

Learning From Flyy Girls: Feminist Research Ethics in Urban Schools

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Abstract: Ethics for feminist researchers foreground issues of identity and subjectivity for the researched and researcher. Feminist research intends to be transformative by focusing on inequities that impact girls and women. For African-American girls in urban schools, those inequities occur out of and in the classroom.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Feminist Research, Researcher and the Researched](#)
- [3. Learning from Flyy Girls](#)
- [4. Coda](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Introduction

I became involved with girls in urban settings during a sabbatical leave in Ohio. After that experience, I continued to work with Kenneth TOBIN and his Discovering Urban Science group ([DUS](#)) in Philadelphia. I was the only scholar in the group who used feminist theory as the primary framework to understand our data. What does the phrase feminist researcher mean? And as a white, feminist scholar, how did my approach to research in urban schools and the ethics involved with that research differ from my colleagues working in the same settings? The next section provides an overview of feminist research and Black feminist theory. I then discuss the overlap between these two theoretical frameworks and illustrate the ethics associated with feminist research in urban settings. [1]

2. Feminist Research, Researcher and the Researched

Researchers have noted that African-American boys' lifeworlds have potentially detrimental influences on their lives and their involvement with school (SEILER, 2001). However, there is little research based in urban high schools that has considered the interconnection of gender with race and socioeconomic status, especially as it pertains to female, African-American students. When I became involved with Discovering Urban Science, the question in my thoughts was "what about the girls?" Who is pursuing their issues and learning their stories? How do their lifeworlds impact their science learning? Thus, using a feminist perspective, I focused my research on the girls I met through DUS. [2]

What is different for a feminist researcher compared with other researchers? How does a researcher self-define as feminist? Feminist research brings gender to the foreground and attempts to understand the perspectives of girls and women. Often research studies have ignored girls' and women's lifeworlds because researchers perceived the private sphere, which is strongly associated with the lives of females, as boring. Within feminist research, the private sphere is as, if not more, important as the public sphere. The lifeworlds of girls and women should be an important focus of the research. The identification and recognition of daily experiences plays the same role that it does in validating women's experiences in feminist research in general, that is, it opens them to discussion, accepts them as valid, and enables a critical look at their fundamental ideological assumptions. And an expanded view of the value of experience can provide opportunities for new insights and theoretical approaches (KNIGHT, 2000). [3]

Feminist research aspires to be transformative and deliberately considers ways to enhance the agency of women and girls. A feminist researcher will explicitly acknowledge the subjectivity of her/his perspective and others who are involved with the research. However, rather than ignoring the subjectivity or using other methods to minimize the impact of subjectivity on the research and interpretation, feminist researchers view subjectivity as an asset. The foregrounding of subjectivity also brings into focus the need to consider ethical issues associated with conducting research (REINHARZ, 1992). [4]

KNIGHT (2000) proposed five aspects of ethics that feminist researchers need to consider. Those aspects are (a) situating one's identities; (b) informing one's daily lived experiences; (c) addressing inequalities; (d) representing one's research; and (e) reflecting on new possibilities. By being aware and situating one's identity, a feminist researcher can begin to understand the power, oppression, and interpersonal relationships of the research subject (KNIGHT, 2000). A person's identity is time and space dependent and varies in different circumstances. However, there is a core self that is established early in life but is also relational through the social constructs of oneself in response to other beings and situations (HEKMAN, 2000). I am a white, middle class female and although I was raised in a working class home, my education moved me solidly into the middle class. As a white feminist researcher, I was conscious that my white solipsism could ignore the life experiences of African-American girls when conducting research in settings that are complicated and complex (RICH, 1979). While I deal daily with the masculine hegemony of Western society, my whiteness affords me a privilege not experienced by African American girls, especially those in urban schools. The girls I met when working in DUS dealt with multiple ideologies that impacted their identities. First, there is the Eurocentric culture that values "White" as the norm and defines other races and cultures as "other." These young women also contend with both the dominant patriarchal hegemony that exists in Western societies and the strong influence of African American culture (BOYKIN, 1983). [5]

