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## “Listen and Let It Flow”: A Researcher and Participant Reflect on the Qualitative Research Experience

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## “Listen and Let It Flow”: A Researcher and Participant Reflect on the Qualitative Research Experience

### Abstract

Ethnographic research involves prolonged and often personal interaction between the researcher and research participants. This paper is a collaboration between a social work researcher and a research participant who became acquainted through the researcher’s ethnographic fieldwork for her dissertation. Despite differing in numerous and significant ways, not the least of which are age, class, education, and race, the two women developed a quasi-friendship after the researcher exited the field—a time when many researcher-participant relationships wane or terminate entirely. The two recorded and transcribed a series of informal conversations wherein they reflected on their experiences in the research process. Of particular salience is the research participant’s perspective of the immaterial benefits she experienced through her participation in the research and her perception of the qualities of a “good” qualitative researcher: one who approaches listening as a practice and cultivates relationships with participants slowly and naturally. The authors’ reflections indicate that participants may be able to offer valuable feedback on the research experience, and researchers might use participants’ unique perspectives to alter their research approach and/or techniques.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Ethnography, Relationship Building, Reflexivity, Active Listening, Interviewing

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## “Listen and Let It Flow”: A Researcher and Participant Reflect on the Qualitative Research Experience

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I met Monique in 2015 through my dissertation research—a two-year ethnographic study of the Clemente Course in the Humanities, a free, college credit-bearing humanities course for historically marginalized, low-income adults. There are currently 31 such courses in the United States and Puerto Rico and, as part of my research, I spent a year each with two of those courses—a year in the midwest and a year in the northeast United States (US)—and sat alongside nontraditional adult learners as they tackled philosophy, literature, art and US history, and critical thinking and writing two nights a week. Monique was a student in one of those courses.

When we first met, our relationship was clear: I was the researcher and she was the researched. Our differences were also clear: Monique is what we researchers often call “marginalized” or “oppressed,” although she would never describe herself that way. She’s a Black woman who, when we met, was in her early twenties, was considered “low-income” for the purposes of the course and possessed just a high school diploma. Although I grew up poor in the Appalachian Mountains, I have occupied a privileged social location as an adult: I am a White woman now in my forties with a doctorate in social work from an elite university. Much separated, and will always separate, my research participants and me: we look different, we sound different, we *are* different. Over the course of my fieldwork, though, I spent hundreds of hours with them in- and outside of the classroom, and while the sharp differences between us never fully disappeared, the edges certainly dulled over time. Those many hours together laid the foundation for friendship, and despite our dissimilarities, Monique and I maintained

contact—exchanging text messages and meeting occasionally for coffee—after I’d completed my research and fully exited the field, and the shape of our relationship gradually shifted into a friendship.

I was curious what it had felt like to be in Monique’s shoes—that is, in the position of research “subject.” What had the experience been like for her? What, to her, would make a “good” qualitative researcher? With my dissertation research complete, I wanted to explore these questions with her, and I toyed with the idea of us collaborating somehow. In this nebulous idea, Monique and I wouldn’t conduct “research” but, instead, would reflect on our experiences in the research process. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) agreed that approval was not needed because our reflections would not be considered “generalizable” or used for any “generalizable purpose.” While not generalizable, maybe our reflections could be interesting or useful to others, I thought, particularly novice qualitative researchers.

I approached Monique with this idea with some trepidation: “How might this vague idea fit into her world?” I wondered. “What, if anything, would be the *benefit* to her?” Monique, however, didn’t share my concerns—“concerns” that I realized were just my biases disguised as questions. Much to my surprise, she was enthusiastic about working together, even without a plan, and fired off a text message response that read, “Yessssss to the collaboration!” That “collaboration” would eventually become this paper, which we agreed I would take the lead on writing and Monique would contribute content and provide direction. For us, this was a natural and fair division of labor; I wanted Monique to be as involved as she wanted to be, but I did not want to add extra work to her already-packed life.

