The Roles We Played: Exploring Intimacy in Research

Kathleen M. Alley
Mississippi State University, kalley@colled.msstate.edu

Recommended APA Citation

Alley, K. M. (2018). The Roles We Played: Exploring Intimacy in Research. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(6), 1470-1482. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3168

The Roles We Played: Exploring Intimacy in Research

Abstract

Intimate relationships can serve as catalysts impelling us to deeply interact with others, and, consequently helping us to develop a greater understanding of ourselves, those with whom we come into contact, and the wider world. This manuscript describes the challenges and constraints I faced when engaged in qualitative research with an intimate other. I borrow from Dr. Carolyn Ellis' (2007) concept of relational ethics, which requires researchers to: (a) act from their hearts and minds, (b) acknowledge interpersonal bonds to others, and (c) take responsibility for actions and their consequences. Power is a part of intimate relationships, so exploring and discussing power issues is critical in developing a solid research design and research processes when we involve intimate others, not to mention a solid baseline for a familial relationship. In this manuscript, I share methods I developed to interrogate my own awareness of my situated power/authority.

Keywords

Creative Commons License

Acknowledgements

The Roles We Played: Exploring Intimacy in Research

Kathleen M. Alley
Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi, USA

Intimate relationships can serve as catalysts impelling us to deeply interact with others, and, consequently helping us to develop a greater understanding of ourselves, those with whom we come into contact, and the wider world. This manuscript describes the challenges and constraints I faced when engaged in qualitative research with an intimate other. I borrow from Dr. Carolyn Ellis' (2007) concept of relational ethics, which requires researchers to: (a) act from their hearts and minds, (b) acknowledge interpersonal bonds to others, and (c) take responsibility for actions and their consequences. Power is a part of intimate relationships, so exploring and discussing power issues is critical in developing a solid research design and research processes when we involve intimate others, not to mention a solid baseline for a familial relationship. In this manuscript, I share methods I developed to interrogate my own awareness of my situated power/authority. Keywords: Intimacy, Relational Ethics, Dialogic Storytelling, Power, Intimate Others

"Without close, empathetic, interpersonal interchange and relationships, researchers will find it impossible to gain meaningful insights into human interaction or to understand the meaning people give to their own behavior" (Maguire, 1987, pp. 20-21). Far from the restraint established for positivism, Maguire demands researchers' active involvement in the research processes and presumably the products that result from relational and intimate research. But what exactly is intimacy within research contexts? According to Busier, Clark, Esch, Glesne, Pigeon, and Tarule (1997), intimate relationships are those that "include qualities of mutual care and friendship as well as revelation of, and respect for, personal vulnerabilities" (p. 165). Human development and feminist development theorists share we are not isolated, but instead we are "relational beings" who grow through our connections with others (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surray, 1991). Intimate relationships can thus serve as catalysts impelling us to deeply interact with others, and, consequently helping us to develop a greater understanding of ourselves, those with whom we come into contact, and the wider world. But does the call to intimacy create a "must do" situation for research? Or are we merely encouraged to be mindful of our relations with "research others?"

Formerly, researchers engaged in intimate relationships that resulted from fieldwork experiences (Cesara, 1982; Cole, 1995), bringing conversations about the texture and nature of these connections into mainstream discourse (Rabinow, 1986). Many of these accounts caused concern regarding researcher/researched relationships. Underlying this concern was "an implicit assumption of celibacy in the field … [as] a fundamental condition for preserving the desired objectivity of the [researcher] from the subjectivity of the [researched]" (Cole, 1995, p. 178). In contrast, narratives of fieldwork intimacy are supported by at least three paradigms: the interpretive, the feminist, and the postmodern. Though these paradigms unmasked researchers, engaging them as human beings, there remains a certain level of discomfort regarding using data obtained through researchers' intimate relationships in the field. To address concerns regarding the involvement of intimate others as participants, researchers have explored multiple dimension of ethics.

In research, three dimensions of ethics are most often considered: procedural ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), ethics of practice (Goodwin, Pope, Mort, & Smith, 2003), and

relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). Procedural ethics are associated with ethically important moments during fieldwork, such as when researchers deal appropriately with informed consent, confidentiality, rights to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects. Ethics of practice, also known as situational ethics, are associated with unpredictable moments that occur during fieldwork, such as when someone decides they are uncomfortable with questions being asked during an interview and researchers question if they'd like to proceed or stop. Relational ethics, which is closely related to ethics of care, (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993) is associated with taking responsibility for our own actions and their consequences for others (Slattery & Rapp, 2003).

