

HOUSE OF MIRRORS: THE MESSY WORLDS OF INTERDISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

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What happens when a female assistant professor sends a young, attractive, smart, female doctoral student into the field with a gentle, older, emeritus male professor? Well, you get the “my assistant” incident or the “soup place thing” and some questions about doing qualitative community-based research with an interdisciplinary team. But you also get some unexpected insights about the research team, the community in which the researchers were received, and the research process itself. In this narrative, using this incident, the authors explore the house-of-mirrors effects of doing community-based interdisciplinary research.

House(s) of Mirrors

At times, doing interdisciplinary research is like walking into a house of mirrors at a carnival. You walk into a theatrically lit, interior space landscaped with concave and convex mirrors. Your image is bent and distorted, reflected and refracted, tossed back and forth in unexpected ways. Somewhere in those images you recognize yourself, your friends, and the strangers traveling beside you, but everyone is stretched and compressed, widened, and elongated in perpetually changing shapes as you walk from here to there. At the end of the maze of mirrors you are left wondering about the “reality” of those images and the one you know that resides at home in your bathroom mirror.

Doing community-based research with an interdisciplinary research team is a lot like walking through the fun house. You leave the landscape wondering which version of reality is being reflected and which version of reality you are capturing. You argue with your colleagues about what *you* saw and heard, witnessed and learned, all the while knowing if he or she was standing just a bit more left, or a bit more right, it would all be a differently shaped—but equally vivid—view of reality.

This narrative is about entering a house of mirrors, wrestling with some images, and learning something about what we experienced from different vantage points. It

is about more than just “doing” the research, though. It is also about the temporal nature of crafting and constructing research writing. In telling this narrative we weave together current text with field notes and email that were captured in “real time” shortly after the incidents occurred. Our use of them here illustrates the iterative process of reflecting back and forth through time and space in constructing written reports.

Finally, given the fact that doing research and writing it up is contingent upon where one stands relative to others, it seemed only fair to invite the reader to step into the shoes of those doing the reflecting in their time and space. Thus, inserted boxes will indicate these positional hand-offs in the narrative. In short, we invite you to experience our house of mirrors as we bounce along through a narrative constructed from different temporal moments and situated positions.

KAREN

Our Narrative’s “Incident”

Bill calls it the “my assistant” incident. I call it “Elana’s soup place thing.” Either way you characterize it, the event occurred outside of my immediate sight. But I was the project overseer, so their experiences were reflected back to me from their different perspectives in fieldnotes, conversations, and emails. My

responsibility was to do something with it. Elana was “my” doctoral student. Bill is an emeritus professor at the University where I was situated well down the academic chain from him, in my untenured, Assistant Professor position (but just up from Elana in the academy’s scheme of things).

So what happens when a female assistant professor like me sends a young, attractive, smart, female doctoral student like Elana into the field with a gentle, older, emeritus male professor like Bill? Well, you get the “my assistant” incident or “Elana’s soup place thing” and some questions about doing qualitative community-based research with an interdisciplinary team. But you also get some unexpected insights about the research team, the community in which Elana and Bill were received, and the research process itself.

An Interdisciplinary Research Team Studying Interdisciplinary Practice

Beginning in 2002, an interdisciplinary team embarked on a community-based study of a small rural county located several hours drive from our university home. The research team was an eclectic mix by any standards. Several folks floated in and out but there were six core members. We ranged in rank from doctoral student to emeritus professor but the team also included all ranks in between: full, associate, assistant professors, and lecturer. Our earned degrees included four Ph.D.s, two J.D.s, a divinity degree, and four master’s degrees. Our disciplines included social work, psychology, law, economics, religion, and anthropology. Our practice experiences included policy analysis, forensic social work, and public interest law.

The core members of the original research team (excluding Elana and me) had worked together for years and had spent a good deal of time studying this community. They had primarily used quantitative court file data and sought to explain how and why this county obtained such an extraordinarily high rate of

confessions and convictions of those charged with child sexual abuse. Their research had focused on explaining the relationships between variables found within the court records.

