

On Being Authentic: A Response to "No thank you, not today": Supporting Ethical and Professional Relationships in Large Qualitative Studies

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Abstract: Written in response to the ethical and professional considerations associated with the conduct of a large qualitative study (BLODGETT, BOYER, & TURK, 2005), I argue the importance of authenticity in the research context, communicative interactions of value to the research, and the ethics of the study. I propose some alternative stances to those presented by the researchers in specific aspects of the study including construction of knowledge from the research, "walking in the shoes" of others, vulnerable populations, and insider-outsider interactions.

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1. Introduction

As I read the paper by Lisa BLODGETT, Wanda BOYER and Emily TURK (2005) I was reminded continually of the role of authenticity in qualitative research. Qualitative research authenticity is important in the research context, communicative interactions of value to the research, and the ethics of the study. Qualitative researchers want their research context to be authentic because the purpose of much qualitative research is to observe and participate in authentic experiences that can be described and explained with the purpose of achieving a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon. [1]

For BLODGETT et al. (2005) their phenomenon of interest was self-regulation in young pre-school children and they describe the ethics they enacted as they sought to develop a model of self-regulation based on their research experience with a combined total of 317 pre-school children, educators and parents. As researchers we want to describe, understand and explain others' lived experiences that in the conduct of the research also become part of our lived experience. Our interactions with participants should be authentic because we also want them to understand our reasons for believing that the research we propose is important. Often implicit in these interactions are ethical stances that remain unexamined. Reading their paper I was confronted by multiple research methodologies ranging from descriptive, to phenomenological, to grounded theory

that were applied to various stages of the research project. I wondered if theoretical framework such as phenomenological hermeneutics would have provided an overarching methodology that would have supported the research structure they developed and at the same time assisted their development of an authentic ethical stance based on reflecting back on the ethics implicit in interactions. Such an approach to ethics would allow researchers to incorporate the requirements of statutory bodies while simultaneously recognizing their partial nature. Finally, being authentic is an ethical stance and how researchers construct that in terms of practice and resources depends on how they understand what it means to act authentically. How researchers construct being authentic has implications for how they construct the requirements for informed consent and the practices of getting the "right" research group and "walking in the shoes" of others. [2]

2. The Construction of Knowledge and "Informed Consent"

BLODGETT et al. (2005) reminded me that regardless of the size of your qualitative study the issues of how power, knowledge creation, and research goals, serve to establish ethical interactions are the same. Regulatory bodies seek to impose particular ethical stances that are not global even though they might be presented as such. These ethical stances include *informed consent* and *confidentiality*. Regulatory bodies often use descriptive language that serves to buttress a power differential creating a boundary between the researchers and the researched. I argued previously (MILNE, 2005) that informed consent is a contract lying at the heart of regulatory bodies' construction of ethical research ensuring the separation of the active researcher from the passive research subject. COUPAL (2004) argues that if knowledge is accepted as value-free then informed consent makes sense because such knowledge emerges from an interaction and is not constructed by researchers or subjects. However, if knowledge is not value-free then informed consent does more to support those in control of the research process than those who would be participants. BLODGETT et al. discuss the issues of researchers being thoughtful, anticipating participants' concerns, protecting individuals who do not want their innermost thoughts revealed and criticized, and being attentive to researcher and peer pressure to participate. However, they do not seem to acknowledge that, for the purposes of the research, informed consent benefits the researchers more than it does the participants. [3]

3. Getting the "Right" Research Group

BLODGETT et al. (2005) describe how multiple stakeholders involved in the study complicate their research task. For example, should parents be constructed as gatekeepers, research subjects, participants, or researchers? Although I acknowledge that research participants can adopt a number of roles through the life of a research study, I would have also been interested in learning about the research community that emerged as university researchers, teachers, administrators, and participated in the research. This would have also required an examination of the role of communication in establishing shared research goals of

understanding the nature of self-regulation and developing an explanatory framework that could then be used to understand and predict self-regulation of other children. Such a goal underscores one of the other issues raised by BLODGETT et al. that of maximizing the active participation of members of a learning community. In much qualitative research the goal is to establish a research community that is also a learning community. In such a context, it would be important to have maximum participation. My experience has been that this is always an issue in qualitative research and whether participants are gatekeepers or guides the researcher needs to build relationships. [4]