Of these three dimensions, relational ethics in particular require researchers to recognize the interpersonal bonds they have with others; to consider the relationships they create over time with research participants. I borrow from Dr. Carolyn Ellis' (2007) concept of relational ethics, which requires researchers to: (a) act from their hearts and minds, (b) acknowledge interpersonal bonds to others, and (c) take responsibility for actions and their consequences. Researchers must repeatedly ask themselves what their ethical responsibilities are towards those involved in their research. On a fairly traditional level, researchers must monitor how participants are treated in humane, non-exploitative ways. Further, researchers should ask themselves, "What are our ethical responsibilities toward participants when they are intimate others in our research?" and, "How can we be mindful of the various roles we take on as researchers when intimate others are implicated in the stories we write?" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In addition, researchers should be mindful that they create currents of relation and reverberations from those relationships. Being a responsive and responsible partner in the relationship may mean being supportive if participation difficulties for the participant. Though there are no absolutes that can guide researchers regarding what they should do in every situation or relationship they may face when involved with research participants, other researchers' experiences can help them to consider possible solutions to the quandaries they may face (Adams, 2006; Carter, 2002; Ellis, 2001, 2004; Kiesinger, 2002; Perry, 2001; Rambo, 2005).

In this article, I share my personal research experience, offering examples of how I engaged with an intimate other during a longitudinal research study based on my dissertation research (Alley, 2013) when I was a doctoral candidate at a large, southeastern university. It was very important I put several conditions in place to ensure I dealt with research intimacy suitably, as my daughter was one of the focal participants I interviewed multiple times and consulted with as a co-researcher for my dissertation research. Throughout the research process, I was both a researcher and her mother, making every attempt not to presume on our mother-daughter relationship when I was interviewing her or asking her questions to confirm my understanding. Herein, I detail how I proactively approached my daughter when conducting this research: as an expert, a researcher, and as my daughter's mother. I include the research context, theoretical framework, and methodologies I incorporated to process this complex relationship and be conscious of how it might influence data collection, analysis, and my research findings. I conclude by sharing my thoughts about relational ethics and ways I believe researchers can ethically research with, and write about, intimate others.

Context of the Study

The longitudinal research study this manuscript emerged from focused on exploring participants' interactions, composition, and the artifacts and knowledge they co-constructed collectively in a text-based role-play-game (RPG) forum. I was a doctoral candidate and the primary investigator of this research, which was derived from my dissertation study under the direction of my major professor and doctoral committee. I followed my university's IRB

process and receive IRB approval. As part of this process, potential participants were provided with information about the research project via email and made an informed and voluntary decision to participate, providing signed consent forms. Further, this consent was ongoing, as participants were reminded they could decline throughout the study.

Trelis Weyr, the text-based RPG forum the longitudinal study focused on, was embedded in fandom related to Anne McCaffrey's (1967-2011) *Pern* young adult fantasy literature series. Many works have been developed related to *Pern* in response to interest generated by a large fan population. To avoid duplicating *Pern* canon and trademarks, role-play forums typically create a particular location and timeline different from the established history of *Pern*. *Trelis Weyr* is a semi-canon or partial canon RPG forum operated on ProBoards, a host of free forums on the Internet (figure 1). I purposefully selected *Trelis Weyr* as the context for the study because my daughter was active on this site, and I recognized the positive opportunity her insider perspective afforded for deeper access to participants' understandings. Additionally, my experience as a media and technology specialist in K-12 education, my familiarity with McCaffrey's fantasy literature, and my perspectives on adolescent literacies both from a professional and personal perspective guided my thinking.

There were 27 participants (ages 12-22) in the *Trelis Weyr* text-based RPG forum (25 female, 2 male). Most were citizens of the United States, though two self-reported living in Canada. Interest in McCaffrey's *Pern* literature series and fan-related practices brought participants to *Trelis Weyr*. These 27 members comprised the community of role-players throughout most of the eight months they played together, though approximately 10 to15 individuals played actively at any given time. I used purposeful snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009) to recruit focal participants. As I viewed story threads (i.e., collaborative posts created by players; figure 2), I identified 10 potential forum participants who consistently participated, and I sent them inquiries. Amog these potential candidates, three individuals volunteered and provided the required paperwork (i.e., Larkwing, Zi, and Kit). In addition to being a focal participant and co-researcher, Larkwing is also my daughter. It was her introduction that sparked my interest initially in text-based RPGs, but more importantly Larkwing (my daughter's RPG persona) afforded me the opportunity to examine this phenomenon, its participants, and their interactions that resulted in the collaborative composition of story threads.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theories of new literacy and community supported my conceptualization of how text-based RPG forum participants collectively composed stories. Within this context, literacy is positioned as a socially and culturally situated practice embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). This approach views literacy as more than a collection of decontextualized skills; rather, literacy is deeply connected to embodied action in the world (Gee, 2004). Theories of how communities interact also informed my analysis of data. Lave and Wenger (1991) defined a *Community of Practice* (CoP) as a group of individuals who engage in a process of collective learning and maintain a common identity defined by a shared interest or activity. Viewing this RPG forum as a CoP offered insight into how the forum functioned collectively, as well as how participants utilized "knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, [and] documents" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 3) they shared and developed together.