When I joined the research team, with my background in qualitative methods, it seemed intuitively obvious that the “better” way—or at least a different way—to ask and answer questions about the county’s success was to approach it as an “exemplar” case worthy of in-depth observation. Questions framed about community success seemed to cry out for qualitative inquiry and a more ethnographic approach, although this was not an approach that any of the other team members had used in the past. My earliest tentative suggestions that we consider such a study weren’t immediately heard, but ultimately and notably, with Bill’s enthusiastic endorsement, this idea gained favor in the group.

We applied for and received a small University grant and immediately began our study. Although I was not a senior member of the research team, nor among its founding members, I was largely responsible for supervising this new research endeavor. I brought Elana, a doctoral student from the School’s joint doctoral program, along for the journey. Often it was her training in ethnography, her understanding of the methodological approach, and her positive energy and support that kept me grounded as I tried to introduce an entirely new way of thinking to a more senior and better-established group of researchers.

The project involved targeting and talking to the professional practitioners in the community who were involved with child sexual abuse cases and their criminal prosecution, including judges, prosecutors, police officers and state troopers, defense attorneys, and social workers. So, notice for the moment if you will, the complicated sets of embedded hierarchies involved in this

project. We were studying a group of community professionals associated with the legal system, a system with its own entrenched and historic pecking order with judges at the top and social workers off to the side. We were studying a type of crime, child sexual abuse, which involves issues of exploitation, power, position, age, sexuality, violence, and gender. We were studying this from the organizational home base of a university, an institution with its own equally hierarchical arrangements of rank and status. So it should come as no surprise that as our eclectic group gathered empirical evidence from this community setting and brought it back to argue about what it meant, we would encounter some tensions involving difference.

Strangers in a Strange Land

I had emphasized the importance of field notes to the research team for a project such as this one. Since the research site was located several hours drive away (first along a long stretch of interstate and then through meandering back roads of the rural countryside), and since the endeavor took time (over a year of doing interviews, collecting documents, reading local papers, and watching trials), it is not surprising that evidence of the passage of time and familiarity with people and place was recorded in fieldnotes.

Of course the more important observations in this kind of study came as researchers built relationships with people in the community. One measure of our growing familiarity with the research site is recorded in the evolution of notes on the "soup place." Over time we came to know the soup, the regular crowd including a local judge, and the owner Tim, and they came to know us.

ELANA / BILL

Soup today was good. Though it's hot and muggy, the menu is still Chili and soup of the day. Today it was Italian Wedding Soup, which was delicious. Two of the Judge's lunch crowd were there, though no Judge. (Elana's Fieldnotes)

We were a bit early for our interview, so we went...around the corner to have a cup of soup and hear the gossip. There was a 'Support Bush, Support Our Troops' sign in the front yard of the shop. (Elana's Fieldnotes)

Nell and I had soup at Tim's behind the court annex. Owner's name is Tim. Hellos all round. (Bill's Fieldnotes)

Got to town at 11:45 in good time to have soup with the good old boys at Tim's. The two guys who are the Judge's buddies...greeted "The Professor" and I joined them. (Bill's Fieldnotes)

KAREN

Notice in these excerpts the relatively different "eye" that Bill and Elana bring to filter and record information. This is critical since this information becomes the "data" for our research endeavor. Relying on one or the other alone would decrease the richness of the overall available material. Elana notes tastes, flavors, mugginess, and environmental context. Bill records his developing interpersonal relationship with the "soup place" inhabitants through his references to the "good old boys," "Tim," and "The Professor." Our observations that Elana would unlikely be welcomed in the same manner as "The Professor," and that Bill was unlikely to register details like the

taste of the soup in his notes, lead to two implications. The first is that there is an interactive effect between and among research team members and community players which influences the very data from which study reports will later be constructed. Second, different kinds of recorded observations—interpersonal and environmental—make available a rich mix for reconstructing the scene and the community in later research reports. While Bill's notes help us consider the relationships among the various players, Elana's illuminate the context in which to situate those actors. Our sense of the scene would be different had the soup choices included lemongrass or miso and the sign planted in the front lawn read "Kerry for President" or "Another Family for Peace."

