FQS FORUM: QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH SOZIALFORSCHUNG

Volume 13, No. 3, Art. 10
September 2012

Negotiating Tensions in Researching, Facilitating, and Critiquing Gender: Exploring Institutional and Feminist Influences

Laura Lane, Nancy Taber & Vera Woloshyn

Key words: collaboration; feminist methodology; gender; researcher expectations; researcher identities; reflexivity

Abstract: This article explores our experiences with negotiating tensions when conducting research. As three female researchers in various stages of our academic careers, we describe our own reflexive accounts of the research process as we negotiated our roles and responsibilities in relation to academic institutions and feminism. We discuss the literature related to responsibilities of academics, the tensions associated with conducting research, and the feminist methodologies addressing gendered issues in the current study. We contextualize the research project by outlining our positionalities and the methodology for our reflexive process. We then discuss our experiences of negotiating ourselves within an academic institution and within feminism. We conclude by discussing the importance of creating a feminist space through collaboration within academic institutions.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Research is a fundamental component of academia (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2000); however, the ways in which research is conceptualized and conducted is often a subject of debate as criteria for rigorous research often support patriarchal understandings of reason and objectivity (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). The ways in which research is conceptualized and conducted is often a subject of debate in academia as criteria for *rigorous* research which often supports patriarchal understandings of reason and objectivity (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). Feminist researchers have utilized qualitative methodologies to relegitimize what counts as meaningful research in academia (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). Although feminist qualitative research is

expanding, research processes continue to incur gendered tensions throughout women's academic careers that can be difficult to navigate (PHILIPSEN, 2008). In this article, we discuss a qualitative research project wherein we collaboratively organized, facilitated, participated, and observed a book club for young girls who struggle with reading. Specifically, we hosted a weekly book club as a sociological interpretive case study. While our focus was on conducting socially responsive research that supported the girls' development as readers and helped them engage in a gendered social critique, we were also interested in exploring our own experiences as female researchers and facilitators. Documenting and analyzing our experiences required ongoing critical reflection as part of a reflexive research process. [1]

This article therefore focuses on our own experiences as three female researchers in different stages of our academic careers as we negotiated various research-based tensions. We argue that reflexive collaborative research facilitates effectively the conduct of socially responsible research within gendered research climates. We first review the literature that contextualizes the gendered social climate of our research, outline some of the tensions that female researchers face, and discuss how feminist pedagogy and qualitative methodologies can provide a particular lens from which to view research. We then describe our specific research context including our own positionalities. We explore various tensions in negotiating our enacted roles and evolving responsibilities to meet academic expectations as well as participants' needs. We conclude by highlighting the importance of reflexive feminist collaborative research. [2]

2. Feminist Research and Researchers within Academia

Universities are unique sites where researchers are predominantly engaged in the processes of knowledge generation and application (BOYER, 1997; DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2000). While the faculty may feel pressure to undertake high-profile research that enhances and upholds universities' academic reputations, research should also contribute to the betterment of a wider research community and society (BOYER, 1997; BORG, KARLSSON, KIM & McCORMACK, 2012). To accommodate social, academic, and researcher needs, academic freedom is promoted while providing researchers the opportunity to choose what and how they will research as a reflection of their interests and values (ROSTAN, 2010). [3]

Sometimes, however, researchers can experience undue feelings of responsibility to meet demands concerning the topics and outcomes of their research (SMITH, 2010). Referring to academic treadmills, SMITH (2010) outlines how funding can shape research agendas while researchers feel the pressure to meet the research needs of financially invested parties. Invested parties now extend beyond those involved directly with research projects (e.g., researchers, participants) to those in business and other communities, with the latter either funding projects and/or being affected by the outcome of the research (BILLOT, 2011; ROSTAN, 2010). With pressure to support "economic development, innovation, and social progress" (ROSTAN, 2010, p.73), researchers may feel the

need to ensure that their research is relevant and meaningful in very specific ways (KASL & YORKS, 2010). To meet their own research goals while also meeting the needs of the participants, educational institution, and academic community, the researchers are often required to negotiate a variety of roles and responsibilities (HERBERT, 2010). [4]

Beyond pressures associated with the production and application of research, women additionally contend with gender-based discrimination in academia (CAPLAN, 1993; GOUTHRO, 2002; PHILIPSEN, 2008; WEBBER, 2005, 2008; WYLIE, 1995). Women academics are often conscious that many colleagues and students perceive femininity negatively within the male-privileged environment. Furthermore, women academics often struggle to cope with tensions between their private and professional lives, especially in relation to balancing their home life and research workloads (GOUTHRO, 2002; PHILIPSEN 2008). Collectively, these factors have and continue to contribute to environments where women researchers' academic confidence and freedom are often restricted (CAPLAN, 1993; RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009; WEBBER, 2005, 2008; WYLIE, 1995). Therefore, as RAMAZANOGLU and HOLLAND (2009) state, "feminist researchers may need considerable ingenuity to work around institutional and funding constraints" (p.149). [5]

Research constraints that reflect institutional and personal tensions related to gender may vary throughout women's faculty careers. According to PHILIPSEN (2008), women's faculty careers can be conceptualized across a continuum of stages extending from early to mid and late career. PHILIPSEN characterizes the early career stage as especially challenging with respect to establishing a healthy balance between professional and personal lives. Unclear academic expectations contribute to many early career females' feelings of guilt about the belief that they need to work as much as possible. In addition to institutional pressures, early-career female faculty are often concerned about decisions related to having and raising young children and securing partner employment. While mid-career faculty continue to face challenges balancing their professional and personal lives, they may somewhat be less willing to accommodate the university at the expense of their identity. Although they may "demarcate what they are willing to do and what they are willing to give up" (p.81), mid-career faculty members may also be met with "rising expectations as they advance" (p.82). Furthermore, women who support families express the need for equal partnership concerning support at home. By the time mid-career faculty members transition into the late-career stage, they are likely to have established their academic identity. Furthermore, they tend to report being "relatively happy with the balance between their personal and professional lives" (p.127), although they may still experience tensions between their personal and academic lives (e.g., ongoing child care and elder care). Finally, late-career faculty members often face pressures to maintain relevancy in their discipline against stigmas associated with aging. Overall then, many female faculty members experience anxiety and worry about their academic performance regardless of stage (PHILIPSEN, 2008). [6]

Graduate students typically gain an initial understanding of the demands associated with an academic career through their graduate school experiences (AUSTIN, 2002). Through observing and interacting with faculty, the graduate students may begin to conceptualize a gendered structure that often excludes women. Mirroring the experiences of female faculty, many female graduate students may "find it more difficult to reach higher academic ranks due to the established norms and patterns developed by previous male generations in power" (ELG & JONNERGARD, 2010, p.222). [7]

Feminist research and pedagogy specifically address challenges that female researchers encounter within academia while often contradicting university structures and values (BURGHARDT & COLBECK, 2005; GOUTHRO, 2002; WEBBER, 2005, 2008). Whereas we argue that feminist research is akin to feminist pedagogy in that it focuses on enhancing "conceptual learning ... [while] also promoting consciousness-raising, personal growth and social responsibility" (CRABTREE, SAPP & LICONA, 2009, p.6), universities typically value forms of commitment and productivity (GOUTHRO, 2002) that "are generally defined within a masculine marketplace framework" (p.8). "Productivity becomes narrowly defined by the publication of academic articles in referred journals and the capacity to obtain research grants" (p.11). Engaging in a gendered analysis, connecting with communities, and precipitating social change do not fit this definition of productivity readily. [8]

BORG et al. (2012) argue that co-researcher partnerships employing reflexivity can challenge "traditional forms of knowledge production" (§35) supported by academic instructions by upsetting clearly defined boundaries between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers. Through collaborative research, researchers can "push back" (SIRY & ZAWATSKI, 2011, p.355) against academic institutions and "reconstitute the norms, structures, and content of feminist [knowledge] and political agendas in anti-hierarchical ways" (BENSON & NAGAR, 2006, p.583). Feminist research typically embraces collaboration and offers academics an alternative approach to conducting research without the limitations that traditional perspectives pose (HARDING, 1987; RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). Furthermore, feminist research encourages reflexive research practices to establish and understand power influences on relationships between participants and researchers (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009; RILEY, SCHOUTEN & CAHILL, 2003; SPEER, 2002). Advocating for reflexive practices, LATHER (1988) states that "our own frameworks of understanding need to be critically examined as we look for the tensions and contradictions they might entail" (p.576). [9]

RAMAZANOGLU and HOLLAND (2009) describe feminist methodology as "*shaped by feminist theory, politics, and ethics and grounded in women's experience*" (p.16, italics in original). We believe that feminist research is consistent with feminist pedagogy in that it promotes an ethic of care that considers the needs of participants, supports collaboration, encourages reflexivity, and explores gendered issues. As such, feminist research can allow researchers to negotiate professional, scholarly, and personal interests. [10]

3. Research Process

We are three female researchers at various stages of our careers who came together to explore our processes and experiences while conducting feminist collaborative research. In this section, we first detail the wider research context in which this research project is situated, outline the research methodology that was employed, discuss theoretical connections to feminism, and describe our positionality as researcher-participants. We then discuss the results from our research process in Section 4. [11]

3.1 Research context

This research project was part of a larger case study that explored sociocultural issues related to gender as experienced and perceived by four pre-adolescent girls who struggle with reading in a book club program. Grounded in feminist pedagogy that focuses on consciousness-raising (CRABTREE et al., 2009; HOOKS, 2000), we used a discussion-based approach to begin exploring gender issues through the critical reading of a diary cartoon novel. At the girls' requests, these discussions were then extended into a second program which included the critical reading of a young adult novel. [12]

MERRIAM (1998) defines a case study as, "a thing, a single entity, a unit around [in] which there are boundaries" (p.27) and states that "any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study" (p.28). This research discusses a reflexive sociological case study as it focuses on issues related to our experiences conducting research in the girls' book club. We reflect on our experiences as researcher-participants who planned, conducted, and participated in the research study (BERGOLD & THOMAS, 2012). [13]

3.2 Research methodology

As researcher-participants, our roles involved planning and facilitating two book club programs over a six-month interval, collecting and analyzing data from the sessions, and engaging in a reflective analysis of our own experiences. [14]

Before each book club session, we held planning meetings. We used our knowledges and experiences from our various academic backgrounds to create activities for the girls that would encourage critical discussion while supporting reading strategies. We collaboratively decided which researcher would facilitate each activity depending on how the activities connected to our personal and academic strengths. Group book club sessions were carried out as closely as possible to our organized plan; however, plans often called for flexibility and reorganization to accommodate unpredictability when working with young girls. We balanced facilitation so that each researcher equally contributed. [15]

Immediately following our facilitation of the weekly book club sessions held for the girls, we reflected on our experiences during a series of sessional debriefs that were audio recorded and transcribed. During sessional debriefs, we engaged in

an open reflective dialogue where we reviewed our perceptions of the girls' responses to the text and program activities, as well as our effectiveness and experiences as group facilitators. In addition to the debriefs, we documented our experiences and reflections through journals. We used our reflections to guide our facilitation of subsequent book club sessions and continued with the planning, session, and debrief process throughout the six months that the book club ran. As the research process shifted from data collection through the book club sessions, data analysis, dissemination, and writing this article, we continued conducting debriefs and journal reflections. Analysis of the debriefs was completed using MERRIAM's (1998) case study application of GLASER and STRAUSS's (1967) constant comparative method. During data analysis, each of us coded the data independently by analyzing each line of our transcribed data for emergent themes and connections to our research questions. We then met for collaborative analysis sessions where we discussed the themes that emerged from our independent analyses and proceeded to compare and agree upon convergent and divergent themes. We felt that the constant comparative method of data analysis best supported collaborative research as it allowed us to come to independent conclusions and then discuss how our understanding of the data connected to each other's analyses. [16]

3.3 Theoretical connections to feminism

Our methodology in this research project was both collaborative and reflexive incorporating feminist approaches to research. Collaboration "generates new dialogues and knowledge across socioeconomic, geographical and institutional borders" (BENSON & NAGAR, 2006, p.584), supporting the multiple perspectives and interpretations of those involved in the research project (PAULUS, WOODSIDE & SIEGLER, 2010). As researcher-participants, we were required to negotiate a variety of different roles related to our academic and gendered positionality (HERBERT, 2010), which we explored through self-reflection and ongoing reflexivity evidenced by our discussions during debrief sessions (HASTINGS, 2010; RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009; RILEY et al., 2003). [17]

Our research methodology also supports feminist pedagogy that emphasizes transformative learning and student empowerment (LARSON, 2005). Feminist pedagogy is an educational practice that values the emotional responses of students and focuses on individual and collective experiences while critiquing gender and advocating for empowerment (LARSON, 2005). Supporting feminist pedagogy, we employed an ethic of care throughout the research project valuing the girls' needs and voices as well as our own. [18]

3.4 Researcher-participants

According to PHILIPSEN's framework (2008), Laura identifies as approaching the early-career stage, Nancy identifies as in-between the early- and mid-career stages, and Vera identifies as being in the mid-career stage. [19]

Laura is a graduate student and an aspiring academic who is just beginning to conceptualize the demands that she will face in her personal and professional life as a faculty member. During this research project, Laura was in the final stages of completing a master's degree and made the decision to apply to a doctoral program. After the data collection process was complete, she learned of her acceptance and began her doctoral studies. Her interests include how forms of power influence the education system and how dominant culture is reproduced. [20]

Nancy, who applied for and earned tenure as an associate professor during the course of this research project, is gaining greater balance between her personal and professional responsibilities. Because of her tenure and promotion, she is less concerned with potential negative repercussions associated with taking risks in her research. However, she is also intent on developing her work as she positions herself in her field and takes on greater service responsibilities. Nancy's interests center on learning militarized masculinities and femininities in daily life; she is focused on engaging in a gendered critique in all her work. [21]

Vera identifies as being in the mid stage of her career as a tenured full professor. While she is gaining greater balance between her personal and professional life, she is also experiencing new challenges outside of the workplace including elder care. As a literacy researcher, she has very strong beliefs about the importance of providing service within the university and larger community settings. However, she is also sensitive to the increasing importance that the institution places on holding grants/publishing and questions how to conduct the best way meaningful research in the context of such an environment. Vera's interest is in literacy instruction, working with students who struggle with reading and writing, and teacher development. [22]

In the context of this research project, Nancy and Vera have common interests in children's fiction and collaborative research. Nancy was interested in participating in a group that would promote girl empowerment while also learning more about struggling readers, whereas Vera was interested in gaining a deeper sociocultural perspective on literacy. They also expressed interest in documenting and exploring their participation in the research project having researched collaborative processes in the past (e.g., RICHARDS, ELLIOTT, WOLOSHYN & MITCHELL, 2001; TABER, HOWARD & COPE WATSON, 2010). Laura was asked to partake in the research project based on her background in English language and literature, secondary school teaching, sociocultural scholarship, and previous work experience as a research assistant. Her role, however, quickly transitioned into one of the co-researchers as she participated in all aspects of the research process. [23]

4. Results

As a result of conducting collaborative feminist research, we had to navigate our way through research territory where roles and relationships were often blurred in an effort to meet both institutional and feminist aims of the research. Two predominant themes emerged from the data, reflective of how we negotiated within the academic institution and within feminism. The former demonstrates our negotiation of expectations and understanding of our academic identities and positionalities (Section 4.1) while the latter demonstrates our experiences maintaining a feminist research approach and upholding feminist values throughout the research process (Section 4.2). [24]

4.1 Evolving selves within the academic institution

An important aspect of feminist collaborative research is understanding various positionalities and subjectivities that exist within the co-researchers to comprehend how research is influenced (BENSON & NAGAR, 2006; PAULUS et al., 2010; RILEY et al., 2012). We began our research by exploring our motives and objectives for conducting research, coming to realize that each of us had different reasons for participating in the research. We came from diverse backgrounds, bringing different strengths and experiences to the research project, which in many ways reflected our differing professional identities and career stages. [25]

As a master's student approaching the early career stage, Laura had an emergent understanding of the research process including publication. She was interested in gaining experience in different research environments and was yet to complete her thesis. Because she had little research in beginning this research project, she felt that her strength was her teaching background for facilitation purposes. She relied on Nancy and Vera's expertise for data collection and her teacher identity for facilitation. Laura's research concerns focused on her role as a facilitator in relation to the girls' participation in the book club. She explained her instinct to assert "teacher" control over perceived instances of disorder. "My first instinct when [one of the girls] goes under the table is [to say] 'Get out from there, you're not paying attention,'" she stated. She may also tell another girl to "put the pencil crayons down." "That's what a teacher does," Laura added. [26]

As Laura began to conceptualize herself as a researcher and understand roles and responsibilities, her confidence in the research project and her relations with the girls increased. She was less concerned with monitoring the girls' behaviors and more concerned about providing the girls the opportunities to assume leadership roles within the book club and enable the goals of the research project. She felt less need for the book club to reflect traditional classroom dynamics and was better able to engage with the girls as a researcher and facilitator. Additionally, since completing her master's degree and beginning her doctoral education, Laura's research goals have shifted from gaining experience in different environments to contributing as an author.

> "As I learn from my experiences and classes, my perspective has changed. I'm starting to become a researcher instead of a teacher trying to do research. I'm gaining new tools to work with that I didn't have before I started this research project" (Laura). [27]

Laura thus began to conceptualize herself within an academic institution shifting away from a teacher-practitioner, towards a researcher. Her experiences reflect AUSTIN's (2002) suggestion that graduate student development can be facilitated through graduate work. By engaging with the research process with two faculty members, Laura began to conceptualize roles and responsibilities that faculty members assume and thus began to build these roles and responsibilities into her researcher experiences. Additionally, through maintaining reflexivity, she began to understand how her teacher identity shaped her research engagement and how institutional expectations shaped her academic identity. [28]

As an early-mid career faculty member, Nancy's professional focus was publishing to achieve promotion and tenure while her scholarly emphasis was on challenging systemic gendered power relations. Nancy highlighted the tensions of being a facilitator, researcher, and advocate for a gendered critique. She stated that she struggled with "trying not to be the teacher at the same time as trying to keep them [the girls] focused" while also being concerned about data collection. "If I was a participant-observer as opposed to a participant-facilitator, I would not have cared what they did and just ... observed." She acknowledged that in order to publish this research, it was necessary and important that the girls participate and complete the designated activities. This was a professional orientation that was somewhat inconsistent with her scholarly intentions of conducting meaningful research, but that would encourage the girls to assume ownership of the book club and participate in a gendered sociocultural critique. Similar to Laura, Nancy's academic position changed throughout the research process as she transitioned from non-tenured to tenured professor. This professional transition diminished some of her concerns related to publishing for promotion, allowing her greater freedom to publish for self-fulfillment and societal change as reflected in PHILIPSEN's (2008) mid-career stage.

> "I was always concerned with conducting meaningful research with a gendered societal critique. However, at the back of my mind, I was also wholly aware of the need to publish for promotion. It was like a game—how I could publish in ways that would satisfy my career while satisfying my scholarly interests. Now, although I want to continue publishing, it is more for my own scholarship instead in order to meet institutional requirements" (Nancy). [29]

Nancy emphasizes her desire to research for personal interest and social significance instead of satisfying expectations for promotion. [30]

As a full professor, Vera was more concerned with implementing a research program that would enhance the girls' comprehension and critical thinking skills than publishing the results of the research study *per se*. While Vera maintained her personal research goals throughout the research project, Nancy and Laura's

interests in publishing reminded her of her responsibility and the importance of this form of communication within the broader academic community. "I am reminded that we need to share the results of our study with others—so that they can build on the good work we have started here ... that writing about this study is part of my responsibility to the girls and their parents," Vera explained. Throughout the book club sessions, Vera also reflected that her concerns about the research process tended to relate to the nature of the girls' participation versus data collection. Vera states, "... [For] me, it wasn't a data-driven concern but ... an ownership …. Whose book club is this? Who's driving it?" Vera's primary research concerns reflect her research goal of conducting meaningful research, paralleling PHILIPSEN's analysis of mid-career faculty members. Instead of publishing large amounts of research, Vera was focused on producing meaningful research that reflected her interests and convictions as an educator and scholar. Her collaborative experiences as a co-researcher reminded her of the importance of sharing these experiences with a wider audience. [31]

Although we were at different stages in our academic careers, our diverse backgrounds proved to be helpful as we found that each of our perspectives helped fill in gaps. Individually, we were likely to question our own actions or roles; however, during debriefs and collective reflections we felt that the diversity offered the participants a strong support system. For example, Vera highlights what she sees as an age gap between herself and the participants that was filled by Laura stating:

> "I'm not sure how good of a facilitator I was, and that's something I've struggled with because I feel—maybe as the oldest researcher—that there's a disconnect for that. And I felt more like their teacher than their facilitator at times ... I was really glad that Laura was that bridge there or at least that's the way that I felt" (Vera). [32]

While Vera questioned how she would connect with the girls as a facilitator, Laura found Vera's experience working with young children to be an asset to the research project. Laura stated that "even just the way [Vera] breaks down ... questions because [she] has ... more experience than I do with girls this age and the way [she] asks questions are so different [than how I would]." While Vera felt the fact that she was older would result in a disconnection from the participants, Laura felt the reverse. Furthermore, Laura felt that as a new teacher and researcher, she was self-conscious when engaging in outgoing activities. Nancy, however, did not feel similarly restricted in her relationship with the girls because she is not a teacher within the compulsory school system. For example, Nancy had no reservations about dressing up on the first night and acting out a character from the book.

> "They really liked [that] Nancy dressed up ... they thought it was hilarious and that broke the ice for them and the way they saw [us]. Then I [thought], I regret being so self-conscious about ... getting into those activities" (Laura). [33]

As a result of our various comfort levels and challenges, we found that it was important to have a diverse group of researchers. "This wouldn't have worked as

well ... if I was the only researcher for instance ... I think we brought a nice blend of our own entities into it," stated Vera. [34]

Our purposes and objectives for completing this research project were tied to institutional expectations that positioned us. Changes in research goals reflected changes in understanding of self within institutional expectations (HASTINGS, 2010; PHILIPSEN, 2008). This reinforces how difficult collaboration can be, as it requires conscious efforts to balance professional academic identities. However, this is necessary to recognize our place in the research and in the wider academic institution. In discussing our reflexive accounts of research experiences, we were able to learn from each other's tensions and perspectives as well as offer support for personal and researcher development. The differences in tensions reflect our differences in career stage and researcher positionality that undoubtedly shape our research project as we collectively worked together to meet academic expectations while supporting our own research goals. As RAMAZANOGLU and HOLLAND (2009) state, "[If] you want direct contact with research subjects, it may be useful to reflect on your own experiences and to clarify your [taken-for-granted] assumptions where these could be relevant" (p.155). We argue that it is not only useful but also necessary in feminist collaborative research. [35]

4.2 Self within feminism

In addition to dealing with institutional expectations, we were conscious that we were also conducting feminist social research and that in aligning with feminist pedagogy, we had the potential to influence the lives of our participants (HARDING, 1987; RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). We were required to make decisions that attempted to meet and balance the needs of the girls, their parents, the university, the academic community, and the research project. Nancy and Vera, as experienced researchers, expressed concerns about meeting academic expectations and maintaining the integrity of the research process while also remaining responsible to the girls and their parents. Laura, as a new researcher and graduate student, did not initially feel the same pressures and responsibilities, as she trusted Nancy and Vera's decisions regarding the research process. [36]

At times, tensions arose in our efforts to meet academic expectations while honoring the participants' perspectives. For example, we felt that we needed to readdress a discussion where the girls vilified the antagonist as a *mean girl* in the diary cartoon novel. The girls discussed strategies that they would use to seek revenge against such an individual. As researchers who wished to encourage critical consideration of gender issues, we wanted to deconstruct the pathologization of the "mean girl" and were "unsettled" by the girls' "honest" yet "fantastical" (Vera) responses. We believed that it was important for the girls to get "away from the revenge fantasy and [focus on] some strategies that they can actually enact" (Nancy) to analyze how mean girls are constructed in literature and society (TABER & WOLOSHYN, 2011; GONICK, 2004; RINGROSE, 2006). Guiding the direction of the discussion in this context was an important aspect in

engaging with feminist theory while supporting our research objectives and the participants' abilities to gain awareness about "being a girl in a sexist society" (Nancy). Our concern for the girls reflects a feminist ethic of care enacted in the research context (CRABTREE et al., 2009). Had we focused solely on our position as researchers, we may not have been as concerned with the girls' perceptions regarding mean girls or with gently engaging them in critical conversations. [37]

Differences in our professional personal lives also influenced our perception of selves working within feminist research. Laura often reflected on her experiences as a daughter, sister, and teacher, while Nancy and Vera referred to their experiences as mothers and professors. The responsibilities associated with conducting meaningful feminist research were balanced in relation to our scholarly academic positions and our personal life positions. For instance, as mothers and educators, we felt a "responsibility to the girls' parents." We recognized that the parents provided consent to have their daughters participate in the research project in hopes of enhancing their reading skills and encouraging critical engagement with gendered issues. "If we weren't doing these things [focus on comprehension skills and critical thinking] ... we would be failing the parents who are worried about their children" (Nancy). However, while we were empathetic to parents' wishes to be informed of their daughters' responses to the weekly sessions, we also respected the need to maintain the girls' confidentiality in relation to their beliefs, opinions, activities, and behaviors while participating in the book club. We were thus especially pleased to facilitate the girls' suggestion of hosting an *open house* where they would present self-selected pieces of their work related to the reading of a cartoon novel to their parents. This would celebrate the conclusion of the first book club program. [38]

We also experienced tension when parents' thoughts and concerns were inconsistent with those voiced by the girls and our overall objective of engaging them in a critical analysis of gendered representations in the literature. In one instance, a parent highlighted a concern that the female protagonist in the young adult novel we were reading was acting inappropriately in response to violent situations midway through the second book club program. While we acknowledged the need to respect the parent's perceptions, we also believed that we needed to support the girls' decision to read a complex text that lent itself to meaningful, critical discussion regarding societal gender constructions. The parent's concerns placed us in a difficult situation where we needed to articulate and negotiate a variety of beliefs and needs. We explained that in being accountable to the girls, it was important to work through a text that they had selected, considering their initial resistance towards reading. We also explained that as researchers, educators, and women (feminists), we felt that the protagonist was a strong female character who was working to survive in dangerous situations in a patriarchal dictatorship. We believed that it was necessary to deconstruct the ways in which the protagonist was portrayed in the book with the intention of connecting issues of power, beauty, and violence presented in the text to current societal systemic power relations. Nancy reflects on her positionality:

> "[It] reminded me again that I don't have to apologize for my stance [but just need to] explain it to help others understand and make informed decisions for their daughters. They can choose to take it or leave it ... [after we] listen [to each other and engage in] dialogue" (Nancy). [39]

In maintaining our feminist position and commitment to the girls, we were willing to risk the continuation of the research project and felt confident in addressing the views of the parent. This instance reflected how our research priorities shifted from meeting institutional demands and publishing requirements to supporting the girls' decisions and reinforcing a feminist critique of gender. [40]

Over time, we became most accountable to the girls and their needs and began to extend our collaboration to our participants. We incorporated their suggestions regarding session activities and created an open relationship where they "held us accountable to the activities" (Vera). "If we said we were going to do something and we didn't do it, [it] really threw them off" (Vera) and they felt comfortable to challenge us. Nancy reflected on the significance of our accountability stating that "in other places [for instance, school] where they thought they wouldn't have a voice, they might not hold the adults accountable." We were able to create relationships where the girls felt comfortable challenging us as researchers and adults, thus challenging research hierarchies through collaborative relationships (BORG et al., 2012; RILEY et al., 2003). Indeed, our decision to facilitate reading a second book within the book club was at the specific request of the girls. At that point, our commitment to assisting the girls become better readers and critical thinkers was of equivalent, if not greater, importance than our need to engage in the research process for publication. [41]

Feminist research methodology stresses that it is important to respect and care for participants while also allowing an opportunity to navigate tensions regarding traditional research (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). Through our open-ended, participant-centered format, we challenged the dichotomy of researcher-researched. Although the participants were not co-researchers as such, their voices were prevalent in the research process. We "recognize[d] children as social players with the necessary capacity to interpret the social world" (MILSTEIN, 2010, p.13), thus ensuring that we honored the participants' perspectives, understanding, and needs while also meeting our research needs and associated parental expectations. [42]

As the participants came to know us as researchers, they readily offered feedback and took ownership over many of the activities. We believe that there was a dynamic shift in the structure and character of the book club as we began to incorporate the needs and suggestions of the participants. The research project, learning environment, and relationships formed a "safety network" where the girls "accepted each other" (Vera) and where we, as co-researchers, learned from one another. While we had conducted the research and collected the data that we needed to meet our academic goals, our commitment to the participants and their strong desire to continue with the book club finalized our decision to host a second program. [43]

5. Conclusion

As female researchers conducting feminist research within a university institution, we faced tensions as we negotiated our positions within the institution and within feminism. Grounding our research in feminism was often at odds with institutional definitions of productivity that align with masculine frameworks (GOUTHRO, 2002), positioning us between two conflicting paradigms. To balance these paradigms, it was necessary to integrate our commitment to the university with our commitment to the community, allowing us to create a space where our multiple goals and expectations were not at odds. Negotiating institutional and feminist tensions was not always easy because our accountability extended beyond the institution and to the girls, parents, academic community, and our selves. We feel that we were able to meet the needs of those to whom we felt accountable. However, this was at times both a difficult and time-consuming process requiring deep personal commitments to the research, to each other, and to the research process. [44]

Through our collaborative reflexive process, we better understood our own positionalities within this research project. Although this case study highlights our experiences rather than the solutions, we believe that this research exemplifies the struggles and processes that many female researchers experience as they attempt to engage in meaningful research. Furthermore, our somewhat differing perspectives of the same situation provided a level of complexity and triangulation that would not have been possible with only a single perspective. As a result, we learned from the multiple voices involved, deepening our group perspective of this research project. As RAMAZANOGLU and HOLLAND (2009) state, "if you want direct contact with research subjects, it may be useful to reflect on your own experiences and to clarify your taken-for-granted assumptions and where these could be relevant" (p.155). We argue that it is not only useful but also necessary in feminist collaborative research. [45]

Through our reflexive collaborative research, we were able to work together critically to create a feminist space within a traditionally patriarchal institution (BENSON & NAGAR, 2006; GOUTHRO, 2002). Transforming the larger patriarchal structure of the university is a necessary but difficult endeavor that may not be possible to achieve in a short-term context. PHILIPSEN (2008) calls for the institution to recognize the needs of female academics and implement supportive measures for all faculty members. In reality, however, many female faculty members must continue to work around institutional constraints in their daily lives (RAMAZANOGLU & HOLLAND, 2009). We suggest that female faculty address marginalization by creating a feminist collaborative space where they may seek out and collaborate with others who hold mutual and complementary interests to conduct research they deem relevant and meaningful. In doing so, they may be able to support their own needs as female researchers while they meet institutional expectations. [46]

References

Austin, Ann E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate school as socialization to the academic career. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *73*(1), 94-122.

Benson, Koni & Nagar, Richa (2006). Collaboration as resistance? Reconsidering the processes, products, and possibilities of feminist oral history and ethnography. *Gender, Place and Culture*, *13*(5), 581-592.

Bergold, Jarg & Thomas, Stefan (2012). Participatory research methods: A methodological approach in motion. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *13*(1), Art. 30, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1201302 [Accessed: June 26, 2012].

Billot, Jennie (2011). The changing research context: Implications for leadership. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *33*(1), 37-46.

Borg, Marit; Karlsson, Bengt; Kim, Hesook S. & McCormack, Brendan (2012). Opening up for many voices in knowledge construction. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *13*(1), Art. 1, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs120117 [Accessed: January 30, 2012].

Boyer, Ernest L. (1997). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate.* San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Burghardt, Deborah A. & Colbeck, Carol L. (2005). Women's studies faculty at the intersection of institutional power and feminist values. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *76*(3), 301-330.

Caplan, Paula J. (1993). *Lifting a ton of feathers.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Crabtree, Robbin D.; Sapp, David A. & Licona, Adela C. (2009). *Feminist pedagogy: Looking back to look forward.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Elg, Ulf & Jonnergard, Karin (2010). Included or excluded? The dual influences of the organisational field and organisational practices on new female academics. *Gender and Education*, *22*(2), 209-225.

Glaser, Barney G. & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

Gonick, Marnina (2004). The mean girl crisis: Problematizing representations of girls' friendships. *Feminism & Psychology*, *14*(3), 395-400.

Gouthro, Patricia (2002). What counts? Examining academic values and women's life experiences from a critical feminist perspective. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Education*, *16*(1), 1-19.

Harding, Sandra (1987). *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hastings, Wendy (2010). Research and the ambiguity of reflexivity and ethical practice. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *31*(3), 307-318.

Herbert, Anne (2010). Facilitator, researcher, politician, magician. *Simulation & Gaming*, *41*(5), 681-693.

hooks, bell (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics.* London: Pluto Press.

Kasl, Elizabeth & Yorks, Lyle (2010). "Whose inquiry is this anyway?" Money, power, reports, and collaborative inquiry. *Adult Education Quarterly*, *60*(4), 325-328.

Larson, Laura M. (2005). The necessity of feminist pedagogy in a climate of political backlash. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *38*(2), 135-144.

Lather, Patti (1988). Feminist perspectives on empowering research methodologies. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *11*(6), 569-581.

Merriam, Sharan (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Milstein, Diana (2010). Children as co-researchers in anthropological narratives in education. *Ethnography and Education*, *5*(1), 1-15.

Paulus, Trina M.; Woodside, Marianne & Siegler, Mary F. (2010). "I tell you, it's a journey, isn't it?" Understanding collaborative meaning making in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(10), 852-862.

Philipsen, Maike I. (2008). *Challenges of the faculty career for women: Success and sacrifice.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline & Holland, Janet (2009). *Feminist methodology: Challenges and choices.* London: Sage.

Riley, Sarah; Schouten, Wendy & Cahill, Sharon (2003). Exploring the dynamics of subjectivity and power between researcher and researched. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *4*(2), Art. 40, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0302400 [Accessed: January 30, 2012].

Ringrose, Jessica (2006). A new universal mean girl: Examining the discursive construction and social regulation of a new feminine pathology. *Feminism & Psychology*, *16*(4), 405-424.

Richards, Merle; Elliott, Anne; Woloshyn, Vera & Mitchell, Coral (Eds.) (2001). *Collaboration uncovered: The forgotten, the assumed and the unexamined.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc.

Rostan, Michele (2010). Challenges to academic freedom: Some empirical evidence. *European Review*, *(8)*1, 71-88.

Siry, Christina & Zawatski, Elizabeth (2011). "Working with" as a methodological stance: Collaborating with students in teaching, writing, and research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *24*(3), 343-361.

Smith, Katharine (2010). Research, policy and funding: Academic treadmills and the squeeze on intellectual spaces. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 26(1), 176-195.

Speer, Susan (2002). What can conversation analysis contribute to feminist methodology? Putting reflexivity into practice. *Discourse & Society*, *13*(6), 783-803.

Taber, Nancy & Woloshyn, Vera E. (2011). Dumb dorky girls and stinky wimpy boys: Gendered themes in diary cartoon novels. *Children's Literature in Education*, *42*(3), 226-242.

Taber, Nancy; Howard, Loretta & Cope Watson, Georgann (2010). Researcher subjectivities as a conceptual frame in collaborative research: How exploring the experiences of adult educators led to examining researcher lenses. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *23*(1), 39-54.

Webber, Michelle (2005). "Don't be so feminist": Exploring student resistance to feminist approaches in a Canadian university. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *28*(2/3), 181-194.

Webber, Michelle (2008). Miss Congeniality meets the new managerialism: Feminism, contingent labour, and the new university. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *38*(3), 37-56.

Wylie, Alison (1995). The contexts of activism on "climate" issues. In The Chilly Collective (Ed.), *Breaking anonymity: The chilly climate for women faculty* (pp.29-60). Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Authors

Laura LANE is a PhD Student in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She has completed her Master of Education at Brock University in 2011. Her research interests include social/cultural/political contexts of education; forms of capital and privileged culture; gender performance and social media.

Contact:

Laura Lane

Faculty of Education, Brock University
500 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1
Canada

E-mail: ll04vt@brocku.ca

Nancy TABER is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She has completed her PhD in Education at The University of South Australia. Her research interests include sociocultural issues in children's fiction; learning masculinities and femininities in everyday life; gender in war/militaries/militarism.

Contact:

Nancy Taber, PhD

Faculty of Education, Brock University
500 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1
Canada

E-mail: ntaber@brocku.ca

Vera WOLOSHYN is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University. She has completed her PhD in Psychology at The University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include ableism in children's fiction; developing and implementing effective literacy and learning programs for children and adults; working with students with learning exceptionalities.

Contact:

Vera Woloshyn, PhD

Faculty of Education, Brock University
500 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1
Canada

E-mail: vwoloshyn@brocku.ca

Citation

Lane, Laura; Taber, Nancy & Woloshyn, Vera (2012). Negotiating Tensions in Researching, Facilitating, and Critiquing Gender: Exploring Institutional and Feminist Influences [46 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *13*(3), Art. 10, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1203100.