Methods Supporting Relational Ethics

"Understanding involves intimacy and quality between self and [other]" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 101). Power inequities in the researcher - participant relationship can be addressed to generate a foundation of equity and to underpin mutual understandings. To these ends, Busier et al. (1997, p. 167) suggest researchers ask the following questions when considering engaging in research intimacy:

1. What are the sociocultural power relationships (age, gender, race, class, educational level, professional roles, etc.)? As mother, I held a power-based position in our relationship. As a researcher, I shared the decision making in the research process. Also, since my daughter was a leader in the context I was researching, she held unique power-based positionality (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).
2. Are researcher and research participant on somewhat equal footing? If not, can inequities be bridged? As researcher and research participant, we continuously attempted to bridge perceived inequities by naming them and discussing their possible impacts. This bridging was not unlike how we addressed differences we encounter as mother and daughter.
3. Can researcher and research participant engage in critical dialogue about the role of power in their relationships? As indicated in point #2, the two of us were in the habit of discussing inequities and conflict that occurred within our relationship and the various roles it afforded.

Power is a part of intimate relationships, so exploring and discussing power issues is critical in developing a solid research design and research processes when we involve intimate others, not to mention a solid baseline for a familial relationship. To ensure I considered power and positioning with all of my participants, I developed several methods to interrogate my own awareness of my situated power/authority and their understandings of our roles. One aspect of my situated power is the fact that I was writing about these participants. In writing about ethnography, Van Maanen (1995) shares that the enterprise is a story telling institution that carries "cultural legitimacy because its stories are commissioned and approved by the leading scientific and educational organizations" (p. 3).

Researcher-Participant Positioning

In my relationship with the focal participants who took part in this research study on text-based role-play-games (RPG) and online writing, I positioned myself as a fellow researcher looking at the collaborative writing phenomenon occurring in this unique forum. I intentionally shared my authentic *lack* of knowledge about RPG activity in text-based forums in order to minimize the perception that I had a knowledge-privileged position as a researcher, thus pointing out the role-reversal that qualitative studies often afford. I explained to participants I had many questions about my own understanding of adolescents' literacy and social practices in online spaces, which led to my interest in exploring related questions with each of them. I also considered how my work with these participants might be *mutually beneficial* within the limits of our involvement with one another. In this regard, I tried to create opportunities wherein we could discuss ideas together about their involvement in role-playing and leadership in the forum. Although it is arguable these activities ultimately benefitted me more than my participants professionally, they remarked that our time working on the research together gave them opportunities to reflect on their involvement in the RPG forum we were

discussing, as well as other online, virtual environments; and to consider how this interest is more than a hobby. In fact, participation in the project may have contributed to a vocation for at least one of the three participants, as she completed a graphic design degree and opportunities for additional creation of online content professionally.

I positioned myself as an *enthusiastic reader* of their writing and a *fellow fan* of fantasy and Anne McCaffrey's *Pern* fiction. Even though I shared with the participants that I had taught previously in public schools, I tried not to position myself as a teacher, as "teacher" may have communicated additional authority. I encouraged them to refer to me by my *first name*, which is not customary in school since teachers are referred to and addressed by using their last name generally. These participants seemed to accept these positioning moves by referring to me by my first name, and as a researcher interested in their work.

I encouraged participants to *disagree with* me or to *challenge my understanding* of events because they were helping me to paint a more elaborated representation of their experiences on the text-based RPG forum. I deliberately positioned the participants as *partners* in the research process; explaining what we were unable to confirm together was just as important as what we could confirm. I also made every attempt to accommodate their schedule and *respect their time*, as well as to provide interactive opportunities that were most comfortable for them (e.g., email, private message, Skype, phone call, etc.). I let the participants know if I approached them with questions during a time that was not convenient, they were more than welcome to tell me it wasn't a good time for them. My participants often didn't respond for a week or more at a time to my questions, showing they were comfortable with responding to me when it best suited their situation and was most convenient.

