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The Journey of a Beginning Researcher

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Abstract

As I embarked on the first major research project of my career as a researcher, I sought a clearly written article that would help me through some common obstacles in qualitative research. This article outlines those problems and offers some solutions from one researcher's perspective. Some of the problems described and discussed include how to use theory and integrate it with data, the issues that arise from being a simultaneous researcher and participant, and how to represent participants with integrity and authenticity. This methodological piece offers suggestions for novice researchers as they embark on their own journeys as qualitative scientists.

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qualitative research

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The Journey of a Beginning Researcher

by
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Abstract

As I embarked on the first major research project of my career as a researcher, I sought a clearly written article that would help me through some common obstacles in qualitative research. This article outlines those problems and offers some solutions from one researcher's perspective. Some of the problems described and discussed include how to use theory and integrate it with data, the issues that arise from being a simultaneous researcher and participant, and how to represent participants with integrity and authenticity. This methodological piece offers suggestions for novice researchers as they embark on their own journeys as qualitative scientists.

I have always loved the work of Joseph Campbell; his writing about mythology and heroic journeys condenses every great adventure story of every culture into a formula¹:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on fellow beings. ([1973/1949](#), p. 30)

The concept of a pattern for adventure stories has always appealed to me because, for all of my liberal tendencies and desires to forge new ground, I don't particularly like unpredictability. There is a certain comfort to what is known, and I crave that comfort. During my first major research process, however, that comfort has often eluded me, and I've found myself sharing some of the characteristics of a hero as I ventured into the unknown world of research, leaving behind what I knew to cross the threshold of the unknown and land in the "belly of the beast" (p. 36). As I look back at the journal I kept during my personal odyssey, I even find evidence that I possessed that fault particular to heroic figures: *hubris*, the all-too-human flaw of arrogance.

This journey has brought me new understandings and relationships, new approaches to my daily life. Campbell's heroes inevitably make the mistake of

... looking back, at what had promised to be our own unique, unpredictable, and dangerous adventure, all we find in the end is such a series of standard metamorphoses as men and women have undergone in every quarter of the world, in all recorded centuries, and under every odd disguise of civilization. (p. 16)

However, despite similarities to each other, the heroic journeys are also important to individual cultures, and change the lives of the heroic individuals. I do not make the arrogant assumption that I have traveled a path unknown to others, but I do know that I have never been down it before and it has changed me.

From September 1997 until May 1998, I studied a group of teachers and teacher educators called Literacy Educators for a Democratic Society (LEADS). I had been a member of this group for three years, and wanted to study them formally because belonging to the group had been so important to me. Each member of the group was an educator who identified herself² as concerned about issues of social justice. My research was an effort to determine how those educators defined and described social justice and equity, what actions they took in response to their beliefs, and why the process of meeting as a group was important to them and their beliefs.

As exciting and interesting as the research was, there were several issues which I, as a novice researcher, found myself struggling with. I turned to mentors and books for answers, and, when all else failed, tried to come up with a satisfactory answer on my own. This piece describes some of the particular problems I had during my research journey.

Finding my Theoretical Way

One of the first struggles on my "journey" was deciding how to use theory in my research. Even with all of my classes, discussions, and reading about theory, it still remained enigmatic to me. After reading a piece by Laurel Richardson (1994) about the metaphors commonly used in discussing theory, I decided to try to approach theory from a new metaphorical angle. Instead of using the typical "construction" metaphor of "theoretical foundations" and "building on theory," I began to consider theory as a map that guides our decisions and gives direction as we try to find our way.

In a chapter for *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), Laurel Richardson issued a challenge for thinking and writing about theory:

In standard social scientific writing, the metaphor for theory is that it is a "building." Consider a different metaphor for theory. Write a paragraph about theory using your metaphor. Do you "see" differently and "feel" differently about theorizing when you use an unusual metaphor? (p. 524)

Richardson noted that language typically lends the image of construction and building to theory. She has disputed the assumption of that metaphor, and raised the provocative question: "What if we used a different metaphor?" Rising to Richardson's challenge, I began to consider theory as a map that guides our decisions and gives direction as we try to find our way.

Theory provides a discourse and a vocabulary to use to describe what we think. It is of little or no use if we do not know how to apply it. Maps are a similar tool that will not be of any use or guidance if we cannot interpret what they are saying.

Not only does theory give us that background for our research, it also represents the ideas that we will find. The representation does not approach any kind of objective reality, but give one understanding of that reality. Similarly, maps do not show reality, but merely represent it; we have to apply what we see on the map to what we see around us. The environment I perceive differs from the one you do.

There are different types of maps, each of which gives us one perspective. Road maps, topographical maps, political maps, and geographical maps--each tells us one particular point of view. Like these different kinds of maps, each different theory will approach a specific, local, contextual experience in one particular way. Different maps also encompass different ranges of area. We can find maps that situate us on different levels. A globe gives us a macro-perspective; a local road map a micro-perspective.

Maps are not always the easiest way to find out where we are going. Sometimes, it is easier to hear that we need to take the first left on Broadway, and turn left at the second light. However, maps give us the whole picture, and sometimes we don't know how that picture will help until later, when we are very lost. A map gives a context to which we can continually refer to interpret our surroundings. They can also place us regardless of the direction of our approach.

Maps tell the story that has been experienced by the mapmakers. They do not substitute for the experience of "being there"; they only show what was there on the day the map was made, in the way that it was seen by those cartographers. The perspective of the cartographers is clearly depicted in the map they've designed, and that perspective shapes the way we think about the world. Looking at a map of the Western hemisphere which puts Canada at the "bottom" and Argentina at the "top" makes us rethink the typical geo-political perspective of maps. Mapmakers clearly make decisions about what to highlight, and what to ignore, and it is dependent on mapreaders to look around and see what else is there.

