

Shrouded in Privilege: Reflexively Exploring a Troubling Experience in Team Research

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss my troubling experience as a novice researcher participating in my first qualitative research experience with a team of fellow Ph.D. colleagues. I will interrogate the tensions between the production of knowledge in this particular research project and my subjective and positional identities as a novice scholar. Qualitative research offers ways to minimize power differentials through an interrogation of invisible and unexplored assumptions. It may also further embed that which it seeks to uncover if researchers are not purposeful in its use. Unable to untangle the knot of critical insights produced by the usual reflexive process, I use poetry as a reflexive healing device to explore my learning throughout this research project.

Keywords: reflexivity, qualitative research, narrative, othering, poetry, voice.

As a social worker who has been working in the field for close to three decades and a social work educator for the last eight years, I struggle to use my voice as a junior scholar in a Ph.D. program. During my first participation in a qualitative study with a group of my peers, I became aware of the degree to which my positionality and subjectivity emerged as significant to my role as a researcher and the scholarship I create. Examining power is intrinsic to social work and seems inescapable in academia, and so I seek to deconstruct shifting and contentious issues of power and the epistemological invisibility that I encountered in the group project. I use poetry to assist me in making visible those emotional spaces that I struggled to express in an academic narrative, not as a way of finding answers but as a means to gain insight into my own epistemological orientation as a researcher. In doing so, I am attempting to unravel the “shroud of privilege” I have experienced.

The research project in question was a qualitative study of the perceptions of Masters of Social Work (MSW) students regarding the prospects for finding employment after graduation. Seventy-four students participated in the study, 59 students completed the online survey and 13 students participated in three focus groups. In the survey, we asked students to provide demographic information such as age ranges, gender (female identified, male identified, two spirited, androgynous and questioning), and we provided space for an open ended question on racial/ethnic background. We queried if the student was an international student holding a student visa. We asked about status in the MSW program and field of study in the program, without discussing the relevance and ethics of collecting this information. After deciding on the questions for both the surveys and focus groups, our next step was to collect the data from social work student participants. We asked three questions in the survey and focus groups:

- 1) What do you think the job prospects are after graduation?
- 2) What are your thoughts around employment after graduation?
 - a) What are some of your concerns?

- b) What are you looking forward to?
- 3) How are you preparing for employment after graduation?
- a) What are some of the creative strategies you are employing?

Throughout the project, our research group struggled with one another to find a way to capture the participants' perceptions of finding employment post MSW. We tried to construct a survey that collected socio-demographic information and developed questions for focus groups, without having conversations about the context of participants' perceptions. The interrogation of power and positionalities (gender, sexual orientation, ability, culture, class, age, and race) and their intersections remained unexamined in the research project. This lack of examination, I believe, was consequential in the outcome of the project. Using poetry and reflexive inner dialogue, I was able to reveal both my resistance to and complicity in maintaining the power dynamics that emerged in the research project.

Ipsa scientia potestas est
~**Knowledge Itself is Power ~ Sir Francis Bacon**

It is critical that we do not lose sight of the power that we hold as researchers when co-constructing and analyzing the narratives provided by research participants. Knowledge is a commodity: In research, the accounts from participants can be used as a product with tangible value. At universities, knowledge is leveraged to gain prestige, prizes, status, or income tied to rank (Kauppinen, 2014). For doctoral students, using the knowledge gained from research is usually the first step in becoming published and furthering a career in academia. I do not presume to grapple with the complexity of the use of knowledge as a commodity, but merely wish to point out that the need to compete for academic success while balancing issues of power, ethics, and politics can be a difficult tightrope for many novice researchers and academics to navigate.

According to Ackerly and True (2010), research has the particular power to create knowledge that pays attention to boundaries, marginalization, silences, and intersections. Qualitative research stresses the importance for researchers to pay attention to their relationship with power differentials and their own historical, sociopolitical positions (Ackerly & True, 2010; also see Hopkins, 2007). Researchers must examine what is excluded in the research and how difference is inadvertently constructed. The research process can embed and obscure epistemological orientations if researchers are not "meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivities" (Peskin, 1988, p. 23). The researchers' values and situatedness can shape the questions, assumptions, terminology, language, method, analysis, and conclusions in qualitative research (Plowman, 1995).