If I ever sensed resistance, I always offered participants an opportunity to talk with me at a later time or not to talk with me, as they chose to do moving forward. For example, there were times when I would not hear from them for a period of days and into a week or more. I would gently send a follow up email, but keep it short and to the point, and not belabor the issue if I didn't hear back from them. There were also times when I got little to no response to certain questions. I would rephrase them, but if I still didn't get much in response I would move on. I reminded participants often that they were under no obligation to continue to talk with me as well, and that they could drop out of the research study at any time if they chose to.

Other than my involvement with the focal participants, I was a non-participant observer *lurking* during active play on the forum site, which I analyzed retrospectively after play on the forum concluded. I chose not to interact with participants in any way during my hours observing their activity. I sat "virtually" off to the side and was unnoticed by participants in the forum, since I was online as a guest viewing their interaction and was not visible as a user during game play.

Recording Researcher Reflectivity

According to Welch (1994), "We create our own stories, but only as coauthors" (p. 41). Relational reflexivity is one way to think about ourselves as researchers and as individuals involved in relationships with our research participants, providing the means to include the voices of all participants, including our dialogue about these relationships. Revealing the interplay between researcher and researched helps us better understand how an intimate relationship might influence fieldwork and interpretation. Busier et al. (1997) call for a "co-story," defined as "a collaborative construction of a historical event, episode, or personal story created by dialogue among the participants" (p. 167). Dialogic conversation is one method that can be used to support the development of a co-story, as at least two participants (researcher and researched) become co-researchers and co-writers when engaged in conversation.

Keeping a *researcher reflective journal* is another way I consistently interrogated my own thoughts throughout the research process. I acknowledged relationality within the research process, recognizing the connectedness between my participants and myself. In addition to this thoughtful consideration of my role during data collection and analysis, I also included two pertinent areas in my research design to address researcher reflexivity: the need for *reciprocity* and the question of *validity*. To attain *reciprocity*, I followed several procedures including: conducting interviews in an interactive, dialogic manner, requiring self-disclosure on the part of me as a researcher; conducting sequential interviews of individuals to facilitate collaboration and a deeper probing of research issues; and, negotiating meaning with my focal participants by recycling descriptions, emerging analysis, and conclusions. I also followed several procedures to check the credibility of data, increasing *validity* and minimizing the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence (Kamarovsky, 1981), including triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One method I utilized was "*face validity," through the recycling* of description, emerging analysis and conclusions with my focal participants during multiple member checks (Reason & Rowan, 1981).

Dialogic Conversations and Storytelling

Through several of the foregoing issues, the role of dialogue has been invoked. For this work, dialogue was conceptualized as a form of communicative interaction between people in an exchange of utterances (Bakhtin, 1981). Through dialogue, people engage each other out loud and themselves silently in order to articulate and express ideas. People jointly examine, question, wonder, and reflect on various issues, and these two-way exchanges help them to understand one another, as well as listen for the meaning in another person's perspective (Anderson, 2012). Dialogue seeks orientation instead of being focused on identifying facts. It is an interactive, responsive process where meaning is derived through conversation.

This understanding of dialogue, knowledge, and language is grounded in the belief that identities are relational and constructed through recursive dialogue and conversation (Gergen, 2009). We speak, think, and act as the "multiplicity of voices" residing in each of us (Anderson, 2012). Hence, narrating in recursive dialogue continually shapes and reshapes who we are and what we think about ourselves; relationships and conversations are entwined, and they influence one another. As relational beings, influenced by and influencing one another, we cannot be separated from the relationships and contexts we are a part of (Shotter, 1984). Thus, a dialogic conversation involves mutual inquiry; a construction of meaning through sharing, exploration, and the interweaving of our ideas, thoughts, and feelings, allowing fresh possibilities to emerge (Anderson, 2012). I utilized several competencies to engage in dialogic communication, uncovering interactions between my daughter and myself in particular: dialogic storytelling (holding and describing your perspective); dialogic listening (being profoundly open); and dialogic interaction (maintaining the tension between telling your own story and being open to others). These competencies are revealed as they are embedded in the following issues.