Given this perspective of maps, consider theory as a map. Theory guides researchers as we conduct our research. It provides a starting place and some direction as to where we should go. Theory does not direct to one particular place, but gives a variety of choices and directions. Theory attempts to provide situational context for the researcher no matter where they begin. Theory lends experience to particular contexts, although it is always open to new and better routes. Theory is open to different perspectives, as well as "short cuts" or "scenic routes," each of which are essential to the whole picture. Sometimes, the dotted lines represent theories that are not yet complete; it is up to us to connect those dots and fill in the direction. Theory informs reality, but does not define it; we still need to stop and look around!

And, in fact, I found myself sorely in need of a map as I tried to conceptualize the theoretical framework for my research. My research journal was filled with questions to myself about theory, reminders to "think about theory!" and guesses about the theoretical perspectives of authors I have read. I frequently felt that I was in unknown territory, and wanted one of those authors to tell me where I was. I kept thinking that if I read the right thing, my own perspective would become clear. I finally decided that the map to guide me would need to be drawn by me, since no one else has been to the same place.

I first decided that I would return to my starting place, and try to figure out what the purpose of theory is. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) define formal theory as theoretical perspectives that are interrelated sets of assumptions, concepts and propositions that constituted a view of the world. They go on to explain that "theories are *human* constructions; they are derived from information which people collect by seeing, hearing, touching, sensing, smelling, and feeling" (p. 120). This

definition helped me understand the landscape, but I still did not know how to get where I was going.

Sometimes I found insights about theories in places where I did not expect them. These detours were not always the right way to go, but did help me eliminate some of the wrong ways. While reading about school reform, I encountered Sarason (1990), who said: "Theory is a necessary myth that we construct to understand something we know we understand incompletely. Theory is a deliberate attempt to go beyond what we know or to correct what we think are the erroneous explanations of others" (p. 123). This seemed to be the right path when I was struggling with theory and wanted to abandon it, but it ultimately began to seem too cynical to me. I want theory to help me understand, not to help me pretend to understand, or to strike a pose.

On what seemed like another detour, I began to go in the right direction again. I found that the writing of bell hooks (1994) amplified my feelings about theory and its use. She asserts that theory must not be abstract and obscure, but accessible and translated into everyday life, and claims that "any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public" (p. 64). Her belief that much of the theory that is produced is not able to transform because it is not directed at daily life (p. 70) resonated with what I believe research should do, but I had not yet found my way. I could wrap my mind around the purpose of theory, but was still not sure where I should go to get it. Should I adopt a label and say I'm critical or poststructural? Forsake those grandiose paradigms and just focus on my data?

It was re-reading Patti Lather's (1986) work that helped me finally find my way. She enhanced what hooks had to say by explaining that when theory is embedded in everyday life, it "then becomes an expression and elaboration of politically progressive popular feelings rather than an abstract framework imposed by intellectuals on the complexity of lived experience" (p. 267). Lather, therefore, suggests a

reciprocal relationship between data and theory. Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which data must be poured. (p. 267)

This idea had guided me to a place I could recognize. I felt familiar enough to be comfortable, but could see the new routes around me that were opportunities for more exploration.

Looking at the theoretical map now, I could identify those routes and understand them. I turned again to Lather (1994), however, to help guide me in determining which route I should use at different times. In a chapter on "Critical Inquiry In Qualitative Research," Lather depicts various paradigms in a table (see [Table 1](#)) that arranges them according to purpose (p. 105). The column for "Prediction," for example, lists the positivist paradigm. "Understanding" is the purpose of interpretive and constructivist research; "Emancipation" is the goal of critical and feminist research; and poststructural and postmodern paradigms seek to "Deconstruct." Lather offers this chart to "help distinguish how each paradigm offers a different but not exclusive approach to generating and legitimating knowledge" (p. 105). Thinking about theory as determined by my purpose, rather than as an identifying label helped me see which roads were open at various

times. Different theories guided my research, and I have come to accept that. In the next section, I will briefly explore two of the theoretical traditions that directed my thinking.

Table 1

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--|
| <i>Prediction</i> | | | |
| <i>Understanding</i> | | | |
| <i>Emancipation</i> | | | |
| <i>Deconstruction</i> | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positivist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interpretive • naturalistic • constructivist • phenomenologic al • hermeneutic • symbolic interactionist • microethnograph ic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • critical • neo-Marxist • feminist • race- specific • praxis- oriented • Freirean • participator y | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poststructural • postmodern • postparadigmat ic • postparadigmat ic |

Postpostivist Paradigms of Inquiry (Lather, [1994](#), p. 105)

Emancipatory tradition.

Lather ([1994](#)) includes critical and feminist research in the category of emancipation. Carspecken ([1996](#)) calls these researchers "criticalists," and describes the tendencies they seem to share (p. 3). These researchers are value-oriented, concerned about social inequalities, and want to effect social change. Their concern with social theory encompasses such issues as the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency. Criticalists intend their research to refine social theory and change social structures, rather than merely describe social life.

Weiler ([1988](#)) has excellent, clearly-written chapters on the historical paths of feminist and critical theory, both of which have greatly helped my thinking. She suggests that both theories address opposing approaches, namely "those which emphasize the *reproduction* of existing social, gender, and class relationships, as well as those which emphasize agency and the *production* of meaning and class and gender identities through resistance to imposed knowledge and practice" (p. 3). There are other commonalities; both theories:

- share a concern with the relationship between individual and oppressive social structure,
- demonstrate the tensions between paradigms of production and reproduction as theoretical approaches, and
- emphasize that social structure and knowledge are socially constructed and therefore open to contestation and change. (p. 4)

Both Carspecken's and Weiler's descriptions deal with the emancipatory purpose of critical and feminist research.