My Positionality and Subjectivity

In my own case, my positionality/situatedness is far from straightforward, as we know is true for many individuals. I come from historical, sociopolitical, and economic positions that are

simultaneously privileged and marginalized. Thus, as I engaged in this research project, my internal battle with my multiple positionalities became an intersecting web of struggles. I attempted to deal with this by putting some distance between my personal and professional selves throughout my participation in the research process. I came to realize that my personal narrative revealed an unanticipated, marginalized, embodied history which was obscured by the mask of my privileged, professional self (Sheridan, 2013). In my work as a practitioner and social work academic, I know that there are times when my ‘collusion and collision’ with the dominant discourse becomes difficult to articulate. My reflexive commentary comes from the treacherously negotiated territory between the complexities of my identified positionality and subjectivity and the intersection with my privilege, all of which became challenged in the research project.

Locating myself as embodying multiple subject positions will provide context to my struggle. I am a cis-gendered woman of colour, of East Indian and British descent. I identify as a lesbian, immigrant, single mother of an adult child; I recognize my working-class roots. I have had the opportunity to complete an MSW, to be employed as a social work practitioner and educator, and I am currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in social work in Canada. I am aware that the experiences I embody as the ‘Other’ intersect in fractious ways when my lived experience collides with identities that provide me privileged status as a Canadian citizen, an educated professional, and an educator in several institutions of higher learning. I struggle to embrace my identity as an academic whose politically contentious voice is given currency in academia due to my status as a doctoral student. As a woman who comes from a matriarchal family, I have a strong female voice. I also grew up in a family culture that embraced its colonizer’s identity. All of this has allowed me to see the world and my work through multiple lenses and intersecting perceptions.

This range of perspectives compelled me to be aware that my personal experiences both overlap, and influence the development of my identity as a researcher (Bochner, 1997). Throughout the process of this particular research project, my marginalized selves—those multiple dimensions of identity—were insistent on hearing the stories of participants whose life experiences and identities, like mine, sometimes proved to be a barrier to finding employment. However, the entangling of my identities meant that I felt the tug to have a voice as ‘Other’ and to hear the voices of Others. My marginalized selves also needed to be heard by my colleagues. McCorkle and Myers (2003) have suggested that it is important for researchers to reveal aspects of their identity and history. My academic voice, engaging with the structures of knowledge construction, attempted to silence my marginalized voice and the voice of research participants like me.

As someone who teaches about social justice, I believe that notions of positionality and subjectivity are critical in the research process. I ask these questions: Who am I in the research? What is my epistemological framework? What are my biases, values, barriers, hopes, and experiences, and how can each of these areas influence the process and outcome? What do I want as an outcome of this research? These foundational questions acknowledge the historical,

social, political, economic, and cultural positions that we each embody. They provide opportunities to be purposefully aware of our subjectivity and positionality. An awareness of our individual positionalities and subjectivities is foundational to revealing how we construct the world and our knowledge about our place in it (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Heron, 2007). Consequently, an awareness of these dimensions of ourselves in the social world is influential in the way we construct and conduct research.

A Troubling Reflexive Journey

The aim of my reflexive analysis here is not to discuss what was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in the research project. Rather, I seek to trouble the notions of power and voice, understanding that I am complicit in maintaining the dominant discourses in social work education. I feel the tensions because of the multiple subjectivities that I embody at the intersection of my identities.

The tensions among my various identities came to the fore as we, the research team, developed an online survey and focus-group questions. I believed that it was important to ask questions, in both the online survey and focus groups, about who these student participants were—such as their gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, employment, age, language, ethnicity and ability—and their thoughts about whether any of these dimensions were meaningful in attaining employment. This information would have given us some understanding of the experiences of participants and would have given participants further opportunity to provide context for the information requested, such as what they thought, felt, and did to assist themselves in gaining employment. I found myself struggling to have conversations with my research colleagues about the need for inclusive research practices for individuals whose voices were silenced. At the beginning of the project, I found I could speak but could not be heard. Subsequently, I found I could no longer speak. I sensed other members of the research team had varying degrees of reaction to my concerns, from overt disagreement to vocal support. However, discussions became stilted. There was more concern with tasks that needed to be performed and issues of timing and deadlines. I felt troubled, disappointed and frustrated about the lack of discussion concerning the potentials for marginalization in the research.