Exploring the Roles We Played through Dialogic Conversation

In this study, I used dialogic storytelling, listening and interaction to foreground my focal participant voices and consider relational elements during the research process. Below are excerpts from dialogic stories and interactions between my daughter and I, as well as our interpretations of these narratives. In both excerpts we are telling the story of how Larkwing (my daughter's RPG persona) began her experiences with role-play, and how we decided to embark on this research together.

My Dialogic Story About Our Beginning

My daughter first shared text-based role-play-games with me in the winter of her junior year in high school. She was interested in participating in forum game play because one of her friends was involved, and she shared it with me as an example of web-based gaming when we talked about things adolescents do online. At first, Larkwing (my daughter) played on "one-liner" sites, where she would create a character and post one or two sentence interactions with others involved on the website. Collectively, these participants created stories by contributing a few lines at a time, much like a round-robin style of writing in a face-to-face interaction where you add a line, pass the paper, the next person in the circle adds a second line, passes the paper, and so forth. These sites supported fast-paced, synchronous play, and in general youth involved in the sites were early adolescents. As a mother, I was worried about Larkwing's safety online. Who else would she be interacting with? Who created and monitored the site? Would this be a positive experience for her?

Larkwing continued to play on "one-liner" websites for a few months, but soon lost interest because she said that type of play didn't support her ability and desire to write longer passages and explore the characters she was creating in greater depth. Larkwing decided to take a look at more complex text-based RPG forums. One of her friends was involved in a role-play forum based on Anne McCaffrey's Pern *(1967) literature series. Larkwing had read and enjoyed these books, and she began her involvement by creating artwork her friend shared with other players on the forum. Since Larkwing's other love was writing, and there was ample opportunity in text-based RPG forums to write with others as a by-product of role-play, the thought of becoming a member appealed to her. At this point, Larkwing came to me and shared the forum website, talking with me about what she had been doing. Knowing her friend had been involved in the community for several months, I was more apt to approve of Larkwing's involvement and quickly said it would be okay. Little did I realize at the time how that decision we both made would change our lives!*

Larkwing's first venture into role-play morphed, and she began to explore other RPG sites based on McCaffrey's Pern. Eventually she wasn't happy being a member on other sites, I think because she didn't have as much control as she wanted. She also felt that many of the sites catered to older players with more skill, and she didn't feel welcomed as a new member. Larkwing ended up creating her own Pern RPG forum, though she didn't share that decision with me at the time. It would be several months later when I became aware of this, when Larkwing showed me Trelis Weyr, her self-designed Pern *site, for the first time. I was so proud of her, looking at the forum she'd created. I was also concerned because I knew being an administrator of a forum was a lot of work, and I wasn't sure if she had the extra time. When she admitted she'd been running the site for several months already I was surprised. I was also touched when she offered to let me "in," saying that she'd already asked the membership if they'd be agreeable to me studying what they were creating together and that they'd unanimously agreed to consider my proposal for research.*

So many feelings were swarming simultaneously: I was concerned Larkwing had taken on too much and it would affect her studies at school; I was overwhelmed that she would do something like this to help me; I was afraid of how studying something so personal for her might affect our relationship. This was an incredible opportunity, but I knew I needed help to navigate working with someone I was so close to.

Larkwing's Dialogic Story About Our Beginning

Mom's already shared the basics, but I want to say a bit more, so you know the whole story. I became involved with my very first RPG forum because I was helping my friend draw

dragons in art class and she wanted to use them on the site. These dragons were very familiar to me because they were based on a literature series I had read, and I love drawing fantasy creatures, so I was enjoying helping her. I was hesitant to try it [role-play on the site] myself still because I wasn't sure if I would like it; I didn't know if I wanted to share my writing with other people. My writing has always been my baby, and I didn't see the appeal then. Eventually I decided to get involved, first on the site my friend shared and then on a second site I found myself. I really liked the second site because it was new and easier to become involved with as a player. It is where I created my first rider and dragon queen, and where I created some of the characters that became favorites over time and I still play. I also liked the people on this site. These members would eventually become the starting members of the Trelis Weyr forum I created, transferring their characters and some of the other materials they had created.

Part of the reason I wanted to create my own site is because I had my own ideas by now about the plot and what I wanted to do on a forum site. I also wanted to create a space that held a lot of the expectations from the literature RPing [role-playing] sites I'd been involved with, but still held the appeal of just having fun like what I experienced on the "one-liner" sites that weren't so formal. Many times, in the literature role-play forums members have characters they create picked apart during the creation process. More advanced members on these forums write very well and expectations are high about a new person's development of characters, and whether they can write enough in threads to participate at the level required. I wanted to create a space where members were supported even if they weren't very strong writers themselves. There were several members who joined Trelis Weyr because they liked the idea of role-play. They were often younger, and they didn't always create strong bios for characters, but over time they got better at writing and you could visibly see a difference in the quality and length of their writing. I wanted to create a forum where members felt empowered to become active and felt supported to improve their writing over time, as they become more involved as players.