Carspecken (1996) suggests that critical research is typically an orientation that researchers share, rather than a specific set of methods. Weiler (1988) does not detail a list of methods to use in research, but does assert methodological themes of feminist research. The first is that feminist researchers begin their research from an examination of their own subjective oppression. "Feminist research *begins* with the unique vision of women in a male-defined society and intellectual tradition" (p. 58). Thus, researchers positioning themselves as feminists must start out by understanding their own societal positions. The second theme of feminist research is an "emphasis on lived experience and the significance of everyday life" (p. 59). In other words, feminist researchers must look carefully at the known and taken-for-granted.

Margery Wolf (1992) expressed a similar perspective on the vantage taken by feminist researchers:

Before reflexivity was a trendy term, feminists were examining 'process' in our dealings with one another—questioning the use of power and powerlessness to manipulate interactions in meetings, examining closely the politics of seemingly apolitical situations, evaluating the responsibilities we bore toward one another, and so on. (p. 132)

Both Wolf and Weiler commented on the approach taken by feminist researchers. Oleson (1994) described the common goal of feminist researchers: to "center and make problematic women's diverse situations and the institutions that influence them, as well as referring the subsequent examination to theory, policy or action frameworks in interest of realizing social justice for women" (p. 158). There are two key concepts, then, in feminist research. The first is one of approach, having a reflexive, introspective process. The second is one of content, focusing on the issues that most greatly affect women.

An important concept within this tradition of emancipation is *hegemony*, the oppressive system of the dominant culture. Apple (1996) conceptualizes hegemony as "a process in which dominant groups come together to form a bloc and sustain leadership over subordinate groups (p. 14)." He further posits that a hegemony "is an organized assemblage of meanings and practices, the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions which are lived" which "acts to 'saturate' our very consciousness (Apple, 1990, p. 5)." Because hegemony is so total, it is part of the daily, taken-for-granted actions that are part of everyday life, and not necessarily identified as oppressive, particularly by the oppressors. Apple suggests that economic and intellectual controls are the two prerequisites for hegemony (p. 11), and positions schools as "agents of cultural and ideological hegemony" (p. 6).

The existence of hegemony in a society is not something that happens quickly or in isolation, but only in relation to historical and cultural contexts. Apple's (1990) discussion of the critical viewpoint focuses on this relational way of examining things. The aspects of the critical perspective that he sees as relevant are the abilities to relate to historical roots and tendencies in the future, and to define things by their ties to other factors (p. 132). For example, we cannot understand the ways in which schools fit into and reify capitalist patterns without first understanding the history and conditions of capitalism. These contextual factors are important conditions of the emancipatory tradition. Apple also claims that critical scholarship, or research, should "aim at illuminating tendencies for domination, alienation, and repression within extant institutions, and seek to promote conscious emancipatory activity through exploring negative effects and contradictions of what is unquestioned (p. 133)." However, Apple (1996) does reject critical research for the sake of research:

Transformations of common sense take time and organization and commitment; but they also must make connections with people's daily lives if they are to be widely successful. These are not inconsequential points, especially because they are grounded in a position that asks critical educational studies to stop "amusing itself to death" in its metatheoretical flights away from the realities that are being constructed all around us. Such highly abstract work can be important, but in my mind only when it is consciously connected to oppositional social movements and not simply to academic status and mobility, as all too much of it is now. (p. 114)

This criticism seems to be a call to the consciences of educational researchers whose work does not reach into schools to change the existing structures.

Another major theme of emancipatory research is *resistance*, which Weiler (1988) says "emphasizes that individuals are not simply acted upon by abstract structures, but negotiate, struggle, and create meaning of their own. McLaren (1994) sees resistance as the process of actively contesting the hegemony of the dominant culture (p. 210). The act of resistance demonstrates the agency of individuals in that they are not passively accepting the ideology or ascribed roles of society. Sometimes, this opposition can successfully allow people to create new roles which were not formerly part of the culture; at other times, the opposition can close doors for individuals by precluding any interaction with dominant society. Scheurich (1995), writing about this notion, insists, "resistance should not be romanticized (p. 247)." He does not totally negate the concept, but he suggests that considering individuals as resistant sets up a binary between oppression and resistance, and does not leave open space for another option, where systemic oppression does not exist. Although I understand and appreciate Scheurich's objections, I find resistance an important and useful concept within the emancipatory tradition and my own research.

My research was guided in several ways by the traditions of emancipatory research. It is here that the theme of resistance is key. I see resistance to hegemonic practices in three ways in my research:

1. The content of what the LEADS group discusses at their meetings resists and seeks to disrupt hegemonic systems of domination.

2. The participants in the study resist accepting the traditional roles of teachers and reproducing oppressive practices in schools.
3. By including the voices of my participants in my research, I tried to resist the traditional paths of an independent researcher who is a disembodied, neutral authority.

Although not as clearly influential as the critical tradition, it has been important for me to consider feminism through this study. The paths of feminist methodology described by Weiler, namely, that feminist researchers begin from their own subjectivity and emphasize experience and everyday life, are familiar ones to me. In that way, the feminist approach is evident in my study. In terms of content, my participants rarely discussed gender as an important issue, nor did they forthrightly identify themselves as feminists. However, because my participants were all women, and because the majority of teachers in the workforce are female, it would have been a mistake not to consider the influence of the feminist tradition.

Deconstructive Tradition.