Part of my subjectivity in conducting research was my limited understanding of the context. I needed to educate myself about the research setting, the girls'

everyday lived experiences, and develop the tools to conduct research in urban schools. Thus during my sabbatical, I expanded my background knowledge of feminist theory to include Black feminist and critical race theory by reading the research of Black and African-American feminist authors such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill COLLINS, Elizabeth SPELLMAN, and others. From this reading I began to understand that sexism and racism impact African-American girls in unique ways. African-American women are subjected to multiple societal oppressions and portrayed in various negative images as servants, domineering women, aggressive sexual beings or a drain on societies' resources. The dominant White culture in the United States attempts to control Black women using the powerful images of mammy, matriarch, welfare mother or sexually aggressive woman (COLLINS, 1991; SPELLMAN, 2001). African-Americans women are subject to the embodiment of racism and sexism, which is often used to ignore the class/economic issues that also impact their lives (COLLINS, 1998). [6]

COLLINS' (1991) Black feminist theory provided the framework for me to understand the inequalities that impact African-American women and to interpret data, such as the interactions between teachers and students and student to students. For example, in an African-American community, neither emotion nor ethics is subordinate to reason. Instead, emotion, ethics, and reason are used as interconnected, essential components of assessing knowledge claims. In an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, values are central to the knowledge validation process, thus research using Black feminist theory always has an ethical aim. [7]

There is a strong oral tradition in African-American culture (BOYKIN, 1983). The use of voice also has a strong place in Black feminist theory because what counts as knowledge includes the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, everyday experience and actions, an ethic of caring, and an ethic of personal accountability in an expanded definition of knowledge (COLLINS, 1991). Dialogue means that all members of the group actively participate in the discussion. The discussion is not only in regards to one's idea but also addresses the relationship of the ideas to the community and its members. A silent community member during a discussion may be interpreted as cheating (COLLINS, 1991). As I spent time in urban schools, I began to understand the importance of emotion, voice, and dialogue in African-American culture. Teachers cognizant of those traditions often allowed and encouraged students to call out and use their voices in ways that myself as a white, feminist researcher initially viewed as encouraging a classroom environment that disenfranchised girls. However, as my experience and knowledge of urban classrooms grew I began to understand the importance of students, and especially the girls in using their voices to articulate their science knowledge. [8]

The role of dialogue in producing knowledge extends further than the ability to debate and defend one's ideas. For students, sharing of dialogue may express itself in terms of asking peers for their opinions, interjection of one's own ideas when another is speaking, or "finding and expressing one's voice." Finding one's voice is a particularly gendered notion because males are usually encouraged to

verbalize their thoughts and ideas, while females are not. Women of Color¹ have two key strategies when using their voice, silence and outspokenness (HURTADO, 1996). Women of Color may deliberately remain silent and listen to gain knowledge that can be shared and discussed when they return to their communities. [9]

Conversely, Women of Color also use outspokenness as a strategy to express their ideas and test their knowledge. However, in school settings, outspokenness can be viewed negatively. For example, teachers labeled girls who talked with expressiveness and enthusiasm as "those loud black girls" (FORDHAM, 1996). These girls were often isolated from the class and denied the opportunity to learn because they did not conform to the white middle-class views on femininity. Black feminist theory enabled me to understand that the girls' outspokenness as a survival tactic that they have learnt from their community. During our research we found that when teachers encouraged girls' outspokenness, the girls became engaged with science. However, this practice also disenfranchised quieter students (SCANTLEBURY, 2004). And although it is important for teachers to respect the girl's cultural backgrounds which may be different from their own and to teach in culturally adaptive ways. Teachers, and I, also have an ethical responsibility to educate the girls on the importance of code switching when moving between cultures. For example, expressive talk in the classroom that uses verve and gestures can be viewed by those who do not have an understanding of African American culture as threatening behaviors in public settings such as retail stores. [10]