The continued exchange with colleagues became more difficult over a period of weeks. I became more resistant to participating in the research process and less engaged with my colleagues. I grappled with my apathy and distance. Having internalized the identity of Other, I struggled to find my place on the team. I found a collision of my identities and their intersections as I connected with the experience of the immigrant looking for a job with no Canadian experience, with the experience of a lesbian who is careful to not ‘come out’ in an interview. When interviewed, I have had to explain why my Anglo surname did not fit people’s association with the dark colour of my skin. I have wondered if that was the reason that I did not get the job. The impact of my identities had not been as visible to me until they were glossed over in the research team’s discussion. I began to have a clearer understanding of the significance of my disengagement from the research and the team. Later, I would come to realize that my reluctance to articulate within myself the significance of my multiple identities and lived experience in

marginalized contexts meant that my struggle with the construction of the research would remain unrecognizable to other members of the research team.

The research team wanted to employ focus groups as a tool to gather the data from the research participants. The intent of focus groups is to encourage participants to discuss their opinions in an environment that is non-judgmental, respectful and comfortable (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The assumption in using focus groups is that individuals are able to express their feelings and thoughts. However, a thorough discussion by the research team was needed about the complexity and application of the focus group method (Webb & Kavern, 2001; Halcomb et al., 2007). As a team of novice researchers, there was in fact, very little discussion about the involvement of the facilitators in the focus group, ways of asking probing questions, and prompting participants to expand on their answers. There was no examination by the research team about the use of focus groups with individuals who come from different social contexts, and how their social contexts might impact their perceptions about finding employment (Harris et al., 2004). Social contexts of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, culture and ethnicity can construct and reproduce differences if not attended to in the research process (Hill-Collins, 2004), and can re-centre mainstream marginalizing discourses. I felt uncomfortable, because not providing opportunities for our participants to talk about their social identities would be asking questions from a place of privilege.

Discourse can create the Other, not only in the ideas that are given legitimacy with what is said (Rossiter, 2005), but what gets left out, which can “both constrain and enable subjectivity” (Kulik, 2005, p. 616). By extension, I had concerns about the lack of discussion regarding the subjectivity and positionality of the participants, and of each of us as researchers, as well as about the potential unintended impact on the research. My participation in this step of the research was disruptive for me. I wondered if we were creating an illusion of inclusivity based on the well-intended but misguided determination to be blind to difference.

Prior to the focus group, my co-facilitator expressed the need to be objective and not interfere in the focus group by asking probing questions or prompting students to expand on their answers, so that we did not influence the conversations and discussion. Freire (1970/2012) stated that “one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity” (p. 50). I contemplated how I, as a facilitator in this focus group, participated in creating a rigid framework that constrained what could be articulated in the group discussion. The artificial prohibition of prompting participants to provide more depth in their answers resulted in a lack of engagement with each other. The focus group felt more like individual interviews taking place in one room which, according to Kitzinger & Barbour (1999), is different from the purpose of focus groups. The participants completed the task—answering rigid, uncritical questions. In my opinion, conversations were flat and lacked depth. Meanwhile, I suspected the presence of unspoken voices and unrevealed narratives. I doubted whether the questions allowed for voices that were marginalized and whether these questions provided opportunities to make invisible narratives visible (Ackerly & True, 2010). We were unwittingly participating in the “god trick,” i.e. assuming an all-encompassing, unlocated perspective (Haraway, 1988, p. 581).

The focus group comprised three individuals of colour and two facilitators who could have been perceived as being members of racialized groups. However, the only discussion of difficulties in attaining and maintaining employment post MSW, was initiated by a racialized female participant about whether she was going to be able to move into management, although she made no explicit connections with her lived experience or multiple identities. I speculated about the relevance of these connections and intersections. I wondered if the focus groups were carried out in a way that made it difficult to delve into the muddy waters of context, positionality, or politics. Did participants get the impression that they were to answer the questions and only the questions in a prescriptive way based on our detached role in the process? Did their silence about the context of their thoughts and feelings have any particular meaning? Or did the participants think the facilitators admitted only certain types of discourses and not others? Ashby (2011) suggests that the information provided in focus groups is dependent on the questions asked. Participants do not provide information and perspectives if not queried by the researcher. I questioned if it was a conversation of “us” with “us.” I felt we were looking at the collection of the respondents’ thoughts and feelings as though each of them came from the same space—a level playing field—a space in which we imagined that everyone shared our own level of privilege. This would have meant that much of what was not spoken by the participants might be invisible to us as the researchers.

As I read through the transcripts from the three focus groups, I struggled with the missing narratives of those who identified as racialized, those who came from sexually diverse communities, those who experienced mental health issues, and those with disabilities that were left invisible. Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, to not be neutral (Freire, 1970/2012). I felt the unease of knowing I was contributing to maintaining a discourse from the centre by not attending to more complex and subtle issues of dominance-induced blindness in the construction of the focus groups. I needed a way to express my feelings, thoughts, and reactions as I worked to make sense of my lived experience in response to the research, so that it had less influence on my own ability to engage with my colleagues and the research. I chose to move from this place of unease, silence, and disconnection by engaging in a process of active reflexivity.

Although there is a diversity of conceptualizations of the term (D’Cruz et al, 2007), I use the term reflexivity rather than reflection because sometimes, the term ‘reflection’ is written about as the process of reviewing a series of acts, occurrences or decisions and appraising the associated outcome (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). Some definitions of the term reflection have its underlying foundation in positivist epistemology, a way of looking in the mirror and having your reflection look back at you without examination. I prefer a conceptualization of reflexivity that is distinctly different; it has underlying foundations in critical epistemology and clearer connection to praxis—a means to unsettling marginalizing world views and the active struggle against its maintenance. Miehl and Moffat (2000) suggest that reflexivity is concerned with how emotions can be enacted in practice [and research] and interrogates commonly accepted assumptions of discourse, knowledge, and their interplay with power (Taylor & White, 2000).

The collaborative congeniality of the research team decreased from relative safety to a continuing feeling of disengagement as issues of power remained implicit and invisible in the research. I felt blocked. I internalized the silences and absences of voices of difference. I became selectively mute; I needed to be reflexive about my own sense of identity (McCorkle & Myers, 2003). My experience of complex, intersecting identities as contradictory and paradoxical pushed me to confront my ambiguous loyalties to the group (Kirk & Ozakawa-Rey, 2004). I realized that as a racialized person trying to make visible the racializing experience, I practised the very opposite of what I was trying to achieve, namely, making visible the voices from the periphery. I recognized that by not speaking up, I was complicit in the silencing.

As we moved to discussions about publishing the study, participants' stories became commodified; they were now data, which had the currency to be used as publishable text (Kauppinen, 2014). For us, as researchers, getting published was a particular way of attaining status in the academic world. The research team began to discuss whose name would come first in an article, and at which conferences findings could be shared. Collecting participants' stories was no longer about a way of bringing their thoughts, feelings, and actions to life through an article; instead the stories became a vehicle for the self-serving objective of becoming published without understanding the impact of the research on marginalized and vulnerable groups (Ackerly & True, 2010).

As the project progressed, I distanced myself from the unspoken narratives of the research participants that I continued to imagine so that I could function as part of the research group. I realized that I was avoiding conversations that were uncomfortable but that occupied my mind throughout the day. I understood that my subjectivity was engaged (Peshkin, 1988), and that I needed to pay attention to my feelings of puzzlement, disconnection, and discontent. I needed to pay attention to the sensations of uneasiness. I drew from a workshop on poetry that was part of this same research course. I began my first foray into writing poetry as a way to express what I had not been able to express in any other way.

Finding My Voice in Poetry

Poetry provides the space for emotional and cognitive domains, and for feelings of ambivalence. It is a way to give voice to lived experiences, a way to have conversations with one's environment, and a way to engage with notions that are difficult to articulate (Raingruber, 2004). Poetry can be a liberating force, through which words become freed from the construction of reality; it tells a much richer story (Norman, 2009). Poets can explore varying degrees of intensity of emotion that are difficult to articulate in any other way. According to Norman (2009), poetry is the language of the mind, body, and soul—the whole-hearted being. Bringing together multiple kinds of texts—including poetry, storytelling and qualitative scholarly writing—can better deconstruct some of the complex, layered questions social workers contemplate in both academia and practice (Transken, 2005). Poetry can be used as a way to be actively reflexive about critical moments in time that can be paralyzing (Lapum, 2008).

I had never before used poetry as a means of self-expression. However, given that I had neither the words nor the safety to share my thoughts and feelings during the process of working with the research team, poetry made it possible for me to convey the more visceral reactions that I encountered, and to express complex emotional experiences brought forth from my participation in the research project. It gave me the freedom to express myself in fragmented and impressionistic ways, whereas the traditional forms of academic writing in English require that thinking and writing be made coherent, explicit, connected, and linear.

Shrouded in Privilege

Do we miss the world of colour shrouded from our view?
Do we miss the world around that our privilege makes seem so untrue?
Can we feel the wind a-whirling as we lie in protected arms?
Does a doctorate degree protect from the menacing phantom of the realms?
Do we hear voices crying as we hide behind a veil?
Does status that obscure shield us from voices crying out in pain?
Do we hear the voiceless crying? Does it matter anymore?
As we scale heights of academy, do the voices come no more?
Am I complicit in the weaving of the mantle that I wear?
Can my voice remain unspoken; can my complicity endure?
The question supposes that the answer is left unexplained
The answer is explicit, and complicit I remain
As I sit in voiceless silence hiding behind my pain
An enraged voice of privilege remains unspoken in the frame
Do I fear menacing glances and the phantoms of the main?
Am I complicit in the shrouding of the mantle of the pain?
I share voices of the Other and one I can supposedly hear
My voice may be strong but it veils so many fears
Does the privilege we possess grope the grave shrouded by despair?
Of voices, we hear not of the endeavour that we share
“I’m not brave enough” my voice says, “I’m too tired to pay the fare”
I teach the rhetoric of social work. Will that really truly suffice?
Many questions remaining much confusion and need, for repair
The mantle of our privilege is the death shroud, not a cloak of comfort and amends
A cold, malevolent presence masks us from the world
Hiding pain, despair, the voiceless, colour, strength, and love
It is a place we must be part of as we move to higher spheres
The grief of moving beyond means not forgetting whom we hear.

Unravelling the Layers of the Shroud

As a novice reflexive researcher, I continue to ask the questions that have been asked by others before me. What is knowledge? Who is served in the creation of knowledge? Who has the power

in the creation of that knowledge? I ask these questions not to find any one truth but to explore the multiple truths that we as researchers bring to our research. I learned that I have an uncomfortable relationship with research. This can be a barrier to engagement, blocking me from working with participants' stories if I have to navigate my own experiences of being part of the Other.

I have learned that I need to be aware of my own history and context and give time and energy to the process of active reflexivity. Writing "Shrouded in Privilege" became critical to the examination of my role in the research project, offering the opportunity to process my own reflexive learning and providing a voice that would otherwise have remained silent and troubled.

In the process of writing this article, I have become more aware that articulating my feelings sometimes relies on the very constructions that I am trying to resist—silos of experience based on a single identity, polarities of right and wrong, commodification of knowledge and silenced voices, self and Other.

I still struggle, yet with a more nuanced understanding of having a double consciousness. As conceptualized by W. E. B. DuBois (1903) in *The Souls of Black Folk*, having more than one social identity challenges the ability to develop a sense of self. I learned that my reflexivity and this research have made uncomfortable bedfellows (Reicherzer, Shavel & Patton, 2013; Villenas, 1996). But attending to this discomfort has been meaningful.

The more I engage with my reflexivity, positionality, and learning, I slowly understand that this is a life-long process of critical engagement, with no comfortable closure (Kumsa et al, 2014). I have a compelling need to situate myself in my research, not as a confessional or a coming out, but to understand the power I hold as an academic and researcher. As challenging and painful as it was attending to my positionality and subjectivity, it has been pivotal to my learning about myself as a scholar. I need to continue to explore how to address ethical research practices and minimize issues of power in relationship to how knowledge is constructed. For me, research and reflexivity is a continuous, critically engaging process that is both messy and profound.

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