We decided to meet a handful of times to discuss the research experience and the evolution of our friendship, with no interview protocols and no predetermined direction. Our informal conversations, which we recorded and transcribed, provided the opportunity for Monique to share her perspective—not *my* perspective of her perspective, as is often the case when researchers reflect on their studies. We conducted “analysis” over a few dinners at a diner near Monique’s job. Like traditional data analysis, our talks involved parsing themes from the transcripts—what were we seeing? What was repeated? What seemed most important? What did Monique deem interesting? This process was akin to open coding; as we talked, I segmented the textual data into categories, circling words and phrases, bracketing passages, and scribbling notes in the margins. Although we took an analog approach to data analysis, we wanted to assure good quality work. Our practice was reflexive and dialogic, and we believe taking such an active, iterative approach forced us to consider quality throughout the course of our collaboration. We also aimed to be comprehensive and systematic in our assessment of the transcripts, carefully working through our conversations and maintaining transparency in our reporting (Reynolds et al., 2011).

What ultimately emerged from our conversations were what Monique called “dos and don’ts” for budding qualitative researchers: researchers should give participants time and space; find common ground with participants; focus on listening, not just hearing; and remember that participants can benefit from the research process, too. From the themes that arose during our talks, Monique identified two areas as being “most important” for researchers to bear in mind during fieldwork:

Charity: So we’ll need to break down everything we’ve talked about. ... From your perspective, what’s *most* important for a qualitative researcher to know, or bear in mind, through their study?

Monique: OK, let’s reflect on this. Dos and don’ts. Like *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. [laughter] I’ll give you two right now. So, one, you have to be good at listening, and you have to be good at remembering things. ... And then two,

everything should come out in increments. It's about timing. You gotta get to know each other [researcher and research participants] and let things flow naturally. You [researchers] want to get close to the students [participants], but everything is about timing. You don't want to forcibly *make* someone like you.

Charity: To try too hard.

Monique: Try too hard. You don't want to beg. You know what I'm saying? Be a real person with real emotions. ... That can make a whole world of difference.

Charity: OK, so you're saying "good" researchers really listen and let relationships evolve naturally?

Monique: Mm-hmm. Listen and let it flow. Those are two of the most important, I'd say.

### **“Just to be heard is huge”**

Monique and I first met at a summer picnic to welcome the incoming class of humanities students. The idea behind the picnic was to bring together the twenty or so incoming students—most of whom had been out of school for years—with staff and former students in the hopes of lessening the new students' apprehension about continuing their education. At 22, she was eager to continue her education beyond a high school diploma but uncertain as to what the academic year might hold. I, on the other hand, was at the picnic because I would be studying the class over the upcoming academic year and, ever the dutiful doctoral student, wanted to begin building rapport with the students who would ultimately become my “subjects.”

After introducing ourselves, Monique and I sat on the grass and talked about what had brought us there that afternoon and what we hoped the year ahead might bring. Before we parted ways that evening, Monique stopped me: “Thank you,” she said, “for listening to me.” On the train home that evening, I jotted down some notes about the day. About that meeting with Monique I wrote:

8/15/2015 ... Talked with Monique, incoming student age 22, for about 20 minutes—half an hour before some other students sat down to join us. She talked a lot—about her education, her plans, her job, past jobs, her parents, her siblings. I was surprised she would open up to a stranger so much but happy to sit with her and hear her story. Later, as we were all departing, we exchanged contact information. She paused for a second and said, “Thanks for listening to me.” Something about that was kind of sad to me, like she didn't have anyone in her life who would really listen to her.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard that phrase innumerable times, but each time it gave me pause, because within it lies the reality that everyone is not heard, that everyone does not have someone to talk to. Through interviews that ran long and countless informal conversations, I had come to understand how infrequently my research participants had the opportunity to talk without fear of judgment, interruption, or censure. What I might see as an informal conversation, a research participant might see as a rare opportunity to speak. When I later asked Monique why she thanked me for simply listening to her talk, she replied: “Just to be heard is *huge*.”