It is in local places like this that incidents transpire in which specific interactions result in deeper understanding, provoke more interesting questions, and generate more situated and complicated knowledge. It is here, at Tim's, that "Elana's Soup Place" incident took place.

The House of Soup

Bill and Elana had driven to town to interview a judge who was central to the project. It was our very first introduction to the "soup place." The day was reported in Elana's eloquent and rich fieldnotes, so excerpts pertinent to thinking about the subsequent "incident" are reproduced here with only minor editing. At the time she wrote:

E L A N A

We went to find the judge, but he had already gone to lunch and left his assistant with directions on how we could find him. Turns out, he eats lunch every day across the street from the courthouse at a little soupstand/coffeeshop. The place (which didn't have a name advertised anywhere outside but—I gather from a poster

inside might be called The Brew) is attached to the back of a beautiful paint-peeling Victorian home. If you weren't told about it, you'd never know this place existed. Inside, the restaurant looked pretty new (the Judge later said he thought it had opened about five years ago). The place consisted of a serving counter, a side counter with 4 or 5 thermoses of coffee (several flavors) and two tables with four chairs each. The wall behind the tables was made of rough-hewn boards and shelves holding empty glass canisters and empty baskets (which looked very quaint). The owner, dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans and white apron lives in the Victorian and seems to be one of the Judge's pals (although I don't know if he's his pal because the Judge eats there or vice versa). When we arrived, the Judge was sitting with three heavy-set, casually dressed men—all of whom were laughing hard as we arrived. At the other table, a lone woman was sitting drinking a milkshake and eating soup. The Judge asked her if we (Bill, himself, and I) could join her since there was no more room at the guys' table. After a few minutes of banter, the Judge told us to order—the place serves two types of soup each day. The Judge always gets two 'small' cups of soup—one of each flavor. Bill and I each ordered a large bowl of chili from the owner (I think the other flavor was some sort of tomato meat soup. They didn't look very different to me.).

Throughout the meal, the Judge, the owner and the three guys at the table proceeded to carry on... talking, laughing and teasing one another. One of the guys seems to be retired/

unemployed, one owns a construction company, and the other didn't say much nor was much said about him (so I can't even guess what he does). I'm not sure if the Judge is always the ringleader or if he was made so by our presence, but throughout the meal he would incite one or another of his buddies to recount a funny story, anecdote or practical joke for our benefit. Lunch was apparently a daily routine for this group—the owner even joked that one of the guys arrives every day at exactly 11:37, after the 11:30 stock reports. The others also joked about how this man is a “professional funeral attendee”—they (and he) joked that he goes to funerals and family reunions for the free lunch. They mentioned this again and again, each time getting a huge chuckle (probably as much out of Bill's and my incredulity that a person would really have the gall to attend funerals for food as by the general hilarity of such a practice). The owner joked that this guy hadn't bought groceries in two months... Given this man's schedule, he seemed either retired or unemployed and the Judge said he used to work at a nearby factory that has closed. The same gentleman seems to be the butt of many jokes, as the Judge told us (and then repeated the story to two other people who came by for coffee later in the meal) about how they had fooled him with some sort of elaborate plot involving a borrowed truck.

At lunch, the Judge talked for a while about college football. He told us a little bit about his family. Memorable details include a discussion about a man he met a few

months ago while he and his wife were at the Mayo Clinic for their annual checkups!! The man was an African American WWII vet who had become a doctor and apparently has a photographic (or otherwise exceptional) memory. The Judge's discussion of going to the Mayo clinic, the Bowl game, and spending every football weekend attending games, as well as his suit contrasted with the more working-class aura of his companions and their mutual ribbing. The Judge's teasing and practical joking might be seen as a way of building camaraderie that spanned class or employment boundaries.