4. "Walking in the Shoes" of Others

BLODGETT et al. argue in the section of their paper on informed consent that they used their empathetic skills "to walk in the shoes and feel the pebbles" of the parents who they wished to involve in their study. This is an argument with which I am philosophically at odds. I agree that empathy is very important for a researcher and that a research relationship should be a caring one. When one involves others, such as parents, in a research project one takes some responsibility for the participants. However, although I try to understand the parents with whom I will be working I recognize that I can never "walk in their shoes." To claim that one can, would seem to me to be claiming more than is possible based on our variable experiences. Although our experiences brought us to the point of being participants in a qualitative study, these experiences have also been different and, consequently our understandings will be different. I would never presume to be able to "walk in their shoes" but I would hope that through conversation and interactions we are able to develop shared goals for the research that will value the experiences and understandings that each brings to the research study and that the experience of research will be a learning experience for both. Such a position removes this dichotomy of the "snooping stranger" and "the good friend" in interactions without forgetting that these interactions are taking place because of a research study. I believe that in research the interactions should be authentic or genuine. Researchers are not playing a part such as the "curious friend," "the snoop," "the aloof outsider," or "the friendly researcher," they are genuinely interested in understanding and explaining specific interactions. [5]

When I am involved in research, I am conscious that I am both insider and outsider because I reflect back on authentic interactions to understand those interactions. Without the desire of the researchers to "do research" it is unlikely that these interactions would take place. This acts as a reminder that in the end the power resides with the researchers and not with the parents, the preschool educators or the children. With respect to the children involved in the research study, Mary MAGUIRE (2005) reminds us that although children can be constructed as "vulnerable" they bring a strong sense of their ability to make competent decisions and challenge research agendas. Thus rather than seeing children as voiceless vulnerable victims of research, researchers have a responsibility for seeing them as active agents and involving them in the research as more than faceless victims. [6]

I was also discombobulated by an account of an interview incident that described a researcher's unwillingness to acknowledge the need of a parent because this need existed outside the boundaries of the interview context. This account indicated to me the importance of researchers recognizing that the construction of insider-outsider status is embedded with ethical values about how researchers do research and how the research participants are constructed. SungWon HWANG and Wolff-Michael ROTH (2005) examined some of the issues associated with this type of ethical interaction. Their arguments lead me to ask if the researcher involved recognized the implicit ethical values embedded in the interaction. I was reminded of Egon GUBA and Yvonna LINCOLN (1989) and their arguments about the characteristics of authentic research and the separation of researcher and researched. Although they were writing about evaluation, their comments are salient to all forms of qualitative research. Rather than separating the researched from the researchers, GUBA and LINCOLN argue that for all participants, university researchers, educators, parents and children, the research should have *catalytic authenticity* because it would change their practice as they move from one field to another and the research should have *tactical authenticity* that would lead all participants feeling empowered to act not just the university researchers. To ensure *fairness* all stakeholders should be involved in constructions and interpretations of data. GUBA and LINCOLN call this *ontological authenticity*, and testimonials of participants, narratives of experience, and an audit trail of data and assertions provides the necessary evidence. Such testimonies also provide opportunities for *educative authenticity* such that participants develop an awareness of, and empathy for, others' constructions. These would seem to be appropriate characteristics for ethical and authentic qualitative research. [7]

5. Finally

Regulatory bodies will always seek to impose particular ethical stances on research proposals. Even though these stances, which include informed consent and confidentiality, emerge from specific theoretical perspectives, they are often presented as universal truths of ethics. A focus on authenticity would not only ensure that our methods of collecting data are pristine but that our data is also faithful to the constructions of *all* stakeholders. In this short paper I have attempted to suggest some alternative ethical stances to those examined by BLODGETT et. al. I acknowledge that a more nuanced presentation of ethics might highlight the contextual nature of ethical stances in all interactions. However, I think there is also value in recognizing possible alternative ethical stances that help to establish a research community of all participants. This community should be involved in critically examining the ethical norms and values that exist in interactions but only become conscious when we reflect back on practice and seek to understand the practices we observe. [8]

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