Although some, (e.g., Kincheloe & McLaren, [1994](#); LeCompte & Preissle, [1993](#)) place postmodern and poststructural theories within the critical family, the purpose of such research is not to emancipate, but to deconstruct. Research that aims to deconstruct has some emancipatory elements in that it resists existing labels and structures and seeks, instead, alternatives that do not currently exist. A key part of deconstruction is that it does not only deconstruct, or break down, existing structures, but it also reconstructs, or creates, new structures.

Edelsky ([1994](#)) suggests that the goal of reconstruction helps critical theorists maintain transformative agendas by adopting a postmodern identity. Characteristics of such transformative research include a smaller, more local, focus; an emphasis on the language of possibility; and attention to the "infinite regress of contradictory meanings" (p. 12). She asserts that

if meaning is constructed and if civil, political, economic, human rights are social inventions, then the transforming postmodernist works to *construct* meaning and to get agreement on *invented* rights that will help equalize rather than stratify relations among people. Such work is political, potentially transformative, and profoundly hopeful. (p. 12)

She sees deconstructive purposes, then, transforming traditional critical research.

Middleton ([1993](#)), writing from a feminist perspective, also adopts some deconstructive purposes. Specifically, she rejects the tendency of feminist and other criticalist paradigms, to impose taxonomies on researchers. Her criticism of taxonomies stems from the perceptions that such schema imply categories, chronologies, and objectivity which do not exist within much feminist research. She places herself, instead, within the postmodern strand of deconstructive research, with its focus on multiple and contradictory positionings, and its primary concern with relationships between knowledge and power (p. 47). The distinguishing characteristic of postmodernism, according to Middleton, is a

disbelief, skepticism, or suspension of belief in universal truth or in the possibility of a totalizing master narrative and, instead, a focus on the various master narratives, disciplines, or theories as

regimes of truth-as historical and socially constructed knowledge with varying and unequal relations to various apparatuses of power. (p. 58)

It is this resistance to the concept of a truth, then, that Middleton uses to identify her theoretical position.

Richardson (1997) focused on the role of language in poststructuralism, one deconstructive tradition, particularly as it is used by authors:

Specifically, poststructuralism suggests two important things to qualitative writers: First, it directs us to understand ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times; and second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said to everyone. (p. 89)

The role of the researcher as an individual is also essential in poststructuralism, according to Richardson:

Poststructuralism points to the *continual co-creation of self and social science*: they are known through each other. Knowing the self and knowing "about" the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges. Poststructuralism, then, permits-nay, invites-no, incites us to reflect upon our method and explore new ways of knowing. (p. 89)

This approach, then, guides us to different ways of looking at what we research, and how we conduct and discuss that research.

There are several things I take from this deconstructive tradition. The first is the desire to search for new structures that do not exist within current frameworks, the ability to conceive of new designs and models rather than just rejecting or accepting current ones. The freedom to search for multiple meanings within my data is the second thing I take from deconstruction. I do not feel as compelled to search for one truth. Related to this is the feeling that I am allowed to present the data I have collected in multiple ways, and re-present my participants multiple times. Finally, deconstruction forces me to place myself as a writer, participant, and interpreter within the text, rather than as a separate entity.

Have I Arrived?

As I have discussed in this section, it has been difficult for me to position myself within a theoretical tradition. Others have felt this, and claim that "connecting with more than one [theory] allows us to resist and acknowledge the need for an integrative theory" (Clark et al., 1996, p. 202). I join them in their desire to connect and resist, but not in the need to integrate theories. This would create yet another category, another label, and I prefer the freedom granted by Lather (1994), to go freely from theory to theory, taking the way which best suits my particular purpose. I expect that I would get bored and stuck in traffic if there weren't always different roads to choose.

Having found, perhaps, my theoretical, way, I will begin to discuss in depth the specifics of my research study. In the next section, I will discuss the methods of data collection and analysis I used on my journey, and consider some of the issues with which I have struggled as a researcher.

Analysis

Considering how to analyze the mountains of data I anticipated collecting was another methodological challenge for me. I knew that I was able to sort things into categories and codes- I'd been doing that with literature my entire academic life. However, knowing how to do something intuitively and discussing it analytically are two different tasks. One researcher, whom I greatly respect, assured me that "no one really knows how they do it. You'll be able to figure it out once you get started". However, convinced I could find a more methodical approach than "just doing it," I began to examine the way that different research pieces described their analysis.

One of the most important pieces of my research has been the notion of *voice*. The women in the LEADS group have such strong voices, and such individual ones, that I have been determined to hear and represent them clearly. The first analytical strategy I used, transcribing each group meeting and interview, helped embed those voices in my mind. As I read transcripts, or remember what different individuals said, I hear their voices saying it, and, although the cadences, dialects, and accents are difficult to capture in writing, the passion with which these women spoke helped me figure out what was important.

Given my preoccupation with listening to the voices of my participants, it is not surprising that the analytical method which became most useful was the Listening Guide used by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues in various pieces of research (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, [1992](#); Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, [1995](#)). These researchers used the Listening Guide in a series of interview studies, in which adult women had interviewed adolescent girls about their relationships (Brown & Gilligan, [1992](#)). To interpret what the girls had said, they tried to answer four questions as they listened to audiotapes of the interviews: Who is speaking? In what body? Telling what story about a relationship (from what perspective)? In what socio-cultural framework? To answer these questions, they listened to the tapes four times, each time with a different purpose. The first time, their goal was to listen to the story that the interviewee had to tell, and get a sense of what was happening in the overall narrative. The second time, researchers listened to the "I," trying to get a sense of how each interviewee used a first person voice. The goals the third and fourth times dealt with the specific research questions being asked in the study.