The Judge also spoke about how he ended up going to law school because he couldn't get into the Marines during Vietnam and “didn't have anything else to do,” a story he told both at lunch and in our interview. Also, when asked if most people involved in the legal system and law enforcement in the county were local, the Judge reckoned locality by where the person had played high school football. I think we need to keep asking about the meaning of football and serving in the military in the community. From this discussion I got the sense that playing football and serving in the military were indicators both of proper masculinity but also of membership in the community (a feeling reinforced by the veteran's memorial at the corner of the courthouse lawn).

The judge also spoke of his father's childhood—he told one story about how his dad was one of four sons (don't know how many daughters). Their family was poor

(maybe his dad's father died when his dad was young) and they had only two pairs of boots between the four boys, so they had to alternate which ones could go to school....

Finally a few comments on gender—the Judge's buddies are all big, jovial men and when I asked the crowd at The Brew if they were all regulars, the lone woman shrugged a bit and said, "Ooh no, not me," as though that should be perfectly obvious. At lunch the Judge spoke a bit about how his dad used to have a lunch crew "just like this" when he was younger. I wondered who comes to this café when the Judge and his buddies aren't there? At the beginning, the Judge addressed the majority of his conversation to Bill, although he started to pay more attention to me as I began asking him to tell me more about his background. Interestingly, during the interview, the Judge theorized that the empowerment of women has been integral to the legal system's awareness of how it often put victims on trial in sexual abuse cases.

KAREN

In these fieldnotes, Elana speculates about class and gender and wonders how they play out in the community. She also recorded a personal observation that the judge did not start off addressing her as attentively as he did Bill, and juxtaposed that observation by recording the judge's personal philosophy on the empowerment of women and its impact on criminal prosecution of sexual abuse. Elana's notes suggest a certain tension between this observed behavior and his articulated philosophy that may be relevant

to the subject matter of our study and worthy of further exploration.

The research team had observed previously that the professional practitioners in the community adhered to highly gender-specific roles. Judges, lawyers, and cops were primarily men. Social workers were primarily women. In fact, the one social worker who had infiltrated the "boys" network that investigated and prosecuted child sexual abuse cases was an anomalous and often renegade male social worker. This social worker, now a faculty member at a nearby university, was also our research team's community insider. Without him as a research team member, serving as community gatekeeper, it is doubtful any of us would have been invited into the community for study.

We came to see that among professionals in this community, masculinity and male responsibility were defined and elaborated through a set of common histories and contexts. Several prominent male prosecutors, cops, and a polygraph operator were all Marines in Vietnam. They were men with a strong sense of right and wrong who seem to have been shaped partly by their experiences in that war. They were particularly committed to protecting children who were victims of sexual abuse. More often than not, that meant protecting little girls from the adult men around them. Though our research team easily deduced these basic divisions of gender and status in the community, we began to hypothesize how these elements played out to explain this community's unusual method of prosecuting child sexual abuse. What intersections of historic context, personal histories, and professional position helped explain this community's devotion to prosecuting child sexual abuse over the past twenty years?

Returning to the House of Soup

The research team returned to the "soup place" on several occasions. Bill and Elana

went together. Bill took another team member, Nell. Bill also went by himself. These are his fieldnotes from one of those solo trips:

B I L L

Got to town at 11:45 in good time to have soup with the good old boys at Tim's. I got there and the two guys who are the Judge's buddies, Rob (the butt of the jokes) and the Bronco owner. They greeted the professor and I joined in. They talked to one another at first.... They asked me about whether I was retired, the aegis of the research and who was financing it. I said a small university grant. They asked me why their county and I said because they had a protocol that was very successful in prosecuting sexual abusers of children. We talked a little about that and Bronco brought up that his daughter (granddaughter) went to school with the 14 year old girl who ran off with the 56 year old guy—with a car and \$4,000 of her parents money. It is a case much in the news. They have been spotted in the west here and there.

The judge comes in and he asks if they had told me about our last visit. "No." Tim, the owner, asks me if I remember the first question they asked me when I came in minutes earlier. I could not remember. They said it was, "Where is your assistant?" Turns out they (Rob and Bronco) were grinning and winking when Elana and I were having lunch because, I take it, she is good looking. So I will be a lot more welcome if I bring my assistant next time.