Research interviews—whether formal or informal—sometimes mirror therapeutic interviews (Gale, 1992). Both types of interviews provide a dedicated space for the speaker to articulate her thoughts to someone who is there purely to listen and ask questions. If a researcher is embedded in the field for an extended time period, as I was, she will end up spending countless hours alongside the research participants—contact that often surpasses what one might experience in a therapeutic process—and a large portion of that time is spent simply *listening* to them (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2006). When Monique spoke about the qualities she thought might make a “good” qualitative researcher, she routinely stressed the importance of being “good at listening”:

They [researchers] need to be good at *listening*, not just *hearing*, you know what I’m saying? ... You’re good at listening. You’re good with remembering. ... We get a chance to talk about other things, not just the research. It’s respectful. I get a chance to speak with you about a lot of things because you *remember*. I don’t have to keep repeating myself, and that’s also a sign that you’re listening. ... It was so refreshing to be able to speak to someone who just wanted to speak to me as well.

What Monique describes is listening as a *practice*: active listening. Rogers (1980) argues that this sort of listening is actually “exceedingly rare in our lives. We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy,” which is precisely why Monique found the research interviews so “refreshing” (p. 116). Many, if not most, qualitative methods classes do little to actually *teach* listening, and instead focus on things like field notes, interview protocols, and data analysis (McClelland, 2017). Social workers are at an advantage in this domain—we’re taught the skills necessary to develop relationships, convey appropriate empathy, and listen—but nascent qualitative researchers who *haven’t* been trained in social work may not know how to cultivate such “soft” skills (Rogers & Welch, 2009). Like social workers, though, qualitative researchers must also know how to truly listen to, and extract meaning from, another person’s story (McClelland, 2017).

Active, empathic listening is deliberate. It requires listeners to send nonverbal cues to speakers—first, perhaps, signaling through our body language and posture that we’re open to talking and then through head nods, eye contact, facial expressions, and affirmations that we’re actually listening (Ivey, 1988; Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). The latter comes naturally to me, but, despite my social work background, the former does not. My resting body language is generally closed, so I have to make a concerted effort to appear “open” and accessible. On a practical level, this means repeatedly reminding myself to keep my arms uncrossed and my brow unfurrowed. I was particularly cognizant of my body language while I was engaged in fieldwork and conducting interviews—how did I *appear* to the research participants? Did I look like someone they wanted to talk to? With some apprehension, I asked Monique what her “first impression” of me was:

I thought you were a student. I noticed that you ... looked ready and willing. Some people often have that closed-off vibe where body language is like this [gestures crossing arms over chest]. It’s like them saying, “I’m waiting for this to be over.” You looked ready and willing, approachable, if you will, to talk to.

Monique, like many people, equates a “closed-off vibe” with uninviting body language and a general aura of disinterest and, further, interprets individuals with a “closed-off vibe” as wanting to quickly extract information from others and move on. *Active* listening, however, requires the listener—in my case, the researcher—to slow down, maintain focus, and just *be still*,

which are not actions that typically characterize our frenetic, twenty-first century lives, and which aren't necessarily second nature.

### **“Everything is about timing”**

Active, empathic listening is deliberate; that's part of what makes it a practice. It requires listeners to slow down and open themselves up to the speakers' stories. “Some people [researchers] often have that closed-off vibe,” Monique said, referring to researchers' posture and facial expressions, “where their body language, it's like them saying, ‘I'm waiting for this to be over.’” We, as researchers, want to be the *opposite* of that. Just as clinicians can't hurry along the therapeutic process, researchers can't expect participants to divulge sensitive information—or *any* information, really—quickly. In our conversations, Monique underscored how important a researcher's pace is:

People [research participants] have trust issues, especially nowadays. Some of them will feel like somebody is out to get something from them. And you also can't approach this [research] like, “I'm here to get this out of you, and then I'm gone for good.” ... When you don't know people, you have to tread *care-full-y*.