I used the basic structure of that Listening Guide to analyze each meeting of the LEADS group, although I read transcripts rather than listening to tapes. The first time through, I read the transcript to get a sense of what we had discussed. I used this reading to try to get a sense of the "plot" of each meeting. Secondly, I used the cut and paste function of my word processor to create separate documents for each participant at the meeting, and examine that individual's words in isolation. This helped me get a clear sense of how much and in what ways each person actually participated in each meeting. During the third and fourth readings, I focused on particular research questions: How do participants define and describe social justice and equity? What actions do participants take to develop and maintain a socially just and equitable

educational setting? Eventually, these two readings overlapped to such an extent that it became more practical to combine them into one reading.

I did this analysis after each meeting, and constructed categories and codes from the transcripts using analytic induction (LeCompte & Preissle, [1993](#)). After coding, I summarized my impressions in analysis notes to myself, also known as analytic memos (Strauss, [1987](#)). These notes became another data resource. I did find some categories to be relatively consistent across meetings. For example, during my analysis of the first meeting, I used the categories of Practice, Issues, and Nature of the Group. Although these general categories held up for each of the meetings, the codes varied to some extent. Reflecting on one meeting, for instance, I wrote,

For [the category] Nature of the Group, I noticed a lot of self-analysis going on in the meeting-what is the nature of my character, what are my purposes, etc. I want to go back to last month's meeting and see if that is there. (Analysis notes)

As I explored previous and subsequent meetings, however, I did not find evidence of this kind of interaction. Perhaps we'd all just had a hard week! However, going back and forth between meetings to confirm and disconfirm my thoughts was a helpful strategy.

I used my transcripts from interviews, reflective journal, and readings in a similar fashion. The analysis of group meetings allowed me to ask questions, develop hunches, and form opinions. Examining the other data resources gave me an opportunity to further explore these, and either solidify, refine, or discard them.

Finally, I conducted analysis of my data by collecting more data! Response data consists of just that-responses of others to data and interpretations of those data. Examples of response data are member checks and peer debriefing. St. Pierre ([1996](#)) coined the phrase, and comments that

our members and peers do provide us with data that is often critical and that may even prompt us to significantly reconstruct our interpretations as we proceed. I maintain that these others are not verifying a truth we have uncovered out there in the field but rather that they are providing us with more data with which to think about the description we are constructing. (p. 8)

Throughout my data collection process, I provided transcripts of meetings to all members who had attended those meetings, as well as some preliminary analysis-although very brief-in the form of letters after each meeting. I attempted to raise some questions in those letters, and they often became a topic of discussion at subsequent meetings. The second round of interviews also functioned as formal member checks. At the end of the interview, I told members what I was thinking about writing, and asked them to respond to that. I have also had many peers and mentors who have provided me with responses to my writing and conceptual thinking, acting as debriefers throughout the research process.

The struggle to analyze my data in a logical, sequential fashion ended up being resolved as neatly as I like things to be. I found a method I could live with, describe, and provide citations for. However, there were issues during my research process that continued to trouble me, and messes I could not clean up so neatly. I will begin to explore these issues in the next section.

Research Roadblocks

I remember hearing an ancient curse along the lines of "May you live in interesting times." Through this year's odyssey, I sometimes felt that an evil deity had granted me a wish for "interesting research." The two major hurdles for me have been the simultaneous roles of researcher and participant, and the perplexing notion of validity. The next sections will address these issues.

Self as participant.

Typically, the worry about "insiders" doing research on their own communities is that they will not see the "taken-for-granted," that only an outsider can look with an unbiased lens (e.g., Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Zinn, 1979). Determined not to fall into that trap, I endeavored to critically look at and question everything that went on, particularly my role in the research. What I was *not* prepared for was the emotions and discomfort that would arise from such close examination. My role in the group changed from being just a participant to being a participant observer, and who knew such a seemingly subtle shift would feel so disquieting?

Like St. Pierre (1996), I have felt that I was conducting "a study of a native studying the natives, of one who has, from the beginning, felt folded into this project in particularly fruitful and disturbing ways" (p. 3). My eyes were open to this likelihood from the beginning, and I tried to follow the paths laid out by others. I recalled Weiler's (1988) admonition that "the researcher [needs] to locate herself in terms of her own subjectivity" (p. 63). I heard Peshkin (1988) warn that subjectivity is inevitable, "therefore researchers should systematically seek it out, not retrospectively, but while research is in progress" (p. 17). And I was duly warned by Krieger's (1996) charge "that efforts to avoid the role of the self are, essentially, a form of self-deception" (p. 178).

I knew these things, and arrogantly decided that since "forewarned was forearmed," I could proceed. I was not prepared for how difficult it was, however, and went back to the literature to see how others have done it. Jones (1992) found she, as the researcher, had been absent from analysis and writing about her subjects, and subsequently re-wrote herself in as "another voice" (p. 23) in the form of a fictional character. In her essay "Beyond Subjectivity," Krieger (1996) discusses the research behind her book *The Mirror Dance*, which is an account of a lesbian community in the Mid West. Her dilemmas arose from the fact that she was unable to separate herself from the community, of which she was a part. Long after the interviews had been transcribed, she found herself unable to complete the research. She went back for more data—through self-reflection and analysis. She composed "pre-interview" reflections and "interview" reflections about what her feelings and thoughts had been at the time, and only after placing herself in the interviews, could write her book. Chaudhry (1997) used a similar strategy in her article "Researching 'my people,' Researching myself." This article reconstructed incidences from Chaudhry's fieldwork and positioned her as both a researcher and a "native" within the research. She described it as "an analysis of the forces in my life that feed into my research" (p. 441).