E L A N A

Unlike me, Bill does not process the meaning of these incidents in his fieldnotes (although he will do so shortly). Nonetheless the pieces are there to think about. A man identified by his car (a Bronco, no less), questions Bill about work and money. Though it is difficult to say if these questions were motivated by concern about Bill's research motives or pure curiosity, they represent "Bronco's" attempt to understand Bill's status and position within the community and the academy. Just as members of the research team were working to understand the hierarchies and relationships between community members, community members strove to decipher the complex relations of power within the research team. Notably, Bill's mention of our focus on child sexual abuse prosecutions engendered the telling of a grand-daughter's 14 year old classmate who "ran off with" an older man, suggesting that in this small and intimate community, many people had knowledge of, or ties to, families involved in child sexual abuse. The subtexts of these two discussions—the first about positioning the research team and the second about gender, age and sexuality—merge when the soup place "guys" were alone with Bill, giving them the freedom to speak about me as "Bill's assistant." As they do with each other, the "guys" seem to be using teasing and joking (this time making sexualized references about Bill and me) to build camaraderie that spans class and employment boundaries with Bill, "the professor." Furthermore, just as we engaged in conversation as a research team about "them" in the community, so too the community seems to be engaging in conversations about "us" in our absence. Finally, I was intrigued to notice the parallels between the story of a 14-year-old girl running off with a 56-year old man and the guys' innuendo about Bill and me.

KAREN

Back at the Academy

I was troubled, although not particularly surprised, by the references to Elana recorded in Bill's fieldnotes. Ironically, in many ways Bill looked on himself as Elana's assistant, since she had had considerably more experience with ethnography than he. Bill always deferred respectfully to Elana and to my directions when it came to this project. Nonetheless, the direct reference to Elana as Bill's assistant by the "soup place guys" made it clear that was not the community's understanding of this relationship. Conversations with Elana revealed she was not particularly surprised. For the record, this is not the first (nor is it likely to be the last) time Elana has had to deal with being thought of as a sexualized object during field research. Such is the price women pay for being young, attractive, and engaging. Her most immediate emotional response to the situation was one of embarrassment. Being older and a bit more battered by life experiences, mine was anger. I get so tired of the same old battles that women have to fight to be taken seriously.

I found myself facing a dilemma. I did not want to leave the reference to Elana unaddressed with the team but was also not sure how best to bring it up. I was keenly aware of Elana's position. I didn't want to embarrass her further, nor did I want to exploit her, but I also didn't want her to have to absorb the indignity in silence. I pondered what to do, given my position as junior faculty member, team research leader, and Elana's supervisor and (hopefully) mentor.

While contemplating a course of action, I received an unexpected but very welcome email from Bill. A lifelong learner, ever willing to think about new things in new light, Bill had also been chewing over the issue. This is what I most respect about Bill, his intellectual curiosity and his willingness to explore the unknown. It was these characteristics that led Bill to advocate with the pre-existing research

team members for trying these new methods of inquiry in the first place. Now, it was his intellectual curiosity and his willingness to tackle problems head on that compelled him to reach out to me and opened the door for addressing the issues. His initial musings were presented by contemplating the role of fieldnotes in the research project, and what ought (and ought not) go in to them. He wrote to me:

BILL

I think most of the thinking about what should go into field notes is based on the lone researcher model, not the team model. I think that we are generally not giving impressions we have of one another on these trips. I got to thinking about that when I was thinking whether or not I should write up what the "guys" said to me about "my assistant" Elana, both as present and absent. I would never have conveyed those comments to Elana except in an ethnographic study. Further, I would probably have forgotten them in ten minutes.

Because of what you told us about the importance of recording what happens and impressions, I could not have skipped them. I think they are particularly important because my impression is increasing that "we men" are getting something different in these interviews than "you women" would get. I would not have noticed that the Judge always talked to me, even in response to questions posed by Elana.