You [researchers] can't bring everything out [of research participants] in the first week or so. ... It's all about getting to know someone, what to say and what not to say. There was never a point where I felt uncomfortable as far as talking about anything. ... All that stuff came out in increments, but I would suggest that everything would be timed. ... You want to get close to the students [research participants], but everything is about timing.

When Monique said “everything is about timing,” she was reiterating what social workers and, ideally, qualitative researchers are taught: cultivating relationships takes time. When Monique provided an example, she spoke in terms of “students”—since that was the sample of which she was a part—but her illustration holds for most any qualitative research participant. She explained that participants open up to researchers in their own time and, as individuals, shouldn't be compared to one another:

When you're [researcher] speaking to one student [research participant], don't compare one student to the next or feel like this student should give you more than the other. Because you may have two students ... and one may be up to here with you [gestures upward], while one is still loading at three quarters of the way, you know what I mean? It may have nothing to do with you but just the person [participant] in general, how they feel about new people. ... Kind of deal with them at different paces. It will make them feel comfortable. ... You can't really say, “Hey, talk to me, I really need this. I'm doing this dissertation. *I need this.*” Then it becomes one-sided. ... A researcher can't be one-sided.

We kind of met in the middle, you know what I'm saying? You want to meet in the middle. You don't want to give someone more power over you or you don't want to take more power over someone else. It should always meet in the middle.

Part of meeting in the middle means we researchers can't expect the participants to give of themselves endlessly. We must make *ourselves* vulnerable too. If some measure of our job as

qualitative researchers is to facilitate participant disclosure, perhaps we must undertake some level of self-disclosure ourselves (Dickinson-Swift et al., 2006). To encourage participant disclosure and build rapport, many researchers, including myself, divulge some information about themselves during the research process though, as Monique argued, the intensity and frequency of such disclosures are important: “You [researchers] probably should leave out less at first,” Monique advised. Oversharing, she said, “may make people feel uneasy.” Indeed, all self-disclosure is not necessarily good self-disclosure; too much, or inappropriate, disclosure has the potential to distance the researcher from the participant, particularly if the disclosure portrays the researcher as more knowledgeable or powerful than the participant (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). Monique spoke to this point in one of our conversations:

This is the example that I want to tell people [researchers] like, “Hey, what you do in this situation [research], it helps to kind of be a little personal and then *gradual*.” You know what I mean? But it also has to be up to the student [research participant]. I mean, I dove right in when it came to you, and I was OK with it. Some people may give you a little leeway in the beginning and they feel like, “OK. ... I don’t want to be all up intertwined with somebody who’s studying me per se.” Because sometimes people can close up or clam up ... Sometimes if you [researcher] go on with a whole bunch of “I’m from here, here, and here and this is what I’m doing,” some [participants] are gonna be like, “*Huh?*” One word may feel like it’s something that they can’t understand or one word and they feel like it’s something else that it’s really not.

As a novice ethnographer, and someone who errs on the side of *undersharing*, I struggled with how much of myself to reveal to participants during my dissertation research, although as we got to know each other, it grew easier to gauge what, and how much, to share. Monique’s take on the matter of researcher self-disclosure was one of “less is more.” In stark contrast to how I *assumed* participants might feel, she argued that it isn’t necessary for researchers to disclose much information about themselves at all:

We didn’t even have to know you were married. ... We didn’t have to know *anything about you*. It’s the fact that ... you would be here [in class] every day. In the end you may, you can reveal whatever you like. I just think less is more in this [research process]. ... It’s not because you’re a PhD student why I wanted to talk to you, it’s because you made me feel comfortable that I want to talk to you. Approach is everything. Less is more is my biggest advice.