Once the site had been created and was in existence for a few months - that is when I chose to show Mom. I wanted to share with her what I was doing online because I was proud of it, but also because we had a deal about my sharing things I was doing online, and I'd been keeping this from her. I also knew she was interested in researching RPG forums because we had been talking about them for six months or so by this time. I knew that telling Mom about Trelis Weyr would give her a forum site she could study, but I also understood it would mean she would be watching my site and what we did on it. I had to think first about whether I wanted her to know about it because I have always been pretty possessive of my writing and things I create. I also didn't want what we were doing on Trelis to be critiqued and studied, if it ended up being shared as something I wouldn't even recognize myself. Mom had shared some of what researchers said about fan sites like this with me and I felt they didn't understand the real experience. In the end, I knew if I was involved and she was studying Trelis Weyr, then I could help her and she would be able to report what really happened and try to get it right.

Mom has always thought I created Trelis Weyr for her, because I showed it to her during this time when she was grappling with how she would research fan sites like it. I guess in some ways I might have been prompted partially to create Trelis because of all the things we were talking about then, but the truth is I created it a few months before I chose to show it to her and for a long time I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell her about it. However, I knew that being involved in Mom's research would give me "permission" to do something I was already doing! I don't think she would have said I couldn't create Trelis, but her research added to the reasons I was spending time on it beyond my own reasons. It also helped her to see that it was a good use of my time in the end so she didn't give me as hard a time about being online a lot, though we still struggled with that conversation. I am happy I created Trelis and Mom was

able to use it as a location for her research. I know a big part of why I worked so hard on the forum and tried for so long to keep it active was so she'd be able to use it in her research.

Interpreting the Roles We Played

When analyzing this interaction, it was immediately apparent that the roles we both played during this research overlapped tremendously. Initially, I was a "mother" in our conversations; very concerned about what my daughter was doing online and why, and how it might be affecting other aspects of her life. Our first conversations were ones where my *mother hat* was fastened securely on my head. However, as we continued our discussions I was so intrigued with what she was showing me, that hat quickly slipped off and was replaced by the *researcher hat*. I was interested in the ways forum sites and their leaders supported participants' writing, including documents created for their guidance, mentoring provided to improve their writing of the biographies of characters, as well as the interactions in role-play completed entirely through dialogue and description. I saw so many support structures and instances of practice during play that supported various participants' writing development, and I was intrigued that the players didn't see themselves as writers in general. As I talked to my daughter, and then later in the research phase with the other two focal participants in the study, I was led into this world and had insiders interpreting it for me, so I would more clearly understand the practice in this community. Often during our discussions, my *technology teacher hat* would come on, as the participants explained the processes and technical aspects of the site, and the RP interactions in the forum. Throughout the research I found myself wearing one or more hats simultaneously, as I considered the things I was observing and hearing through multiple lens (mother, research, technology teacher).

Likewise, Larkwing also wore several hats during this research. She was my daughter, but was also the site administrator and a mentor, and she became a co-researcher or collaborator as she helped me to better understand and explain the phenomenon I was observing with authenticity and accuracy, as only an insider can do. Larkwing was influenced as my daughter when she made decisions as a mentor, because once I knew about the site and was observing the interactions, she couldn't "unknow" that the study existed and I would see what was happening. She had to think about the ways this knowledge was interacting with her participation as a mentor and as an actor in the game. Though she said repeatedly that she was unencumbered by my presence, I know my daughter must have been in some ways.

Larkwing and I were always close as mother and daughter; however, when she entered middle school we talked less frequently, and by high school our discussions were often not as developed ("How was your day?" "It was fine."). I had a very close relationship with my own mother, and I'd worked hard to develop this same relationship with my daughter. I wanted her to feel confident that she could discuss anything with me without judgment, and that I would genuinely be interested in what she chose to share. I had lofty goals, but the reality, as she became a teenager, was that we fell into the typical mother-daughter pattern of interaction. One thing that resulted from our interaction during this research is it supported our communication outside the traditional discourse of a teenage daughter - mother, which in many ways supported that more traditional interaction as well. In the end, I believe our relationship as mother and daughter was strengthened because we respected each other as co-researchers and experts in our own areas of interest, and it gave us a common topic to explore and discuss together; one in which my daughter was the expert and I was learning from her. Larkwing was the expert regarding text-based role-play and she enjoyed sharing her knowledge with me. She also wanted to understand more about research and what I was doing, so asked me many questions. We were able to develop boundaries and ways to sustain mutual respect, which positively impacted our relationship outside this research long term.