The more I reflect on being kidded about my assistant when she was not present, the more I suspect that I was being kidded about the possibility that she was somehow more than that to me. I don't know. I do remember the '60s and '70s when

some older professors essentially traveled with roadies. Unless there was something like that on their minds, I don't think they would have been laughing so much about the winks between them that I missed when with Elana, or the laughter in telling me about that in her absence. Anyway, it probably doesn't matter much. (Bill's email to Karen, March 23, 2003)

KAREN

Of course it matters much. Bill's observations are important and he is right: when working as an interdisciplinary research team, observations of other team members, in addition to the "research subjects," necessarily become an object of the research process itself. Thus, reflexivity between the multi-person, inter-disciplinary research team and the community exponentially compounds the reflections that reverberate back and forth between observed and observers.

Furthermore, Bill's observations were important because without the imperative of fieldnotes, Bill would not have conveyed this information to Elana or me directly. Instead, he would have shielded us from the comments of "the boys," but for the fact that he felt he needed to "come out" as a requirement of the ethnographic process. What would otherwise have been a sexualized private conversation became a piece of information for public analysis. It seems central to the topic under investigation—child sexual abuse—to consider how interactions between researcher and community produce and reshape the intersecting dynamics of gender, age, and power. First, Bill had to trade on his inclusion in the soup place group of older men and their camaraderie in order for the research team to observe that members of the community were positioning researchers in ways related to their relative age/gender. At the same time,

in order to reveal this information to our research group, Bill had to break the meritocratic norms of the academy in which individuals are expected to relate to one another based on intellectual identities and where sexualized identities and relations are generally taboo.

Finally, it is interesting to note the significance of what is hidden and revealed and the choices made in the context of the research process. Just as Bill noted that Elana's presence or absence changed his experience at the "soup place" so, too, did the fieldnote imperative shift Bill's decision about what to hide and reveal of his experience. Bill says that not only would he have not communicated the "guys'" comments to Elana and me but for the imperative of fieldnotes, he would probably have "forgotten them in ten minutes." Indeed, Bill probably would have forgotten about them and that would have been one of the privileges of his position. It was a forgettable incident for him, but not so for Elana and me. On the other hand, it was Bill's position of privilege and his openness towards those situated in ranks below him that facilitated the process of putting the issue on the table for further investigation.

Caught in Between:

Her & Hims, Here & There

"This is a teachable moment," I thought after reading Bill's message. So I sent an email back to him with a list of questions to ponder and I asked if this was an issue that could be brought back to the research team meeting for discussion. Interestingly, although the team routinely spoke graphically about child sexual abuse—the object of our study—turning our gaze to sexual innuendo and power differences within our research team felt taboo to me and although I had long wanted to do so, I was unsure of how. In Bill's email, I saw the opportunity to illustrate the arguments I had made to a research team that wasn't used to thinking about the roles of power,

gender, sexuality, and situatedness as integral and important parts of the research project itself. I had always talked about these concepts in the abstract; now this incident provided a perfect concrete example for demonstrating what I had meant. Furthermore, I saw an opportunity to protect Elana, or at very least insist that the group pay attention to her position, without having the burden resting exclusively on her shoulders. Finally, given my junior faculty status on the team, Bill's email created an opportunity to raise issues that made me feel vulnerable with my senior colleagues in a safe, acceptable, "intellectualized," and "academic" way. So I wrote Bill my own email. It read:

These are wonderful reflections and go to the heart of this kind of research project. Among other things, this work assumes there is no one "right or correct" reality only different presentations and interpretations depending on where you sit—particularly where you sit relative to positions of power (race, gender, ethnicity, class, education, etc.). Anyway may I share this email with the group? I would like to put your fieldnotes, Elana's fieldnotes, and this email together for discussion at the next research group meeting. I think it would be very helpful. (More than helpful, I think it is critical to team development.) In the meantime, I have some questions for you to ponder:

1. If the guys at lunch did think/imply that there was more going on with you and Elana than meets the eye, did that enhance or detract from your credibility with them? Did it occur to you to correct the impression at the time? Why or why not? Did you gain something by not addressing

their remarks? What? What are the bigger conclusions to be drawn? How far does this community of ideas and attitudes extend?