The role of emotion is key within Black feminist theory. If a person has views or opinions, the depth and strength of the emotion that s/he portrays in offering the opinion further validate these. An argument delivered without emotion is less credible than one where the person is showing what s/he believes. Personal accountability of knowledge is also critical. Knowledge claims include reason, emotion and ethics (COLLINS, 1991). The Black feminist theoretical standpoint proposes that knowledge and how it is shared includes experience, dialogue, ethics of caring, and personal accountability. When a knowledge claim is made, it is quite possible that African-American students, especially females, will ask how the knower thinks and feels, as well as personal details. [11]

With an ethic of caring, people value individuality, express and share their emotions and personally validate their knowledge through showing emotive action and dialogue actions. A person has views or opinions, and the depth and strength of the emotion that s/he portrays in offering the opinion further validate these. An argument delivered without emotion is less credible than one where the presenter is showing what s/he believes. The ethic of care also includes empathy. People may not share their knowledge if they believe the listeners not to be empathetic. There is a trust between a person and with whomever she is sharing the knowledge. Within personal accountability, the Afrocentric ideal expects that a person relates to, believes in, and reflects the values of the knowledge. [12]

1 HURTADO (1996) capitalizes Color because the term includes people from specific ethnic groups.

As I developed my understanding of Black feminist theory, I began to interweave the feminist ethics and methods regarding research techniques. I needed to show respect to the girls who were willing to work with me, and learning about their culture was one aspect of that respect. I realized I needed to share with the girls why I thought the research was important, what I was learning from the work and how I felt about that work. As a feminist researcher, using qualitative methods, I could critically challenge the researcher-researched hierarchy. For example, a feminist approach is that interviews reflect a conversation in which the participants and researcher shares and discusses ideas and issues, rather than a conventional style in which the researcher asks questions seeking information, clarification and other data, but does not share any personal information or answer the subject's questions since they are conventionally deemed by the researcher as irrelevant to the research. If the girls asked me personal questions, I would answer. I developed social capital in the science class by sharing my chemistry knowledge with the girls and offering them help with the content. As a middle class, white woman and feminist researcher, I sought assistance from teachers and others in DUS to understand the girls' lifeworlds, used Black feminist theory to understand the data and constantly monitored my responses and reactions to the different classroom atmosphere in urban schools. [13]

3. Learning from Flyy Girls

One morning, while I was getting ready to go into Philadelphia to spend the day in a chemistry classroom working with a teacher and her students, I chose a shirt that initially I thought, "no that is too tight, I can't wear that." Then I laughed, put the shirt on and drove to North City High. At North, I would spend time in chemistry classes, Chantrelle, Danielle, Tiffany, and Chenay were the young women I thought of when I laughed at my white, middle class reaction to a tight shirt. These young women proudly wore the fashions popular with teenage girls, and unlike white women like myself who were taught to use clothing to cover body flaws, Chantrelle, Danielle, Tiffany, and Chenay wore their jeans low, their shirts tight, and their earrings large. Rather than cover up a less than perfect body, they wore the current fashions proudly, talked and laughed loudly and had the confidence to expect their teachers to teach. (Field note)

The experience of working with urban African American girls has provided me the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of being a feminist scholar/researcher and the ethics associated with that role. I have used Black feminist theory in conjunction with feminist research ethics to explore the issues of teaching and learning science in urban schools with predominantly African-American students. There is a large overlap between Black feminist theory and feminist research ethics. The issue of voice is foregrounded, and a feminist researcher must be cognizant of how the participant's views are portrayed. Visiting and conducting feminist research in urban schools placed me in a position to reconstruct my perspectives on urban, teenage girls and develop an appreciation for the strength of the young women I met in those settings. Their assertiveness in focusing on their needs, their self-determination, and resiliency, garnered my respect and made me question aspects of my identity. The vignette on body image illustrates

something I learned about my own identity from the girls. Rather than be concerned about others' perceptions, their self-confidence gave me the confidence to challenge stereotypes. [14]