Each of these pieces focused on the researcher role *after* the research had been completed. My strategy has been to try to trace this role as I have gone through the research. I frequently wrote about my feelings in my journal and in my analysis notes. Sometimes this writing would focus on the dissonance I felt about my dual roles as researcher and participant:

This was a difficult meeting for me. I feel insecure about my new role as researcher of the group and tend not to want to impose anything on the group members. (Analysis notes, 12/2/98)

This dissonance was also present as I read and re-read my own words in the transcripts of our meetings:

It is difficult for me to be analytical about my own words. I tend to be very critical about the substance of what I am saying.

It is distressing to me that I had so many comments that were criticisms or complaints about teachers and school culture. (Analysis notes 2/5/98)

I also wonder if my effort to be a researcher prevented me from participating in the group meetings in a natural manner.

...this is a contrast to last time, when I felt as if I had been so negative. At this meeting, I offered positive counterpoints several times, and, in fact, I think I cut off conversation at a couple places by jumping in with positive examples so quickly. (Analysis notes, 3/25/98)

There are two facets to this last entry. The first is that I do not know if I consciously tried to be more positive because I had perceived myself as negative previously, or if it was a change that would have occurred anyway based on my different moods and the different topics. I do suspect that I would not have considered it if I had not been immersed in analysis.

The second point is that my role as a researcher probably influenced the way I interacted in the meetings. I found myself refraining from speaking, and writing down my thoughts to go back to later instead of sharing them because I wanted to hear what other people had to say. I knew I would have access to my own ideas and connections later, but I could only get other people's words at that particular point in time. And, in fact, as the year went on, I could document how infrequently I participated when I looked at the decrease in the total number of times I spoke in my analysis. Since a group is dependent upon the participation of all of its members, I am sure that, in this way, my presence as a researcher affected the group, although I do not know if this was perceived by anyone else.

I also have entries in my journal about the difficulty of researching people in the context of the LEADS group when I know them from other contexts. I have been in the group with these women for the past two years, have taught in the same school with some of them, and taught some of their children. These were not strangers to me, and it was frequently difficult to separate what I thought about what they were saying at the time from what I believed about them due to other relationships. For example, I wrote:

[She] returned to the group, which is wonderful. She added so much to it. I really wonder about my relationship with her. I have always had respect for [her] as a professional, ... but I've never known her to be as insightful as she was today. I'm pretty sure it is not she who has changed.

(Journal, 10/4/97)

When I have had experience with people in the LEADS group that I know are coloring my impressions of what they say, how do I deal with that? (Journal, 12/10/97)

We had a LEADS meeting today and M was able to come! I love it when she is here. M had some great things to say, and I really appreciated her presence. (Journal, 2/21/98)

Although I tried to protect my researcher's eyes from my own enthusiasms, I know that previous relationships with participants contributed to how I saw them in the group.

I can come to no neat conclusions about these issues I faced as a researcher participant. The only thing I can say with assurance is that I continually sought integrity in my writing and analysis of these events.

Validity.

I have also been conscious of my role as the researcher in making interpretive decisions. Although I have shared my thoughts with the other participants and asked for their feedback, sitting down to transcribe, analyze, and decide what is important has been an individual exercise. Borland (1991) said of this: "When we do interpretations, we bring our own knowledge, experience, and concerns to our material, and the result, we hope, is a richer, more textured understanding of its meaning" (p. 73). Her words reassured me, but did not eliminate my concern.

Seeking guidelines that would make my interpretations more valid, I turned to Lather's (1986, p. 78) suggestions for the minimum expectations to include in research designs:

- reflexive subjectivity
- face validity
- catalytic validity
- triangulation of methods, data sources, and theories

I have tried to meet each of these criteria. *Reflexive subjectivity* which involves "some documentation of how the researcher's assumptions have been affected by the data," was present in my reflective journal and analysis notes. *Face validity*, or the process of "recycling categories, analysis, and conclusions back through the respondents," is what I have termed response data. *Catalytic validity* demands "some documentation that the research process has led to insight and, ideally, activism on the part of the respondents." Although I'm not sure if Lather would be satisfied by the level of activism, I do know that my second round of interviews prompted the group to decide on a new course of action for next year. Lather's final requirement is for *triangulation*. I have used multiple methods, data sources and theories in this research process.

Although I used Lather's minimum criteria, I am not satisfied that these guidelines have helped make my interpretation more valid, more "right," but they have been important considerations for my research. Scheurich (1994) suggests, "what is called for here, then, is a loud clamor of many different voices participating in an open, tumultuous, post-dualistic, post-imperial conversation on validity and research" (p. 19). In the next section, I will discuss my particular concerns with representation, and how my struggle to validly represent the voices of the members of the LEADS group prompted me to add my voice to Scheurich's "loud clamor."

Representation

The way my research process is represented by my written text has been of great concern to me for two reasons. The first is the notion of validity I began to address in the previous section; I want to be cautious about how I interpret the voices of the other participants. The second is a fear of falling into the category of research Richardson (1994) described:

I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I have yawned my way through numerous supposed exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts have I abandoned half read, half scanned. I'll order a new book with great anticipation-the topic is one I'm interested in, the author is someone I want to read-only to find the text boring. (pp. 516-17)

My greatest apprehension in writing this piece has been that this research, which has been so inspirational and exciting for me, would turn into an academic tome-overly analytical, written only in one voice (mine), and not representational of the emotions and passions of the group members. I do not want my work to be boring, for my sake as a writer, and for yours as a reader. I want you to be as interested in my research as I was, and the only tool I have to ensure that is the way I represent it in writing.

Representational examples.