2. How do you suppose this environment made Elana feel? Even without direct comments do you suppose she "got" the social signals and signs? (The correct answer to that question is 'yes' so let me move past it.) Given the underlying message what are the implications for Elana's work in the community? For the project in general? What are the implications for other women in the community? How might this, in fact, be related to the development and working of the child sexual abuse protocol itself? Furthermore, how should we, as a research team, honor, interpret and understand data that we collect given our different positions relative to the information and its implications?

3. What other evidence do we have that either adds credence or discounts the notion that gender, power and access are related in this community? Who gains access? How? To what extent? Whose voices are amplified in the process? Whose are silenced? Are there ethical and unethical ways of proceeding by using gender?

4. For the purposes of this project, could interesting questions be emerging about gender, power, and sex in this community? Why the interest in sexual abuse at the expense of other things? Why the graphic language about cucumbers and such in the male-to-male interviews about child sexual abuse? Why the lack of such talk when there is a female present? Have there been any women who have been significant players in the operation of the protocol? Why

or why not? Have any women tried to be part of it and either been discounted or left out of the process?

5. What's sex got to do with it? What's gender got to do with it? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a lot. What's professional? What's personal? Where are the boundaries between the two and what are the implications? I'm still of an open mind but won't dismiss any working hypothesis at the moment. This is where this kind of research gets interesting, dangerous, and complicated. However, in my personal (and very biased) opinion, this is where the complexity of the real world begins to get revealed in a meaningful way.

Research as a House of Mirrors

Our next research team meeting was devoted entirely to the soup place incident. The team was very open to pondering questions raised in the emails and fieldnotes, exploring feelings and reactions associated with the incident, and discussing implications flowing from it. We didn't answer all the questions raised in Karen's email; nonetheless the meeting did deepen feelings of team trust and respect. Both were nurtured through the exercise of revealing our individual vulnerabilities and explicitly acknowledging relations of gender, age, and power among us. The comments of the "soup place guys" forced us to publicly acknowledge our various positions relative to one another and to think critically about how gender, age, and status influenced what we observed, what we shared, how we interpreted, and what we wrote about this research project.

Much of what we've learned involves the methodological and interpersonal consequences of this kind of research. First, we were reminded anew of the very old adage in qualitative inquiry, that the researcher is an

instrument in the research process. The data collected from any community setting depends largely on who does the collecting. As Bill, Elana, and Karen ventured into the field and found the Judge, Tim, Rob, and Bronco—among others—we each were told and we recorded different stories filtered through different observational points of view and interpreted through different lenses. This filtering happens throughout the process, including at the fieldnote stage, thus influencing the essence of the study data. For example, Bill recorded—almost unconsciously—his growing interpersonal familiarity with the group of guys at the soup place by labeling them "the good old boys," and learning the first name of the owner. Bill's choices, in the way he recorded what he saw and heard, revealed something to us about status as recognized in the community. The fact that the "guys" chose to call him "The Professor" tells us something about how they saw him. The fact that Bill chose to record the comments about Elana helped shape our understanding of who these community members were relative to us as well as who we were relative to each other.

Second, by sending different combinations of researchers into the community we captured different views of the same incident from different situational perspectives. For example, perhaps it was because Bill was so personally interconnected to the "good old boys" that Elana had the space to sit back, observe, and reflect on the environment—the taste of the soup, the peeling paint, the politics—as well as to pose hypotheses about the role of class, military service, and football. It may be that Elana was freed up to observe context because of the fact that she was not one of the guys; Bill was quickly immersed in developing interpersonal relationships at the "soup place" and therefore had less opportunity to observe the environment.

Third, sending different combinations of researchers into the “soup place” at different points in time resulted in access to different kinds of information. Not only is different information shared based on who is present, but selective absences are also relevant. So, for example, it was Elana’s absence that created an opportunity for having a conversation *about* her. All of these “lessons” about gathering evidence are relevant to doing community-based research because they are directly related to the “data” collected and thus available for interpreting and reporting.

We also learned something about the processing, interpretation, and reporting of evidence. Interdisciplinary research methods need to include interpersonal processes ensuring that information can be shared safely among group members. The various recorded versions of truth, as witnessed, observed, and recorded by Elana and Bill, would be nothing more than flat, descriptive observations if the team hadn’t found a way to create a safe space for public discussion about sensitive topics relating to power, gender, and position dynamics. We learned that it takes someone in the “power up” position at the beginning to give permission to discuss team dynamics around sensitive topics. This happened as I created space for Elana to voice her feelings and when Bill opened the door to Karen to bring the “soup incident” to the whole group. Furthermore, having dealt with these dynamics once, it was easier for the team to recognize and characterize them as recurring themes in subsequent incidents. For example, later in the project Elana made repeated attempts to schedule an interview with another older, male judge in the community. He was virtually unavailable to her (and the contact they did have was unpleasant). The problem was solved when a male attorney in our research group offered to deal with the judge directly. He received prompt and courteous responses. In the post “soup-place” atmosphere, no one blamed Elana for failing

to schedule an appointment but rather immediately suspected that status and gender issues were at play and sought to address the problem by substituting the contact person with someone to whom we predicted the judge would respond, which solved the problem. We gained access to the judge and his views by utilizing what we had learned. Thus the understanding gleaned from “the soup place” incident was incorporated into the structure of the research group dynamics and utilized in our approach to this community.

Given our varied backgrounds, the research team has been remarkably cooperative in working out interpretations of data as we attempt to negotiate text for a book on our research. Although that is a project and process that is still underway, an interesting outcome of this interpretative process can be seen in the fact that individual team members have used the same pool of qualitative data to write up extremely different kinds of manuscripts based on their own disciplinary or professional inclinations. For example, Elana has written a piece on “confessions” drawing on her theoretical training in anthropology, and Bill contributed to it with his knowledge about the role of confessions in religion; one of the lawyers on the team has written a law review article which challenges myopic arguments generally made by feuding sides in legal debates about child sexual abuse; Karen has written an article on one of the trials we observed, using an experimental narrative voice; and Bill is working on policy implications drawing from his background in policy analysis. These individual articles, written out of the collected pool of data, have taken on a variety of literary and scholarly forms, are likely to find homes in very different kinds of scholarly journals, and will be made available to diverse audiences. Thus the interdisciplinary nature of the endeavor has allowed each of us to capitalize on the unique backgrounds we bring

to the table and to the process and promote different kinds of findings.

These different approaches may give rise to the question of how the different perceptions of our team members effect our research conclusions. There is no final way to answer this question based on our experience. Bill offers a comparison from another study, and a different methodological approach, to make this point clearer and to raise it more generally for research communities:

I have carried out multiple regression analysis of self-reported drinking and driving in a national survey sample. I did this with two women, a colleague and a student. A variable we focused on was gender; women, in fact, are much less likely to drink and drive and this difference is statistically significant. We report this result in the context of several previous studies of women's drinking and driving. If you ask me how I would have reported the empirical result had I carried out the research alone, the only appropriate answer is I don't know.

That is, of course, the only appropriate answer in qualitative research as well. We don't know how the diversity we observed influenced *all* of our conclusions. This does not mean that our experiences are not important for other researchers. We think they are. We have described how differently men and women, young and old are treated by community members with the obvious consequent limitations on the perception of any one person or even any homogeneous group.

In short, what we saw, what we learned, what we understand, and what we report reverberates in a complicated interplay of

images here and there, between and among, them and us, I and you. Through this experience we learned that doing community-based research with an interdisciplinary research team required us to engage in individual as well as collective reflexivity. In the end it is all very much like a house of mirrors where you can't help but wonder about the variations of realities that are shaped and formed by the process of walking through.

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