However, acting within an ethic of care, I was also able to support one of the girls' teachers about the school dress code. Girls were not allowed to wear shirts that bared their midriffs or tops with thin straps. Chantrelle, Tiffany, and Chenay challenged their teacher on the school's dress-code policy. The teacher and I noted that the school was "a place of work" and what was appropriate clothing for work was not what we would wear if going out "clubbing on a Saturday night." The ensuing light-hearted teasing from the girls about the type of music played at the clubs the teacher and I the might visit provided us the chance to talk about dress for different situations, such as school, church and clubs. Thus we able to enact an ethic of care by showing respect of girls' opinions, by providing a rationale as to why they should respect the school's dress code and by illustrating that their everyday experience had already provided them the knowledge on how to code-switch. [15]

During my first month's work on the DUS project, one of the teachers suggested I read the popular novel *Flyy Girl* (TYREE, 1993). This book was an assigned English text and the girls strongly related to the story because the novel was set in Philadelphia with the main character an African-American teenage girl transitioning from middle to high school and dealing with her unfolding sexuality. Many of the girls I have met in Philadelphia's urban schools are "flyy"², self-confident, self-determining and use their agency to claim an education. African-American girls from low-income families expect that they will enter and remain in the workforce for most of their lives (WEILER, 2000). They place a high value on education because completing school will improve their employment opportunities. [16]

Reading *Flyy Girl*, interviews and listening to the girls' stories, conversations during class, gave me another insight in the lives of urban, African-American girls. Through their work with DUS, I met two young women, Ivory and May. As part of my research, I asked them how gender impacted their lives. Ivory (aka EB Marvelous) produced a rap music video and May wrote a poem. These artifacts provided evidence as to how they viewed gender in their public and personal lives. For the purposes of this paper I will focus on Ivory's rap music video, which she titled "Gender": (In the available video, EB presents the rap piece she composed.)

2 Flyy describes a girl who is attractive and fashionably dressed.

GENDER

Girls going around having two or three kids. Not knowing they responsibilities. Some men taking care of they kids. Down the line comes school drop outs ages thirteen and up going around the hood giving they body to a group of guys that's slimy. Later on these guys laugh and start to call names and harass the fact that those girls now have street names lose respect for themselves. It takes a lot to learn. while men in street gangs or ending up in jail. Start off playing hooky game. And setting off school bells. Then it's the thing those whose missing school, chilling out thinking it's cool, just to smoke marijuana they some damn fools. Friends done dropped out of school. Its times you suppose to be a leader most turn out a follower. Drop outs becomes a big issue in life. For parent who have a clue is to what they son do. Say be seven in the arrive home at two. You find your son and his friend sleep while some on the phone. For men and women all you can do is hope for the best. whatever happens didn't hesitate ... Just find a way to clean up the mess. EB Marvelous flow freestyles and raps. And that all I can tell you about this gender in the hood mess. I slay on the go, when I throw my shot up its all water. I'm just a Philly cat trying to speak my mind and when I rap heads turn like I done commit a crime. I represented the dabridge to the fullest. Dus I give you the crowd. And my square is Cannes like we was to get dough like them bulls from them playboy mansions.

[EB Marvelous, Summer 2002](#) (Video file, 12 MB) [17]

Ivory's rap music video is very powerful, with words, music and images that address the gender issues she encountered on a daily basis as a young African American woman in the city. Ivory gave permission for the research group to show, share and analyze her gender project. She has also presented research at

national research conferences on urban science education with other DUS members. [18]

Analyzing Ivory's "Gender" deepened my understanding of her lifeworld. Further, when Ivory gave her permission for the DUS group to show the rap, this provided me the forum to talk with others involved with science education about the issues impacting students in urban settings, particularly girls. Those others include my preservice science education majors who study at a predominantly, White, middle class university, my colleagues at the same institution and science education researchers who do not spend time in urban schools. [19]

Ivory's rap provides an insight into the continuing double standards regarding to sexually active female and males. For girls "who giving they body to a group of guys," lose respect and then are given "street names." But Ivory shows her independent consciousness by noting that the parents of girls and boys who have engaged in premarital sex, taken drugs and dropped out of school should take the responsibility of their children's behavior and that they should "find a way to clean up the mess." [20]