Recognizing the potential for a body of research to lose its freshness when written about over-analytically, researchers have begun to tell their research stories using new forms. Richardson (1994) calls these new methods *evocative representations*, in which authors "deploy literary devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses" (p. 521). Some of the representational devices Richardson includes in this category are narratives of the self, ethnographic fiction and drama, poetic representation, polyvocal texts, and mixed genres, which draw from literary, artistic and scientific traditions. There have also been steps taken in non-narrative formats, such as Readers' Theatre (Clark et al., 1996) and videotapes (Dowdy, Delpit, Griffin, Spires, Napia, & Miller, 1998).

Richardson (1994) suggests that this kind of representation is becoming more common because "we are fortunate to be living in a postmodern climate" (p. 517). Virginia Woolf, however, used one of these techniques in 1929 when she wrote *A Room of One's Own*. The work had originally been conceived as a speech about women writers, but she decided, "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licences of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming here" (1995/1929, p. 14). Woolf's reputation during her time was not one of a traditional figure, which may have given her

a greater sense of freedom to blur the edges of fact and fiction. Bateson suggests, "At the center of any tradition, it is easy to become blind to alternatives. At the edges, where lines are blurred, it is easier to imagine that the world might be different. Vision sometimes arises from confusion" (p. 73).

It is true that such representations have become more common recently. Margery Wolf's work, *A Thrice-Told Tale* (1992) tells the same ethnographic story in three different ways: as a traditional ethnography, as a set of field notes, and as a work of fiction. Wolf declares that each kind of representation should have a place: "Fiction can evoke a setting, a social context, an involvement of all senses in ways that enhance understanding. But it is no substitute for a well-written ethnographic account" (p. 59).

Clark et al. (1996) have a similar perspective. Their piece "Collaboration as Dialogue" was originally performed as a Readers Theatre piece at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association. Subsequently, the piece was published as an article in the *American Educational Research Journal* (AERJ), and the authors said

In order for our story to reach a larger audience, we have now taken our Readers Theatre script and, in addition, "written down" the interpretive text surrounding it for journal publication. The constraints of this task—both material and institutional—impinge on our original text in ways that make it difficult to maintain openness. (pp. 198-199)

They did, however, combine traditional interpretation with the more experimental representation, and I believe it became a stronger piece for the combination. It certainly provided strong methodological description for others who hope to do the same kind of work.

Although Vivian Paley's book *Kwanzaa and Me* is not as clearly academic as Clark et al.'s or Wolf's, it does provide another model for representation. Her writing style is very informal and introspective, and is peppered with stories about Kwanzaa, a fictional character, and his friends. Paley states that "my journey into black and white, or to any other self-defining region, must always involve storytelling, the children's mine, and that of all the interested parties I meet along the way" (1995, p. 9).

Regarding the topic of representation, it helps to recall Eisner's thoughts on the topic: "All methods and all forms of representation are partial and because they are partial, they limit, as well as illuminate what through them we will be able to experience" (1988, p. 19). There is not one clear, easy way to represent research, but continually seeking new ways can only help improve the assortment we have to choose from, and make a reader's life more joyful.

Multiple voices.

Representation first became an issue of concern for me as I read and re-read the transcripts of meetings and interviews. I kept hearing the voices that had originally spoken the words I was reading. My comment in my journal that "*I keep hearing voices in my head*" (Journal, 1/11/98), reflects more on the strength of those voices than on the state of my mental health. As a member of the group, I felt that whatever came from the meetings was a collaborative construction. Yet I

continued to puzzle over the fact that I was the researcher, and responsible for choosing what would be represented. Reading Bateson's (1989) reflection on how to consider her relationship with the participants in her research provoked a strong sense of resonance:

This is a multiple collaboration built on both difference and similarity, but I still lack an appropriate term for it. Before and beyond this project, we are clearly friends, but the word is too rich and broad to focus the special commonality of a single project. Sometimes I refer to Joan, Ellen, Johnetta, and Alice as "the women I have been working with"-as collaborators-and yet this belies the playfulness of many of our conversations. The words used by social scientist for those they involve in their research feel wrong to me, even though as an anthropologist I believe that the people we call "informants" are our truest colleagues. These women are not "interviewees," not "subjects" in an experiment, not "respondents" to a questionnaire. There is symmetry in our mutual recognition but there is asymmetry in that I am the one who goes off and weaves our separate skeins of memory into a single fabric. But they weave me into their different projects, too.

The usual words fit even less well when I apply them to myself as the fifth member of the group, to me interviewing myself, asymmetry within symmetry. Women have been particularly interested in the notion of reflexivity, of looking inward as well as outward. Perhaps this is because we are not caught in the idea that every inspection involves an inspector and an inspectee, one inevitably dominant, the other vulnerable.

When I search for a word for my relationship with the women described in this book, I feel a need for a term that would assert both collegiality and the fact that the process is made possible by our differences. The thesaurus betrays me, denying me a term that affirms both symmetry and complementarity. The gap in the language parallels a gap in the culture. We are rich in words that describe symmetrical relationships, from buddy to rival to colleague. We are also rich in words that describe strongly asymmetrical relationships, many of which imply hierarchy and have curious undertones of exploitation or dominance. But none of the words meet my needs. (pp. 101-102)

I understood exactly what Bateson was saying, and-although *participants* is the term I have used to describe myself along with the others-echo her desire for a new term.