Monique put a premium on building rapport and argued that making participants “feel comfortable” may be more likely to elicit rich interview data than a researcher’s self-disclosure. I took a leap into self-disclosure a few months into my second year of data collection when I brought my younger brother, who was in his mid-twenties and visiting from out of state, to class one evening. In light of her relatively conservative take on researcher self-disclosure, I asked Monique her thoughts on the addition of my brother to that class—was that too much self-disclosure on my part? Had the timing been right?

It was totally appropriate. ... It’s like you brought a piece of home with you. And that’s part of you that we don’t know—you have a sibling, you know what I’m saying? [laughter] ... So, it was nice that you were sharing little things about yourself with us. It just made it also feel like, “OK. Charity is human.” You know what I’m saying? Like some people [researchers] come into certain



situations, and it's just strictly business: do the study, let's get out, that's it. You know what I'm saying? But you gave us a little bit more, a little bit more, which is cool, at your own pace. I don't believe that anybody would force it out of you, but it was just nice that you shared a part of yourself with us. I think that's very warm and nice. It just shows that we're the same. You want people to know that you're not ashamed of us.

Monique felt that I was sharing a "piece" of myself by bringing my brother with me to the class. Sharing just a small part of myself demonstrated to her that we were all "the same" and, although it both surprised and saddened me to hear, indicated that I wasn't "ashamed" of them, which, of course, I wasn't. Throughout my two years of data collection, I negotiated and renegotiated the boundaries between the participants and me. Monique seemed to understand this ever-shifting balance when she articulated what some methods teachers seem to omit from their instruction: researchers "grow" as the experience unfolds. We are in a constant state of flux. We make choices, make mistakes, and, ideally, learn from everything.

And also put this in there [this paper] that you grow with this process as a researcher. You're not the same researcher that you were when you first started. Especially having more than one [site]. Who you were in the [Midwestern city] course is not who you are in the [Northeastern city] course. You learn, you make mistakes, you understand what your capacity is, what your limits are, what you want to dive into first, what you want to let people know off the bat.

Monique's sentiment—"You learn, ... you understand what your limits are, what you want to let people know"—is in keeping with feminist methodology, which encourages researchers to use sharing and self-reflection to help cultivate interactive relationships with participants over time and which mirrors aspects of good social work practice (Alston & Bowles, 1998; Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Dickinson-Swift et al., 2006; Oakley, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1993).

### **"I was learning through your learning"**

Monique and I differ in numerous and significant ways, not the least of which are age, class, education, and race, and if not for my research, it's unlikely our paths would've ever crossed. I broached the subject of our differences several times but was always met with the same response: "it doesn't matter." While I disagree with the view that differences don't matter in the research process—I was acutely aware of my whiteness, for example, especially since my dissertation centered on the experiences of people of color—there were times that I privately worried about, and perhaps fixated on, the differences between the participants and me, which Monique argued could hinder the overall research experience:

Charity: Does it matter that I'm [White] –

Monique: I think that's one of the things that can prevent the [research] experience from being successful is if you [the researcher] let race or education get in the way. You want common ground [with the research participants], but that doesn't mean that you have to come from the same ethnic background or the same tax bracket. ... It doesn't matter. It's not one of those things that ... it wouldn't make me like you more or less. It doesn't matter if you are gay or straight, it doesn't matter if you're White or Black. It's not a life-changing thing.

It doesn't make me feel any differently about you. ... The mind isn't Black, White, green, or gold.

I also worried about how the participants felt about being research “subjects,” a clear difference between us and a position which connotes some degree of powerlessness and objectification. I expected Monique to say that at the very least it felt weird to be observed, or sometimes irritating to be asked questions, but she told me, as did others anecdotally, that she was “excited” to be a part of the project and eager to “help.” Participating in research was a learning experience for her:

When you told me that you were a PhD candidate, for some reason Dr. Phil came to mind, because he's a PhD. [laughter]... I didn't know anything about getting a PhD. I was excited about that. I've never been in a class where someone who's researching it is *in* the class. And I never knew what a dissertation was, so I was learning through your learning, you know? And I thought that was very cool. ... Now I know someone with a PhD—*what?!* [laughter]

