

Balancing the
relationship between
students and
teachers in
ethnographic
fieldwor...



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To 'believe in someone', without adding or even conceiving what it is that one believes about him, is to employ a very subtle and profound idiom. It expresses the feeling that there exists between our idea of a being and the being itself a definite connection and unity, a certain consistency in our conception of it, an assurance and lack of resistance in the surrender of the Ego to this conception, which may rest upon particular reasons, but is not explained by them. Simmel G. (1990: 179)

The beginning of an ethnographic project is always fraught with conflicting emotions: the excitement of being in the field, anxiety of entering the site, establishing relationships with informants, developing friendships, gaining a sense of place within the local dynamics, preparing for the departure, and mourning the separation. It is nerve-racking. & being a novice makes things even harder. There are no previous experiences to guide you or soothe you in moments of loneliness & fear. Antonio C. (2006: 724) Analysis

Lisa Russell's ethnographic fieldwork provides a "close-up" and "analytic" depictions of social life as she experiences it. By "close-up" Lofland (1972, 4) she "intimately acquainted" herself with the "discrete circumstances" of a social context "through personal participation, observation, and semi-structured interviewing." She has been in face-to-face proximity with the persons and circumstances under study. She has well manifested & drawn a searching attention in investigating student resistance with a state of favorable expectation in attaining trust.

She has provided a kind of description and quotation that moves us 'inside' . . . the world under study" (Lofland 1972, 4). Although she is a young

ethnographer researching students she has been “ analytical,” and “ searched out specific regularities and patterns of social life” (Lofland 1972, 5). In my view Lisa’s Ethnographic fieldwork accounts as both descriptive and interpretive; descriptive, because of her emphasis on detail (p. 87, 193), and interpretive, because she determines the significance of what she observes without gathering broad, statistical information. (p. 194, 195).

Researching student resistance on a podium of trust, by a young novice ethnographer has thrown into, sharper relief the issue of the usefulness of research and that of objectivity versus subjectivity. These debates are hardly new but continue to have importance and significance in research regarding participatory democracy and personal experience research (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994).

I perceive that in order to understand the multiple factors that shape the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, to influence the quality and content of information, researcher reflexivity is required better referred as “ the knower’s mirror” (Malterud, 2001, p. 484)-in examining the ways in which researchers and participants jointly produce knowledge and interpretation . Further, in a world structured by age & gender, research of young teenagers by a white female, aged 23-24 creates an added dimension, especially where the research intrudes into their everyday lives in matters concerning trust.

It is through the direct human contact that the research participant can assess the integrity of the researcher (Giddens, 1991). In a landmark study published more than two decades ago (Roberts, 1981), the distinctive

relationships of female researchers and research participants, modeled on patterns of friendship, were highlighted (see also Oakley, 2005). The same attention has now been given to the ways in which gender and age shapes communication styles and interactions between men and women. Moreover, sex/age is the only factor that influences research and social relationships.

This article discusses how these factors shape the conduct of interviews and the interactions. Reflexivity of research A researcher is no longer a novice if she participates in reflexive writing and Lisa has been reflexive about age & gender acting to her benefit for the interpretation she makes of the data (Diane Reay , 1996). Reflexive writing plays a huge role in the professional growth of a researcher and can provide insight into the personal and implicit process of what a researcher experiences in accordance to their work & development and that these written accounts have benefits both for the writer, as well as the reader.

In broad terms, by documenting and reflecting on their experience, writers benefit from an enhanced awareness of themselves as people and as professionals, an awareness which makes for more informed professional decision-making (Holly, 1989a). Reflective writing is acknowledged as a useful tool for both promoting and understanding researcher's professional activity and growth. Kulik (1995) argued that " an erotic subjective does things. " Kulik believed that " desire (age/sex) experienced in the field seems often to provoke questions that otherwise easily remain unasked, or that only get asked in a rarefied manner" (p. 5).

Lisa used age/sex to take advantage of opportunities of common experiences (p. 194) . Age shapes perceptions of the body and its transitions, and informs the language that individuals deploy to speak. Due to her age the students felt, that she would have a fair stance of understanding them. Lisa uses her age to mirror her memories as a teenager and would engulf in participative conversation relating to common issues . She uses her sex as a tool to deploy their underlying emotions. Lisa has used a process of respondent validation (Bloor, 1978), in order to provide some measure of participant control over the research process (p. 87) which would not have been possible conjuring the factor of her age.

My argument here is that as a young researcher Lisa had to be more reflective about her research and had to be more open and willing to share her experiences, identify with the respondents as much as possible in order to diminish the barriers and equalize the relationship and try to establish, what Vincent and Warren (2001) refer to as ‘ structure of feeling” or, as (Edwards 1993,) argues, to promote some sense of solidarity between the researcher and the researched e. g. Sharing stories and experiences is an aspect of a developing relationship; only friends ‘ share’ stories (rapport gained faster with some p. 194).

In negotiating access, in any qualitative research, the researcher is asking for the participants to trust her/him, especially if the research involves disclosure of personal experiences (p. 196). Lisa felt strongly that she had to ‘ prove’ her trustworthiness (not reporting their behavior p. 193). This emphasized the responsibility that was now entrusted to her; not just to take care of the data but not to disclose it either.

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Empathizing was important in the winning of trust, as part of negotiating access and staying in. The hierarchical relationship never emerged as she was young and could fit into the age constraints of the students to be disregarded as an authoritative figure. But unfortunately she couldn't manifest the same relation with the teachers and attain a simultaneous relationship, (failed to intervene with troublemaking behavior I was frowned upon p. 189) and she realized that over identification with teachers would customarily threaten her relationship with the students.

On a more pragmatic approach it wouldn't be wrong to deduce that a more veteran/older researcher in a analogous milieu would be regard as an sneak /discloser of information, this transcend of hierarchical benefit that Lisa had because of her age benefited her to develop affinity and reliance which wouldn't be true for an experienced researcher. Although researchers have recently focused on the nature of expertise, the link between learning and the development of expertise yet remains to be more fully explored.

The purpose of this study I believe was to analyze the different learning processes undertaken by Lisa. (Inexperienced outsider) . Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted. Results indicated that novice learning is contingent on concept formation and assimilation. Novice learning is also framed by the feelings novices experience in the context of practice. Lisa has engaged herself in a form of self-inquiry & being grounded in her experience of being a researcher through which she could identify and understand specific ways of being reflexive.

This understanding underpins the arguments I present here for the value of a reflexive researcher as a tool for promoting research development and pushing her away from being a novice. I quantify that after this research Lisa Russell is no longer a novice as she overcame 1) contact Anxiety (p. 185) 2) confronting/dealing with resistance (p. 192) 3) Working in enchanted territory (p. 182). At the same time we must also accept that “ systematic reflection is a learned activity” (Schiffman, 1987: 160). Reflexive writing on the field of qualitative research is a field of professional activity a point also made by Janesick (1998).

She views journal writing as ‘ a type of Connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns and indeed their own understanding of their work’ (p. 3) and argues that journal writing is ‘ a tangible way to evaluate our experience, improve and clarify One’s thinking, and finally become a better . . . scholar’. Conclusion From this overview it should be clear that rather than providing a conventional report on a piece of research, this paper explores processes central to doing research & to developing as a researcher which Lisa has clearly evolved into & making her no longer a novice.

I believe that Lisa has done a fairly good job in data analysis by representing and identifying extracts that were significant in some way, which helped me to develop a level of personal significance In addition, discrepancies or proximities of age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender all influence and, to a degree, predetermine the relationship of interviewer and interviewee. These factors shape what is asked and how stories are told.