The rap shows Ivory's knowledge and wisdom about gender dynamics and her use of dialogue to express her knowledge is another example of how African American women show connectedness to their families and communities. Moreover, the rap provides insight to her cultural life as she has interwoven video of her friends, the neighborhood, and images from popular rap music videos. The video also illustrates her skill in the oral traditions, having rhythm and verve, and using her voice (BOYKIN, 1983). [21]

As a feminist researcher, I am responsible for articulating Ivory's perspectives about gender, while being cognizant of how others might misinterpret or re-interpret her perspective (KNIGHT, 2000). Also, through my privileged position and alignment with feminist research ethics, it is important that I give voice to the inequalities uncovered by research that impact Ivory and her sisters. And as I lend that voice, and use dialogue, I need to reflect an ethic of care, acknowledge that the personal accountability of the knowledge is as valid as other data collected during the research. Further, showing emotion in sharing the research and telling the story is acceptable and required! [22]

By sharing her daily experiences, Ivory has taught me how girls' roles as *othermothers* within their kinship structures impacted their lives and their engagement with school. *Othermothers* are women who raise or assist in the raising of children who are not their own biological offspring. COLLINS (1991) links this role for women in the African American community to slavery when children were routinely removed from the care of their biological mothers. The mothers were expected to continue their daily work, while young girls and elderly women, that is, *othermothers* raised the children. As I discussed elsewhere, the role of an *othermother* can impact urban girls' engagement with school as they have the responsibility to nurse sick young cousins, nieces, or nephews or escort them to school. Teachers can also expect girls to act as *othermothers* when they

ask girls to help boys who have been absent "catch up" on the class material. While a girl is teaching one of her male peers, she is focused on his, rather than her, learning (SCANTLEBURY, 2004). [23]

The role of *othermother* is an inequity for the girls, as boys are rarely asked to assume these caretaking responsibilities. Within the ethics of feminist research, one needs to address inequalities within the research and also how those results are conveyed to the society at large (KNIGHT, 2000). Moreover, when I discuss these issues with my preservice teachers, teachers, and colleagues, it is my responsibility to foreground that in some cases girls' absenteeism from school may be due to family responsibilities rather than a disinterest in learning. [24]

DUS pioneered in science education using students as researchers. The group also had high school students in different roles such as teacher educators, curriculum consultants, and video makers. The use of video and the production of a rap music video as research provide a new possibility to foreground the important issues for students. In this regard, the research aligns with KNIGHT's (2000) ethics for feminist research and also the importance of acknowledging and respecting individuality from Black feminist theory (COLLINS, 1991). [25]

The next steps for me as a feminist researcher are to ask the students to produce artifacts that illustrate issues that they view as important or to wait until the students decide what aspects of their science learning and the teaching they experience are of interest. I also need to educate my preservice teachers about teaching in culturally adaptive ways for students such as Ivory, Chantrelle, Danielle, Tiffany, and Chenay. For example, teachers often will shut down verbally assertive girls, who may disengage from science. As a teacher educator, I use video of girls working in science class that show teachers who encourage oral traditions and also teachers who through gestures or words shut students down. I engage my preservice teachers in discussions the pedagogical strategies they can use that would encourage students to engage in science, be respectful of the students cultural backgrounds and also prepare the students for mainstream culture. [26]

I also have an ethical responsibility to prepare the girls for a life within the mainstream culture. The discussion around school dress-code policies provided an opportunity for me to enact an ethic of care towards the girls. Other discussions also included issues related to outspokenness, and how using one's voice as a challenge may be ineffective strategy. However, the ability to develop a logic, critical oral argument is an important skill in science. Teaching girls how and when to code switch between different cultures is an ethical responsibility for a feminist researcher. As is educating teachers on how the girl's strengths in other areas, such as having the self-confidence to speak up, produce a rap or question the status quo can be utilized to develop science skills and knowledge. [27]

4. Coda

Flyy girls from urban schools face many challenges and their insights into how to deal with those challenges can inform teachers, school administrators, and researchers. Feminist research ethics demands that researchers foreground girls, value the knowledge from girls' personal experiences, address inequalities, and reflect on how the research is re-presented to others. Flyy girls expect no more and deserve no less. [28]

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