Larkwing and I Today

Larkwing is 23 years old now and pursuing dual bachelor's degrees in photography and communications, with a specialization in digital and photographic communications. She still role-plays on various forums and remains friends with most of the people she actively played with on *Trelis Weyr*. As a matter of fact, she recently got married and her maid of honor traveled from Australia to be at her wedding; a dear friend she met through online text-based role-play and only met face to face one time prior to the wedding, though they have multiple Skype conversations each week. Larkwing and I live in the same town and she attends the university where I am now employed as an Assistant Professor, so we see each other and talk on the phone a few times each week. Though I remain very interested in text-based role-play online, I have not moved past the "lurker" stage myself. I am not sure why exactly, because I do feel competent enough to create characters and to role-play now. I guess I still feel like an outsider.

As a researcher and practitioner, technology-based interactions and their affordances intrigue me. There are so many incredible things participants are doing to support each other's literacy and social development in various virtual environments; things we can learn from and bring into school-connected experiences to better engage our students. This discussion is an enduring conversation I have with Larkwing and her friends. How can we improve adolescents' school-based learning experiences, so they don't learn to hate learning (e.g., writing, reading, etc.)? It is a question Larkwing and I both remain passionate about and ponder frequently when we talk.

Looking back, I see how this experience researching together truly strengthened our familial relationship, but more importantly the adult friendship I hoped to develop with my daughter. At an early age, I valued my daughter's expertise and listened to her thoughts, allowing her to voice her opinions. I think she appreciated that I honored her knowledge and I was willing to be taught by her; a role-reversal not often experienced between parent and child. I learned to value the funds of knowledge all people bring to relationships, regardless of their age, education, etc., which made me a better teacher, and actually a better human being. I will be forever grateful to my daughter for trusting me enough to let me peer into her world as a teenager and try to understand something that was extremely meaningful to her.

Conclusion

I end with the same quandary I shared at the beginning: how do we ethically include intimate others in research? I don't have *the* answer, but my experience researching with my daughter and her friends showed me it is important not to shy away from participants we have relationships with just because they are intimate others. Without Larkwing's perspective, I would not have approached that insider vantage I could get no other way. Arthur Frank (2004) said:

> We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people's dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories…. The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. (pp. 191-192)

Researchers must certainly attend to guidelines set forth in IRB plans, but we must also remember that receiving IRB approval is only the beginning of the ethical work we must do. We need to be guided throughout the research process by the same moral compass we use when we make ethical decisions in our personal lives. Researchers need to "question more and

engage in more role taking than they normally do because of the authorial and privileged role that being a research gives them" (Ellis, 2007, p. 23). In my own research, I ask many questions of my participants, including sharing my interpretations and asking them if I am representing their experiences accurately, as I realize the increased importance and change in depth of member checking. I also ask myself questions throughout the research process, using a reflective journal and anecdotal notes. Facing my own writing in the journal forces me to face the underlying moral reasoning that propels the narrative, even confessional writing. Further, I talk about my research with colleagues, questioning my own ethical practices with every step (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Since this type of research is most often emergent, researchers need to understand that relational and ethical considerations might change during the process as well. For this reason it is often a good idea to practice "process consent," ensuring throughout the research process your participants are still interested in being a part of the project (Etherington, 2005). Even when we get consent initially from participants in our study, because relationships may change over time, our participants may change their minds. Participants often back out, feeling their involvement is too big a commitment over time, or they decide they don't like talking to us anymore for other reasons. In the case of intimate participants, we know the relationship is life-long, and we must be ready to witness and respond to changes in relationship.

To be prepared, researchers need to have a backup plan, including incorporating multiple voices and interpretations so we have flexibility if some participants choose to discontinue their involvement. Researchers should also remember that often their participants don't see the personal relevance of being involved in the project; they don't see what they are getting out of being part of the study. For this reason, we need to think about how much we are asking of participants and be careful to not cross the line by asking too much. Conversely, researchers might be more forthcoming about the possible benefits participants gain by being part of the research, and labeling these benefits, as these advantages may not be readily discernable to participants. Finally, researchers need to remember that intimacy in research carries responsibilities and considerations, and these must be provided for in our methodology and scrutinized throughout the research process.