Others have puzzled over how to write about collaboration in a singular, academic voice. Crow, Levine, and Nager (1992), in their reflection on collaborative interdisciplinary research, stated that "the central challenge of writing our narrative was whether we could construct a unified, coherent rendering of what we had learned as a team without losing sight of the distinctive contributions each of us had brought to the research process" (p. 748). Hunsaker and Johnston (1992) similarly refer to the difficulty of writing about collaboration in a linear fashion; their piece in AERJ contained narrative and dialogic sections as well as linear ones. Clark et al. (1996) expressed a comparable concern when they said, "*Writing down* compels us toward a monologic text which may not represent the very dialogic nature of our work and interactions" (p. 199). Richardson (1997) asserted that the issue of representation is an important one for researchers to consider as an issue of how power relationships are reproduced: "How does our writing ... reproduce a system of domination and how does it challenge that system? For whom do we speak and to whom do we speak, with what voice, to what end, using what criteria" (p. 57)?

Poetic representation.

Laurel Richardson's [1997](#) work, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, helped me to think about alternative ways of representing my particular data. One of Richardson's techniques is to re-form transcripts from interviews into narrative poems. Although her expertise as an analytical outsider is necessary in the selection and organization of the language, a reader or listener is clearly able to hear the participant's voice. Richardson notes, "No matter how we stage the text, we-the authors-are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them (p. 148)." The technique also allows readers to feel as if they can hear what the speaker has to say and how he/she said it, since the words do not become decontextualized or "cleaned up." Richardson attributes this to the fact that "Poetry can re-create embodied speech in a way that standard sociological prose does not because poetry consciously employs such devices as line length, meter, cadence, speed, alliteration, assonance, connotation, rhyme and off-rhyme, variation, and repetition to elicit bodily response in readers/listeners (p. 143)."

Keeping this in mind, I worked carefully with my data to allow the voices of LEADS members to speak for themselves. In constructing this poetry, I did not try to avoid writing about my data analytically or academically, but to enhance that kind of representation, and allow the voices of my participants to be heard as strongly by my readers as they were by me. In fact, the poems present a different kind of analysis, because, as Richardson describes:

In poetically representing lives, the sociologist/poet writes in the pauses, signals them by conventions such as line breaks, spaces within lines and between stanzas and sections. The sociologist/poet chooses how and where and why and for how long quiet will counterpoint the sound, thus creating a text that mimics more closely the actual conversation and that builds upon both sounds and silences. (p. 142)

Others have used similar poetic constructions. Patai ([1988](#)), in writing a life history of an illiterate Brazilian woman, "retranscribe[d] one of my tapes as verse, in a very simple form, by indicating through the broken lines the pauses and inflections of Marialice's speech" (p. 150), and, as a result, learned more about her participant than traditional transcriptions allowed. McCoy's ([1997](#)) article "White noise-the Sound of Epidemic" features poems she constructed from the journals her students had written. McCoy provides details of the construction in lengthy endnotes, which sufficiently satisfies the curiosity of readers who wonder, "Where did that come from?" without interrupting the flow of the text.

Woolf ([1995/1929](#)) said that "poetry depends on intellectual freedom" (p. 112). It is that freedom which has helped me to re-present the voices I carry in my head. One example is the following poem, "[Looking for Answers](#)," in which members from the group describe the importance of belonging to a group like LEADS. The poem was constructed from data gathered during the audiotaped interviews and group meetings during the course of this study. Different participants spoke all of the words. Each stanza is represented in a different font and with alternating margins to demonstrate changes in speakers. The bold, italicized words at the beginning of each section are mine.

Looking for Answers

Seeking Alone...

So many times here at school
I find that I'm really in the minority.

I end up being the voice,
you can ask for assistance,
but sometimes people don't feel
the need that you see.

I think it's important for people to keep saying that.
I do that here, even if I am in the minority.
I still keep saying,
"But!"
"What about?"
"Have you thought about this?"

And sometimes I do get support,
but a lot of times,
you just cannot get someone else
to see your idea as important.

A lot of the things we know,
and if we don't sit around and discuss them,
they kind of go to the back part of our minds,
and you just forget about them.

When you're not truly who you are
you can't exist,
and I just reached that point.
I was either going to leave teaching
or something had to change.

I'm working as hard as I can
to stay positive.

Finding Together...

We always have choices,
even though we may feel like we don't,
and listening to other people talk,
gives me a sense of having some power.

Just to get with a group of people who can say,
"yes, I understand that,"
helps a lot.

Because it's nice to talk with other people
struggling with the same issues
and who even see them as issues.

That time to converse...
I'm sure that I would not do this on my own.

It's friendships,
it's sustained time to talk about
the issues that are most important to me.

It's a safe place.
Even when we disagree, it's safe.

It's like a shot in the arm,
it keeps me connected with
what I really believe is important.

It has been therapy for me

A rich learning community—
there's rapport in the group
and a level of confidence
where you feel comfortable
enough to say what you feel.

It's a place I feel safe
in batting around ideas.
Things that I feel a little afraid to say at school.

It gives us some sense of empowerment.

We help each other think things through.

Going On ...

There's a lot of hope,
and behind that hope is a really strong belief
that if there's going to be genuine change
a lot of it's going to come about through
dialogues like that.

Any time you unite
you can accomplish
more than you can
alone.

It's like a support group,
it's a problem solving group,
it's an encouragement group

I just don't want to see it fold.

It's like our voices started merging.

Looking Ahead

The research process I undertook was an exciting and fruitful one. As a novice researcher, I came up with more questions than I anticipated, and struggled to come up with answers that would satisfy not only the requirements of the academy, but also my personal drive to understand.

At the beginning of this piece, I used Joseph Campbell's words to launch the story of my research journey. In ending the journey, and having placed tongue firmly in cheek, I conclude with the reflections of another great poet/philosopher of our time:

"What a long, strange trip it's been!" Jerry Garcia, The Grateful Dead

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End Notes

¹ I have altered the gender-specific pronouns of Campbell's prose to make them more inclusive.

² I use feminine pronouns because during the course of the study all members of the group were women.