Monique saw her participation as a benefit, as an opportunity to help and to learn. She felt that she was “learning through [my] learning” as I navigated the research experience and the path toward degree completion. I, of course, was learning through her learning too as she navigated the humanities course and the path toward graduation. Monique, like all the participants, received gift cards in exchange for in-depth interviews. She referred to the gift cards as a “nice incentive, cool,” but added, “I don't need a Starbucks card to talk to you. It's not like it was the only benefit to participating in your study, you know? I think the biggest thing is that we [participants] just wanted to help you.” Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) tend to understand research benefits in terms of material gains to participants—like monetary compensation, for example—while ignoring the less tangible benefits Monique experienced (Bradley, 2007; Opsal et al., 2016). Indeed, the act of reflecting on the research experience together was an immaterial benefit to both of us. As a graduate student, I never would have predicted I'd collaborate with a research participant-turned-friend, but the experience proved to be immensely fulfilling for Monique and me. Our differences actually brought us together, and Monique's position as a research “subject” ultimately empowered her.

The insight Monique provides is specific to her experience and by no means generalizable. These are the opinions of just *one* research participant who, it could be argued, may be an outlier, may be biased, or both. But how often do we hear from participants after our studies are over? How often are their ideas about research something we talk about? How often do we engage with them as equals? For Monique, being a research participant in an ethnographic study afforded her the rare opportunity to be fully heard by another person—an intangible benefit that can't be measured and shouldn't be ignored. As a research participant, she was able to see my approach firsthand, and through our conversations I've learned how important active listening, timing, and “be[ing] a real person” were to her, and possibly important to other participants as well. Our conversations demonstrate the value that participants may hold for researchers *beyond* our studies. Monique acted as a valuable thought partner once I exited the field, but had I solicited feedback from participants throughout the research process, I could have made mid-course corrections to my techniques and approach, or built upon aspects that may have been working especially well. Without participants' feedback, we researchers can only guess what's working and what's not, what's making participants comfortable and what's not, and what's of benefit to them and what's not.

Shortly after Monique and I wrapped up our conversations about the research experience, we submitted an abstract to a qualitative research conference in Las Vegas, with the idea that we might present together. When I shared the news that the proposal had been accepted, she responded in much the same way as when I presented the opportunity to collaborate on this paper: “omggg i’d love to go! how do we map this out? ... Let’s start planning right away. This is important to both of us and I’d like to get registered right away.”

Her enthusiasm for an academic methods conference admittedly surprised me—“This is important to *both of us*?”—but presenting at the conference *was* important to her. She saw the presentation as an opportunity to share her perspective with others, and the experience proved to be fulfilling for both of us, though in different ways.

I sometimes wonder where our relationship will go now that my dissertation research is over and our collaboration is complete. After all, our paths don’t cross unless we *make* them cross. What shape will our relationship take as time passes? When I asked Monique this question, she replied:

We formed a relationship in a research capacity. ... So there will always be that capacity of the relationship, and I think that we’ll always, we’re now connected for life. Like, we’re friends for life. If I introduce you to someone, I can say, “This is Charity. We go *way back*.”

Ethnographic research connects researchers to their participants; sometimes those connections grow strong and endure, and sometimes they don’t. Monique and I have known each other for four and a half years now, but somehow all those hours we’ve spent together make it seem longer, like we do indeed go “way back.”

Through our project, Monique and I solidified an unlikely friendship, and both of us gained confidence. I grew more comfortable as a researcher and Monique learned that her ideas have immeasurable value. Indeed, we hope that this collaboration will encourage researchers to see study participants not simply as “subjects,” but as potential collaborators with more to offer than answers to interlopers’ burning research questions. Participants hold insight into the research process itself—insight that may be particularly valuable to novice researchers. Rather than abruptly terminating all relationships when fieldwork is complete, perhaps researchers might be inclined to engage willing participants in dialogue as equals, so that both may learn and grow together.

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