References

Adams, T. (2006). Seeking father: Relationally reframing a troubled love story. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(4), 704-723.

Alley, K. M. (2013). *Playing in Trelis Weyr: Investigating collaborative practices in a dragons of Pern role-play-game forum.* Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (Accession Order No. 1417072690).

Anderson, H. (2012). Collaborative relationships and dialogic conversations: Ideas for a relationally responsive practice. *Family Process*, *51*(1), 8-24.

Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (M. Holquist, Ed., C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin, TX: University of Texas.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women' s ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Busier, H. L., Clark, K. A., Esch, R. A., Glesne, C., Pigeon, Y., & Tarule, J. M. (1997). Intimacy in research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 10*(2), 165-170.

Cannella, G., & Lincoln, Y. (2004). Epilogue: Claiming a critical public social science: Reconceptualizing and redeploying research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*, 298-309.

Carter, S. (2002). How much subjectivity is needed to understand our lives objectively? *Qualitative Health Research, 12*, 1184-1201.

Cesara, M. [Pseudonym of Karla Poewe]. (1982). *Reflections of a woman anthropologist: No hiding place*. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Cole, S. (1995). Ruth Landes and the early ethnography of race and gender. In R. Behar & D. A. Gordon (Eds.), *Women writing culture* (pp. 166-185). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ellis, C. (2001). With mother/with child: A true story. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7*, 598-616.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry, 13(1)*, 3-29. doi: 10.1177/1077800406294947

Etherington, K. (2005). Writing trauma stories for research. *Lapidus Quarterly, 1*(2), 25-31.

Frank, A. (2004). Moral non-fiction: Life writing and children's disability. In P. J. Eakin (Ed.), *The ethics of life writing* (pp. 174-194). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. New York: Routledge.

Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Goodwin, D., Pope, C., Mort, M., & Smith, A. (2003). Ethics and ethnography: An experiential account. *Qualitative Health Research, 13*, 567-577.

Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*, 261-280.

Harré, R., & van Langenhove, L. (Eds.). (1999). *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of international action*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I. P., & Surrey, J. L. (Eds.) (1991). *Women's growth in connection*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Kamarovsky, M. (1981). Women then and now: A journey of detachment and engagement. *Women's Studies Quarterly, 10*(2), 5-9.

Kiesinger, C. (2002). My father's shoes: The therapeutic value of narrative reframing. In A. P. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature and aesthetics* (pp. 95-114). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2006). *New literacies* (2nd ed.). Maindehead, UK: Open University Press.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Maguire, P. (1987). *Doing participatory research: A feminist approach*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.

McCaffrey, A. (1967-2011). *Dragonriders of Pern series*. New York, NY: Random House.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring, a feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Perry, J. (2001). *Sibling relationships and care of parents: Deconstructing memories and personal narratives* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.

Rabinow, P. (1986). Representations are social facts: Modernity and post-modernity. In J. Clifford & G. Marcus (Eds.), *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography* (pp. 234-261). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Rambo, C. (2005). *Handing IRB an unloaded gun* (Unpublished manuscript). University of

Memphis, TN.
Reason, P., & Rowan, J. (1981). Issues of validity in new paradigm research. In P. Reason & J. Roawn (Eds.), *Human inquiry* (pp. 239-252). New York, NY: Wiley.
Shotter, J. (1984). *Social accountability and selfhood*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
Slattery, P., & Rapp, D. (2003). *Ethics and the foundations of education: Teaching convictions in a postmodern world*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Bloomberg, NJ: Psychology Press.
van Maanen, J. (1995). An end to innocence: The ethnography of ethnography. In J. van Maanen (Ed.), *Representation in ethnography* (pp. 1-35). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Welch, D. D. (1994). *Conflicting agendas: Personal morality in institutional settings*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

Author Note

Kathleen M. Alley is an assistant professor of Literacy in the Curriculum, Instruction and Special Education Department at Mississippi State University. Dr. Alley's research explores youth's literate and social practices, and the environments that sustain literacy and motivation growth within school and informal, out-of-school contexts. Her interests include writing pedagogy, children's and adolescent literature, technology integration, and teacher preparation in rural contexts. Prior to accepting her position at Mississippi State University, Dr. Alley was a Florida educator for 27 years. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: kalley@colled.msstate.edu.

Article Citation

Alley, K. M. (2018). The roles we played: Exploring intimacy in research. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(6), 1470-1482. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss6/13