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Exploring Identity: What We Do as Qualitative Researchers

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Exploring Identity: What We Do as Qualitative Researchers

Abstract

Although there has been much discussion about distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research, our purpose here is not to revive those conversations, but instead to attempt to explore and articulate our identities as researchers who practice in the qualitative tradition. Using autoethnography as our methodology, we as six researchers from various social science disciplines and at various career stages engaged in focused introspection by responding individually to two questions: who am I as a qualitative researcher; and how did I come to that understanding? This reflection led to discussions of those elements and experiences that have shaped the way we see ourselves in the context of our research. The question of “identity” evolved into a discussion about “what we do.” During our data analysis, six themes emerged, representing our group’s responses: (a) building epistemology, (b) making/doing good research, (c) as an art or craft, (d) why does qualitative research need legitimating? (e) qualitative research as a social bridge, and (f) stewards of people’s lived experience. We conclude by reflecting on the value of building a community of practice among qualitative researchers.

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Researcher Self-Identity, Auto-Ethnography, Epistemology

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Although there has been much discussion about distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research, our purpose here is not to revive those conversations, but instead to attempt to explore and articulate our identities as researchers who practice in the qualitative tradition. Using autoethnography as our methodology, we as six researchers from various social science disciplines and at various career stages engaged in focused introspection by responding individually to two questions: who am I as a qualitative researcher; and how did I come to that understanding? This reflection led to discussions of those elements and experiences that have shaped the way we see ourselves in the context of our research. The question of “identity” evolved into a discussion about “what we do.” During our data analysis, six themes emerged, representing our group’s responses: (a) building epistemology, (b) making/doing good research, (c) as an art or craft, (d) why does qualitative research need legitimating? (e) qualitative research as a social bridge, and (f) stewards of people’s lived experience. We conclude by reflecting on the value of building a community of practice among qualitative researchers. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Researcher Self-Identity, Auto-Ethnography, Epistemology

Introduction

There has been much discussion about the perceived distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research. Although in some circles this conversation persists, our purpose here is not to revisit or engage with this discussion. Rather, we attempt to articulate our identities as researchers who practice in the qualitative tradition. We, as group of qualitative scholars from a variety of disciplines at a large Canadian university, have decided to do this, in part, in response to Morse’s (2006) suggestion that qualitative researchers must “start anew, reexamining what we are doing and why, starting with the assumption that together we are creating a new discipline, one that will make a new, different, and significant contribution to developing knowledge” (p. 94). This paper is an exploration of that focus.

Context

One of the unique features of qualitative research is the premise of the role of “researcher” within qualitative inquiry. Unlike other forms of research that seek independent “realities” through “objective” observation, qualitative research locates “the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2) and acknowledges that there is a “relationship between the researcher and the researched” (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014, p. 8). Here, findings are mediated and negotiated between researcher and participants, where the researcher strives to make her/his assumptions transparent. The result is not value-free objectivity, but what Ritchie and Lewis term “empathic neutrality” (Ormston et al., 2014, p. 8). Research is therefore co-constructed by researchers and participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Qualitative inquiry depends on this idea, making it critical for the researcher to engage in reflexive practices which call upon her/him to become aware of her/his role in the research process; thereby becoming aware of “what allows

them to see as well as what may inhibit their seeing” (Watt, 2007, p. 82). In fact, this is seen as a central trait, unique in its tradition, and critically important to qualitative researchers.

Reflexivity is well-covered in the qualitative literature; however, it is often presented as a process by which the researcher understands her/his *outer* “world view” in relation to the data and engages in certain steps (list your background and relationship to the study, journaling and field notes, understanding the literature... etc.). What is virtually absent from the discussion is the interplay of the researcher’s *inward view*, or introspection, with the reflexivity process. This kind of introspection is equally important in the practice of qualitative research; despite this, there is a clear lack of thorough discussion regarding this process which may lead researchers to engage in fully exploring their identity as a qualitative researcher. Identity then is considered to be both an entity and an ongoing, dynamic process whereby individuals develop, evaluate, and re-evaluate their mental self-image in the context of others in their environment (Chatman, Eccles, & Malanchuk, 2005). Lavis (2010) argues that within social constructionist epistemologies, identity is viewed as a “fragment, likely to be one of many components, both socially and culturally constructed and negotiated, which make up ‘self,’ that is, our understanding of who we are in the world in relation to others” (p. 319). Overall, one’s identity is shaped through multiple and reciprocal identities including racial, gender, political, career and religious identities (Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999). Identity can foster both positive and negative feelings - of belonging, connectedness, self-confidence, or not. Identity as a shifting, ongoing process is a powerful concept in qualitative research. This concept suggests that identity is both static, as well as a process set in a context. Yet, the process of introspection about one’s identity in the context of research has not often been explored as relevant to the researchers themselves. So, on the one hand we began this project through our common interest in “identity” as qualitative researchers, but as we engaged with the topic of “identity,” a new process unfolded which we are describing in this paper.

Given the emphasis, in particular by post-modernists, on negotiating “realities” through ongoing power struggles and socially-constructed “truths” it is reasonable to expect qualitative researchers to question, “Who am I?” (as we did), in the context of a continuing inquiry and in order to shape understanding (Dryden, 2013). Investigating, embracing, and challenging one’s own values, beliefs and experiences is critical to how one perceives her/himself as a researcher; (i.e., developing a research identity). In the pursuit of understanding and the need to create relationships with participants and other researchers as well, this “identity” intersects with the paradigm from which one conducts research/inquiry (Ponterotto & Grieger, 1999).

Lavis (2010) argues that multiple research identities are required to meet both researcher and participant needs: those required of the researcher by participants, and formed by the researcher to enhance interview success, but also the success of understanding the data through data analysis and finally, the writing up of findings. Lavis (2010) purports that our “self” is comprised of fragments that come together through interaction with others, constructed through negotiation and context. Further, during qualitative inquiry, researchers can experience new identities, including those that are unintended or undesired (Lavis, 2010). As such, identity is revealed in context as something “performed” by the researcher through dynamic interaction with others, including the participants and the research question. The researcher desires to extend the interview and acquire information to further knowledge acquisition; the participant desires to present her/himself in a way that has meaning for her/him, may appeal to the researcher, and fit the research question. The researcher may experience tensions by having to take on different and sometimes incongruent identities with different participants. Such a complex dilemma does not invite easy solutions, however others including Briggs (2002) and Henwood, Griffin, and Phoenix (1998) pose that developing an ontological and epistemological stand point can provide an anchor from which to reflectively consider one’s practice (Lavis, 2010). The word “practice”

is key, because in the need to address shifting identities, qualitative researchers are certainly engaged in that as part of the practice of conducting qualitative research.

And so, we return to the process of introspection as invaluable for this exploration of our identities as qualitative researchers. Introspection in qualitative research has been demonstrated to be an important process for emerging, as well as more senior researchers. Reissetter et al. (2004) found that PhD counselling students experienced paradigm shifts after encountering qualitative research. The qualitative approach was not merely viewed as a different method but as a powerful world view which allowed them to experience congruence between qualitative methods and their own beliefs, resulting in an affirmation of their research identities. Identity is a construct and a process of identification that presents as complex and compelling, and with reflexive elements that enhance the qualitative research process from beginning to end. Engaging in this introspection is an important part of becoming and being a qualitative researcher at any career stage, as even more senior researchers understand that longevity and time add new dynamics to their identities, and to their interactions with participants and the subject matter.

In this paper, we explore this dynamic. Six scholars engaged in focused introspection in order to explore our identities as qualitative researchers. We determined that in order to do this, it would be useful to reflect on and study ourselves to learn what we thought were significant components in our individual and collective qualitative researcher identities. Our initial questions about identity led to an unfolding process, which unbeknownst to us at the time, mirrors the literature above. We will describe this process and the outcome in this paper.

Project Background

We are all members of the Qualitative Research Group (QRG) at the University of Manitoba. This group, established in 2008, has more than 200 researchers representing at least 16 different academic units across the university, Canada and some internationally. Its vision is “to connect qualitative research findings to real world outcomes both locally and internationally, working towards positive change in the community and a better understanding of the world around us” (Qualitative Research Group, 2015).

In May 2015, the QRG held a Qualitative Café, where a variety of researchers, including students and faculty members, came together to share their experiences as qualitative researchers and to learn from each other. Several themes were identified as discussion points for roundtables. During this day, several of us who were part of a group discussing the theme, “qualitative research and identity,” decided to embark on a collective research project after the day was completed. This group came to be known as the “Special Project” group and was comprised of the following people in alphabetical order, after the first author: Dr. K. Roger, Dr. T. Bone, Dr. T. Heinonen, Dr. K. Schwartz, Dr. J. Slater, and Mr. S. Thakrar.

What brought us together initially was a common interest in our identity as qualitative researchers. Some of us had begun our research careers as quantitative researchers and became qualitative (or more qualitatively oriented) researchers, some of us had identified as mixed method researchers previously, as well one team member was a graduate student, and several started out as and have remained qualitative researchers. We found that our diverse professional and disciplinary backgrounds yielded rich discussion and debate, bringing depth to this work.

Our first group discussion in May 2015 began with the recognition that some fields in academia continue to privilege quantitative research over qualitative research. Despite this reality, each of us was deeply committed to conducting qualitative research. We began to ask each other why. Because of this discussion, we decided it would be fruitful to further investigate and explore ourselves as qualitative researchers. The purpose of our work was to learn what links us together and what sets us apart from one another and/or from other types of researchers.

Methodology

This work has resulted in an autoethnographic study (Ellis, 2007). Traditionally, autoethnography brings together the study of people from one cultural or social group and biography (Sharp, Riera, & Jones, 2012). The researcher(s) usually writes a narrative about hers/himself as the study subject in relation to life experiences or events (e.g., Averett, 2009; Cutforth, 2013; Hamdan, 2012; Scott, 2013; Whitinui, 2014). To study ourselves as qualitative researchers, we engaged in an individual process of questioning, reflecting, and writing, recalling our beginnings in qualitative research, what committed us to qualitative work, and what we discovered over time, all with the intention of responding to the initial question, “Who are we as qualitative researchers?”

Methods

As we first sat together in discussion with others at the Qualitative Café, we realized that we knew little about our own identities as qualitative researchers. Our curiosity was piqued by this topic, and after a review of the literature on the qualitative researcher identity, we realized that there was a significant gap in how a qualitative researcher’s identity is developed. Through discussion over email, background articles were found and shared, and research questions were formulated. In order to explore further our qualitative research experiences and views, we asked each of our group members to write 3 to 5 pages focusing on the following questions:

- a) Who am I as a qualitative researcher?
- b) How did I come to that understanding?

Although the questions themselves provided a specific focus, they served only as a preliminary and central launching point, which enabled us to individually reflect on the elements and experiences that have shaped how we see ourselves in the context of our research. As we discuss below, the question of “identity” evolved into a discussion about “what we do.” This third question emerged as a response to our autobiographical process answering the two questions above.

Once our individual pages were written, they were circulated electronically to all group members. Upon reading each other’s documents it was clear that each auto-ethnography contained rich content from people with different fields, diverse research topics, and at different stages of development as qualitative researchers.

Analysis began from an ideographic perspective where each of us first analyzed our own accounts by identifying 3 to 5 thematic statements from our own documents. We then met together to present and discuss each other’s stories and statements. The individual thematic statements were then recorded verbatim on flip chart paper and we discussed the meaning of each statement, allowing authors to emphasize the significance these statements had on the development of their identity. A debate followed on how the thematic statements could be grouped together. Thematic groupings ultimately emerged, which were then collapsed, aggregated, expanded, and bracketed. Discussion continued until initial consensus about all themes had been reached. Rather than numbers, letters, or words, symbols were initially used to represent each theme to better help us organize them conceptually (e.g., a purple circle, a yellow triangle). We decided to use these symbols for their randomness and to move towards higher level concepts about identity rather than solely personal narratives. Using numbers may have led to an unconscious ranking, which we did not want. Similarly, word titles or short-form letters might have prematurely assigned or assumed a meaning, which we also wanted to avoid. Eight initial thematic groupings were identified.

Each group member was then asked to individually read through all the stories in order to identify higher level descriptors for each of the eight symbols. This process allowed us to apply our own unique lenses to make sense of the experiences of other group members. These descriptors were precursors to the final theme names, which were ultimately agreed upon through a consensus approach, and reported in this paper. We were willing to make room for our differences by not deleting any important themes, to learn from each other when something was new, and of course to agree when that was apparent or natural given our individual and team analysis. The findings discussed below reflect both a symbiotic evolution of our team's discussion, as well as a recognition that some of us aligned more closely with some themes than others. No themes were deleted or left out when someone felt they were highly relevant.

Two of our authors then wrote descriptions of each theme for the findings section and presented it at the next group meeting. We agreed that these paragraphs captured the themes well; however, there was editing, revisions, and some debate. At this point, each of the authors revisited their documents looking for rich quotes which embodied each of the new major themes. These were sent to one of the authors who aggregated the quotes and chose which best explained what had been written. The group read and discussed the quotes that were chosen and agreed that they captured the intended meaning of the theme and the participants.

As this was a co-constructed autoethnographic project, traditional institutional ethical review was not required (Ellis, 2007). All of the researchers were participants and authors, and there were no third party "others" revealed in the data. Nonetheless, there were ethical considerations that were taken into account during all phases of the research to ensure all researchers/participants had a continued willingness to engage in the project. These included: having clearly articulated goals and objectives for the process; treating consent as a dynamic process throughout the course of the project; practicing "process consent" (Ellis, 2007, p. 23) through regular checks to ensure researchers/participants still wanted to participate; anticipating ethical issues; and providing room for dissent. All participants were experienced researchers who understood the research ethics process and understood their right to withdraw at any time.

Rigour was ensured through the development and adherence to a research audit trail (Carcary, 2009) and having all researchers/participants participate in all stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The individual and collective qualitative research experience of the participants enhanced theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Member checking was employed to guarantee validity of quotes, and all researchers/participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on all data and written documentation at multiple stages, including this paper. Although unique to our group's decisions and processes, the data analysis methods we used were not dissimilar from those used in other types of qualitative research projects. