Ethical and Friendly Researchers, but not Insiders:
A Response to Blodgett, Boyer, and Turk

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Abstract: This commentary is a response to the article by Lisa J. BLODGETT, Wanda BOYER, and Emily TURK (2005) in this issue of *FQS*. The original article describes ethical challenges and relational issues within a large, ongoing, qualitative study about the development of self-regulation in early childhood. Those authors focus in particular upon: (a) obtaining free and informed consent, (b) working with vulnerable populations, and (c) balancing insider and outsider roles. I identify some key strengths of the research that may provide useful models for other researchers, while cautioning against the evident overgeneralization of the term "insider." BLODGETT et al. clearly demonstrate that they are ethical and friendly researchers, but they are not insiders in the daycare settings where their research takes place. I conclude with a call for researchers to seriously consider and empirically document what it might mean to adopt a subject-centered perspective on research ethics.

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In this *FQS* issue, Lisa J. BLODGETT, Wanda BOYER, and Emily TURK (2005) document some important ethical and professional considerations in a large qualitative research study. They introduce their ongoing research project about the development of self-regulation in early childhood and provide an overview of the historical context of research ethics guidelines as a foundation for their consideration of the challenges of relational issues within research, focusing in particular upon three important aspects of their research experience: (a) obtaining free and informed consent, (b) working with vulnerable populations, and (c) balancing insider and outsider roles. Their practice is informed in part by their considerations about "what it must be like to be busy parents and educators" (Paragraph 16), an empathetic perspective that underlies much of what they write and informs my commentary in this response. [1]

Through their actions, BLODGETT et al. clearly demonstrate that securing free and informed consent is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event that occurs at the point of initial recruitment (MALONE, 2003; THOMPSON, 2002; VAN DEN HOONAARD et al., 2004). BLODGETT et al. describe the steps required to obtain permissions and support from early childhood educators, program directors, parent groups, and individual parents. Consistent with current standards, parents and educators provided free and informed consent, while children provided assent to participate (Medical Research Council of Canada et al., 2003; SIMPSON, 2003). BLODGETT et al. also describe consent and assent procedures for children who might appear in the background of a videotape of a participating child. In a busy preschool setting, researchers certainly have to

expect that other children and adults will enter into and leave the camera viewing area, so this is an important consideration in this kind of setting. BLODGETT et al. reconfirm consent and assent on a regular basis by asking children each day whether they wish to be videotaped and by generally trying to remain open about the research, chatting freely with parents, educators, and children and allowing them to watch what is being recorded on video. This openness is well suited to qualitative research and contributes to positive relationships among researchers and participants. For this reason, BLODGETT et al.'s report might provide some useful suggestions for other researchers entering into preschools or other related research settings. [2]

BLODGETT et al.'s efforts to obtain consent and assent to participation appropriately address concerns regarding children's limited capacity to understand research procedures, possible risks, promises of confidentiality, and freedom to decline participation (ABRAMOVITCH, FREEDMAN, THODEN, & NIKOLICH, 1991; BRUZZESE & FISHER, 2003; SIMPSON, 2003). BLODGETT et al. suggest that not only children but also families are vulnerable populations in research. Researchers ask participants "to open their private lives to examination" (Paragraph 21), which places those participants in vulnerable situations, open to possible harms. BLODGETT et al. suggest that the gratitude that they express toward participants equalizes the power imbalance between researchers and participants, but this seems to be overstating the case (Paragraph 36). They are, however, careful to minimize any coercion to participate. I was particularly impressed by their claim that they pay conscious attention to nonverbal expressions of comfort and consent, actively withdrawing even when they receive no explicit indication of non-consent. This is another good strategy for other researchers to consider. [3]

Throughout, BLODGETT et al. devote considerable attention to describing their efforts to establish positive, friendly relationships within the daycare centers where their research is based. They describe their efforts to gain entry into the daycare communities and establish relationships with various gatekeepers and others in the settings (early childhood educators, program directors, presidents of parent associations, parents, and children). They strive to be open, friendly, and informative in all of their interactions. As they argue, they earn trust through their actions and they have begun to experience a "buzz of support" (Paragraph 38) from early childhood educators, parents, and children. These are certainly all positive and necessary aspects of undertaking a research study, whether the study is qualitative or quantitative, large scale or small scale. [4]

In qualitative research, relationships between researchers and participants may extend over a long time and involve the exchange of very personal information, including information that was not originally intended as part of the research study (SHERIF, 2001; THOMPSON, 2002; TILLEY, 1998; VAN DEN HOONAARD et al., 2004). As BLODGETT et al. suggest, it is particularly challenging to build personal relationships with many individuals as required in a large qualitative study such as their ongoing project with 317 participants. They document the

extent of their commitment to this undertaking and the resulting positive benefits for their research. As they conclude:

> "In fact, as a result of weaving together interpersonal kindheartedness with professional and ethical approaches, we found that our procedure within the preschool community was not a cumbersome undertaking but a humane, respectful and more interesting way to approach a research study. We learned that we do better, produce more, and live more enriched lives as researchers by being compassionate to our participants and each other" (BLODGETT et al., 2005, Paragraph 38). [5]

One might argue that there is no other way to undertake research. It is doubtful that research participants would voluntarily supply the "gifts" (ROTH, 2004) of their participation if researchers did not act in such ways. Researchers who adopt a more detached, impersonal approach to prospective research participants are more likely to encounter the kinds of resistance to participation that ROTH (2004) expressed toward statistical research studies:

> "As I resent the idea that my responses, meaningful in my life and those surrounding me, are but blips in some statistics rather than being taken seriously, I never participate in such research—unless my participation is compulsory such as in the surveys conducted by Statistics Canada" (ROTH, 2004, Paragraph 4). [6]

Beyond being friendly and establishing positive relationships within their research sites, BLODGETT et al. make the exaggerated claim that they became "insiders" within the preschool communities. Being friendly, building trust, establishing a comfortable setting for research participants, and their other efforts are certainly important, but they are insufficient to turn outside researchers into insiders. [7]

The literature on insider-outsider roles clearly demarcates these notions as complex, multi-faceted, dynamic, and situational (ACKER, 2000; BANKS, 1998; KANUHA, 2000; SHERIF, 2001). These terms get taken up in different ways by different researchers, but BLODGETT et al.'s use of the term seems misplaced. They are not conducting research in their own settings as indigenous or native insiders. They are certainly not preschool children, and they provide no indication that they are early childhood educators or parents. If any of the members of the research team are early childhood educators or parents, they seem not to have allowed these roles to enter into their participation in the research. They do not document their experiences as educators, parents, or children in the article and make no mention of sharing this information with participants or prospective participants. They do not establish familiarity in the ways that TILLEY (1998) described in her research within a school in a women's prison. TILLEY had no first-hand experience as a prisoner or with prisoners prior to her appointment as a teacher in the school. Over time, TILLEY and the women became familiar as she explained, "I told the women about my life both as student and teacher. We considered our biographical selves, our histories; we became familiar with each other" (The Researcher: Moving From Outsider To Someone Familiar section, Paragraph 5). TILLEY taught in the school within the prison for almost a year

before deciding to conduct research in that site. By that time, she was no longer a stranger or an outsider; she was a fixture in the day-to-day life of the prison school. She was careful, however, not to suggest that she was an insider. She was an employee in the school, free to leave when she chose. BLODGETT et al. would benefit from being similarly cautious in their use of the term "insider." [8]

Participants in BLODGETT et al.'s study came to know the researchers as researchers only, and not as ongoing members of the daycare communities. They were present in the daycare centers, but provide little evidence to suggest that they were active contributors to community life in the ways that SIXSMITH, BONEHAM, and GOLDRING (2003) recommended. BLODGETT et al. conducted interviews and observations, but seemed not to fully engage in the life of the community. [9]

BLODGETT et al. tell the story of a parent who began discussing personal matters after the interview ended and the interviewer responded by saying, "I'm sorry, we cannot give advice on parenting. We are most interested in hearing about your thoughts and experiences, and we thank you for your time in answering our questions" (Paragraph 34). BLODGETT et al. accurately describe this episode as an "opportune moment to re-establish the role of the researcher to the parent and increase outsider status" (Paragraph 34). Although few details are provided in the article, it seems that the parent was reaching out for help and this could have been an opportunity to provide reciprocity and some individual benefit to the parent participant. If the interviewer felt that it would be inappropriate to provide this advice directly, then some recommendations about where to go for such assistance might have been in order. Research ethics boards (REBs), institutional review boards (IRBs), and similar bodies routinely request that such support services be identified in research materials. The individual parent may have needed something more in exchange for the gift of participation than the knowledge that three books and a copy of the research report would appear in their daycare center. In this episode, the interviewer acted like an outsider and, I argue, the researchers remained outsiders throughout the other friendly and open interactions described in the paper. [10]

I am not suggesting that research necessarily must be undertaken from an insider perspective. Nor am I suggesting that insider research is necessarily methodologically or ethically superior to non-insider research. Many qualitative researchers (ACKER, 2000; MALONE, 2003; SIXSMITH et al., 2003; TILLEY, 1998) point to the methodological and ethical challenges associated with insider roles. Individual research participants are variously more or less likely to divulge information to researchers who are more closely or distantly associated with a research site. BLODGETT et al. need not undertake insider research, but they ought not to mischaracterize their work as insider research. [11]

BLODGETT et al. do a commendable job of detailing some key ethical considerations in their research with children, parents, and early childhood educators. They demonstrate the importance and the value of paying careful

attention to relational issues in research, and they obviously considered participants' perspectives in the planning of their research. As they explained,

> "We used our empathic skills as a problem-solving tool that allowed us to take the perspective of our participants to 'walk in their shoes and feel their pebbles', imagining what it must be like to be a busy parent of a preschool child or a preschool educator who is being asked by high and mighty researchers to give up free family time to participate" (BLODGETT et al., 2005, Paragraph 16). [12]

Their report would have been more persuasive, however, if they actively sought participants' perspectives on the research approach rather than relying solely upon their own impressions. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (*TCPS*) like other ethics policy statements enjoins researchers and research ethics boards to take a "subject-centred perspective" when they consider ethical issues in their research: "researchers and REBs must strive to understand the views of the potential or actual research subjects" (Medical Research Council of Canada et al., 2003, p.i.7). Despite its centrality, very few theoretical or empirical studies have directly addressed participant perspectives on research. AITKENHEAD and DORDOY (1985) argued that professional codes of ethics must be based in part upon empirical research about participants' reactions to research procedures as a means to prevent unethical actions. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee has begun to focus upon this topic, and I would like to encourage BLODGETT et al. and other researchers to join in the efforts of documenting participants' perspectives on the ethics of research. [13]

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