

October 2019

## Researchers Doing Research in Their Own (Or Others) Backyard: Reflective Comments

Mary E. Hauser  
*Carroll College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hauser, M. E. (2019). Researchers Doing Research in Their Own (Or Others) Backyard: Reflective Comments. *JADARA*, 27(3). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol27/iss3/9>

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS: REFLECTIVE COMMENTS

---

MARY E. HAUSER, Ph.D.

Carroll College

Waukesha, Wisconsin

### Abstract

The article considers issues of subjectivity, bias, the reader's role, and politics, in qualitative research done with participants the researcher does and does not share a common frame of reference. The critical condition for establishing the integrity of the research is seen as being how the researcher makes clear his or her connections to the participants.

---

Naturalistic or qualitative research conducted with "special" (minority, non-mainstream, disabled, or disadvantaged) populations brings into sharp perspective issues of bias and subjectivity. Because the groups considered "special" are usually not represented among those who conduct the majority of educational research, the discontinuity of experience between the researcher and the researched easily leads readers to question bias or subjectivity in the work produced. Do the researchers really understand the experience of the "special" populations enough to accurately represent it?

This paper was prepared to provide reflective comments in response to issues raised in this regard by Akamatsu (1994), Foster (1994) and Stinson, (1994). Their papers are presented

elsewhere in this volume. These authors have highlighted effectively, through their lived experiences as researchers with "special" populations, the major issues of the insider/outsider question that all researchers must address in their work. I could easily connect with their stories from several perspectives as a researcher, as well as a consumer of research, as a member of the majority Euro-American culture, and as a member of an oppressed minority group (women in academe). But, can accounts based on lived experience really be credible? Can they be unbiased? What is the voice of the researcher and what is the voice of the researched? Is the interviewer or observer seeing, recording and then reporting events "accurately"? Such questions should always be asked by consumers of research. But when the work done is explicitly framed in the bias of the writer as has been done in these three papers, we *can* accept their views. The position that I am going to argue for is that researchers who are self-conscious and explicit about their biases, and who clearly articulate their purpose, produce research to be respected. In these cases, issues of bias and subjectivity become non-issues because the writers are explicit about telling us about lens they are using. Let me begin with a story from my own lived experience.

A few years ago, I was getting ready to leave

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS

for China, to spend a year working at two different teacher education universities. I had been to China twice before and was totally enthralled by everything I found there. In fact, when people questioned me about my choice of China as a place to work I explained (not totally whimsically) that I had felt comfortable there in the past and that this affinity I felt for the culture probably meant that either I had been Chinese in a former life or that I was getting ready to become Chinese in a future life.

An American colleague, who had also spent a year in China, was helping me to prepare for this trip. In the course of our conversations he mentioned, more than once actually, "Remember, no matter what, you can never become Chinese." At the time, I kind of passed his comment off as one of warning me against the possible consequences of "going native" (whatever that meant). Little does he know how significant that comment has been to me as a researcher. As I do ethnography and other forms of qualitative research, I am often reminded of his words. And, as I thought about the ideas I want to discuss today, I again recalled his advice.

I can't be Chinese, or Cambodian, or deaf, and because I can't, the awareness of who I am in relation to the people with whom I do research must always be in my consciousness as well as clearly articulated to me and to my reader. I am often an outsider and first and foremost that means that I cannot make assumptions about any situation. This same caveat, by the way, must also be employed when I am an insider.

I can't be Chinese, or Cambodian, or deaf... but that doesn't mean that I can't learn about Chinese or Cambodian or deaf people and share my knowledge ... from my perspective. And so, because I remembered what my colleague told me, interviewing a Cambodian teacher's aide, for example, was done with the awareness that I needed to make sure that I didn't make

assumptions about my knowledge and understanding of his knowledge and understanding. I can't know what it was like to be in the camps in Thailand.... but I can listen to the story he tells me and represent it as best I can through my female, Euro-American experience.

I used the phrase "represent it as best I can" purposely. I want to avoid the use of represent "objectively" or represent "without bias" for the moment.

In responding to the question of "can you only do research in your own backyard?", my first thought was to present a defense... to make a case for doing research in any number of backyards. But after reading Alan Peshkin's article in a recent *Educational Researcher* (1993) my thinking about how to frame my comments changed. Peshkin wrote about making a case for the goodness of the qualitative research paradigm by discussing examples of how its integrity could be respected, rather than mounting a defense for its use. Mounting a defense for a position implies presenting a set of reasoned arguments, and suggests coming from a logical positivist, objective position. What we are interested in understanding through these papers is connections..... connections between researcher and researched. Understanding how we can respect the integrity of these connections can more fittingly be done by understanding what Peshkin terms their "generative purpose" (p. 23)... which means, in this application, how the connections are made and how the connections shape the work.

Respect for the research integrity can be addressed by considering two ideas: the purpose of the research being done by the person who is not in her own backyard, and the way that we need to think about the subjectivity that plagues us as we recover from a positivist perspective. I have pondered for a long time how to organize my presentation of these ideas....they are so intertwined that I have not been able to come to a

## **RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS**

---

good way of separating them for discussion. So let's arbitrarily begin by exploring some ideas about subjectivity.

### **Thinking About Subjectivity**

Subjectivity is part and parcel of who we are. It is the essence of the experience through which we filter all of our subsequent experiences. It precludes our ability to think objectively or without bias. "Write out of your own experience" is advice often given to budding writers. But it is a somewhat unnecessary caveat, because no writing that we do can avoid being filtered through the lens of our own experience. A colleague of mine interprets this statement in its purist sense. She feels so strongly about this idea that the only research that she does is reflexive and/or autobiographical. Her view is that we can't pretend to know others except through our own experience. The contrasting view is held by a person whose work is totally quantitative based on the belief that the only way one can ascertain the objective truth is through that paradigm. The researcher is removed from the focus. All variables possible are controlled so they don't affect the objectivity.

Probably most of us operate in between these extremes. All of our experiences as researchers are filtered through the mental schemata that have been developing all our lives. The way in which we feel that we need to recognize and account for the influence of that experience determines where we will situate ourselves on this continuum. Statements such as these that I have come across recently are illustrative:

"I have my biases but I will try to rise above them."

"You can tell I have an obvious bias and I'm trying not to have it as I write this up."

"The goal is to.....be able to set aside or somehow adjust for the influence of the (personal) perspective on one's work."

These writers are struggling with their placement on the "subjectivity continuum." It may be helpful when dealing with such struggles to consider the idea that resonances between personal views and professional views are the source of both insight and error. Writers avoid mistakes and distortions not so much by trying to build a wall between the observer and observed as by observing the observer observing oneself... as well as bringing the personal issues into consciousness.

### **Thinking About Bias**

Technically, bias is neither bad or good. It is simply the mental leaning or slant with which one views a situation. On the other hand, the word prejudice that is often used as a synonym for bias, has a distinctly negative meaning because it involves making judgments or opinions before the facts are known.

We can't set aside our personal biases and we shouldn't try. Our biases frame a valid way of looking at whatever question we have decided to investigate. We have probably thought in listening to or reading other people's research, "Well, maybe that is what you found, but that isn't the real situation.... you were biased. I want the facts." Well, the "truth" seems to be that there are few "facts." What was reported was the real situation for that researcher. Her description of the situation is as valid as yours would have been. Yours would have been different, but still valid.

I have experienced this situation. I have been doing research in a culturally diverse elementary school. For one project, my purpose was to document events and practices, i.e. describe what was going on at the school, and initially, to

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS

provide an interpretation of the events that would satisfy my dissertation committee. As I observed the events and practices in this school, I became acutely aware of the fact that my understanding of some of them was very different from those teachers who identified themselves as "givers of knowledge." So, whose perspective was the more objective, the more real, the more accurate? Ultimately, the reader decides.... about which I want to say something in the following section. So that readers, including my committee members, would be able to respect my understanding of the situation, I identified my biases with the "I"s that Alan Peshkin described in his article, *In search of subjectivity – one's own* (1988). One of my "I"s was the "Activist I". It reflected my concern for educational equity for all of the students in the school. How I represented the students in this school was definitely affected by this "I". The "Activist I" chose what to look at, as well as how to write what was seen. Just as the quantitative researcher demonstrates her bias by the question that she asks and the hypotheses she generates, the lens of my bias determined what voice was privileged in my ethnographic study.

A comment of Warwick's (Peshkin, 1993) about research methods applies here. He holds that each body of data collected and reported on provides a different and valid glimpse of reality. Reality does not become clarified by any one person's construction or approach to inquiry.

### Reader's Role

Now I want to return to the earlier reference I made about the role of the reader in bias and subjectivity in educational research. Meaning is constructed by the writer and it is also constructed by the reader. Even if we could "control" our subjectivity as writers, we cannot control it in readers. But we tend to assume that the reader is

gender neutral and culturally neutral. As Roland Barthes (1977) points out, the meaning of a text lies less in its origins than in its destination. Readers of texts are free to read what they want to read. They can agree but they are also free to resist, to contribute their own readings. Readers can read against the grain of a text's dominant voice, seeking out other possible authorities. We need to remember that readers will resist our intentions and contend our meanings whether we tell them to or not.

### Thinking About Purpose

Let's now think about purpose and its relationship to respecting the integrity of the research done in whoever's backyard. "What is the purpose?" will be answered differently by each researcher who is asked to describe what she is doing. A few references to the way that others have answered this question are illustrative.

Tedlock (1991), writing about anthropology, states purpose in this way: **to render reality as it was lived while being observed.** She sees ethnography moving to accounts in which the focus is on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue. This differs from the traditional monograph that centers on the Other, the observed. As ethnography moves away from this traditional view, both knowledge and experience from outside field work should be brought into our narratives, and we should demonstrate how ideas matter to us, bridging the gap between our narrow academic worlds and our wide cultural experiences. These strategies should help us simultaneously deepen and invigorate our writing and ourselves.

Tedlock talks about what she calls a "subaltern group" of researchers (not majority class, gender, or ethnicity) who are passionately interested in the co-production of ethnographic

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS

---

knowledge, created and represented in only the way it can be, within an interactive self/other dialogue (Tedlock, 1991, p.82).

What is the purpose? can be answered according to Maxwell (1992) as **understanding** and as such he is in basic agreement with Wolcott. Understanding is a more fundamental concept for qualitative research than validity. Maxwell explores in his article the kinds of understandings to which qualitative research leads. Descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalizability and evaluative understandings are the kinds of understandings that he sees that qualitative researchers seek.

Tobin and Davidson (1990) talk about the purpose of at least one of their projects as being to **empower informants**. This research was planned "to empower informants by replacing traditional ethnographic authority with polyvocality and to decenter the text from its authors by shifting the power of reflexivity from the metadiscourse of the ethnographer to the understandings of preschool children, teachers, and administrators (p.272)." They did this both through using videotapes as text and through reflective cross-cultural analysis of the videotapes by the participants. They wanted to insure that the participants' voices were the focus of the ethnography. In a thoughtful reflection on this process they honestly reveal why and how they felt that it did and did not achieve the goal of polyvocality.

To the question of purpose Madeline Grumet responds "I work not only to **know the world**, not only to **show the world**, but also to **change the world**" (1990). Her autobiographically based narratives of teaching blend art and science to demonstrate an alternate view of knowledge construction.

Foster's and Akamatsu's articles (this issue), in considering the possible problem of not having the right questions to ask about deaf culture because they are outsiders, raise the larger question of whether or not the purpose of research is to **answer questions or ask them**.

There are many answers to "What is the purpose for the research?" The ones I have included are for the most part, answers that are given by those whose work employs qualitative methodology. They share a common concern with questions that are best answered from a holistic frame of reference. Other paradigms yield other answers to questions of purpose.

How do the comments about subjectivity and purpose inform our thinking on this topic? I think that they help us to demonstrate the integrity of research done in and out of our own backyards. If subjectivity and purpose are clearly delineated, the effort can be respected.

### The Politics of Subjectivity and Purpose

There is a political issue that needs to be put into this context. This issue is also addressed by Akamatsu, Foster, and Stinson. Akamatsu indicated that ethnographic research allows the people being studied to define that which is being studied implying a sharing of voice. However, It doesn't happen automatically. It has to be a self-conscious process of the researcher. The issue of voice is critical. Who owns the issues that are related to the "special" populations with which we work? To answer that, we must be aware of who the majority of researchers are... Euro-American males or Euro-American females whose dominant frame of reference is always through the "referent ethnicclass."<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the valid observation that Foster made about the fact that we all move in different cultures, we cannot negate the power of the referent class because it influences one's identity in all interactions.

But since most researchers are not members of minority or "special" populations, if we confined our efforts to our own groups we would silence the voices of many who need to be heard. We would lose a perspective that is necessary to have. The number of researchers who are members of

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS

---

"special" populations is still small... they can't at this point be able to raise all the voices that need to be heard. This may sound like a patronizing colonialist-type statement. It isn't. Rather, it points out my view that multiple perspectives on questions of culture are not only desirable, they are necessary. This is a culturally diverse society and it must be studied that way.

Essentially, being clear about the bias you bring to the situation is the key to respectable research. Why can't I do research on Hmong students? Can only Hmong students do research on themselves? It seems to me that our contribution to the body of knowledge about others would be sorely diminished if we decided that was not to be done.

This perspective, is of course, being given by a Euro-American female.... And you bring your own subjectivity to this reading and you may have different views of the situation. Or, your views may be in agreement, but your reasons for agreeing may be different. Here is what two of my colleagues have contributed to my thinking about doing research with non-mainstream populations.

A woman who identifies herself as Asian American stated, "I don't have any problem with it (researchers crossing cultural boundaries). But it depends on how people present themselves and the angle they take." For example she talked about reading something written by a non-Asian American that says with definiteness, "this is how Asian Americans see this, or feel about that." That is offensive to her. How the information is

represented makes a difference. You need extra sensitivity in working with people whose culture you do not represent. Collaboration, also discussed by Foster, is one way to address this problem.

Another colleague, a man who identifies himself as gay, had this to say:

"Collaboration means that people have full partnership in the research process. It isn't like having a graduate student from whatever group you are investigating come in to help with the research, it is having that person make decisions about every part of the process."

A member of a dominant group researching an oppressed group must be done with care and collaboration.

Tobin and Davidson (1990) make a comment that can summarize our discussion. They feel that, "the ethical questions raised by this discussion are not problems to be solved by right thinking, well-meaning researchers. Rather, they are tensions inherent in the research enterprise, in the ongoing negotiation of meaning between scholar and practitioner, and between insider and outsider" (p. 272). Our papers were prepared in this spirit. Qualitative methodology has blurred the boundaries between the researcher and the researched. It requires us to think carefully about the issues of subjectivity and bias. The questions always need to be at the forefront as we both produce and read texts. It is through questioning that we can understand the connections between ourselves and those with whom we work.

---

## RESEARCHERS DOING RESEARCH IN THEIR OWN (OR OTHERS) BACKYARDS

---

### References

---

- Akamatsu, C.T. (1994). The view from within and without: Conducting research on deaf Asian Americans. *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association* 27(3), 12-16.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. NY: Hill and Wang.
- Foster, S. (1994). Outsider in the deaf world: Reflections of an ethnographic researcher. *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association* 27(3), 1-11.
- Grumet, M. (1990). On daffodils that come before the swallows dare. In E. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.). *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Maxwell, J. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(3), 279-300.
- Peshkin, A. (1993). The goodness of qualitative research. *Educational Researcher*, 22(2), p. 24-30.
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity—one's own. *Educational Researcher*, 17(7), p. 17-21.
- Spindler, G. & Spindler, L. (1990). *The American cultural dialogue and its transmission*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Stinson, M.S. (1994). Research on deaf individuals by hearing persons: One deaf researcher's perspective. *Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association* 27(3), 17-21.
- Tedlock, B. (1991). From participant observation to the observation of participation: The emergence of narrative ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47(1), 69-92.
- Tobin, J. & Davidson, D. (1990). The ethics of polyvocal ethnography: Empowering vs. textualizing children and teachers. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 3(3), 271.

---

### Notes

---

1. This term is used by G. and L. Spindler [1990, p. 34] to refer to the population in the US that has disproportionately furnished the personnel for positions of power and influence in our society.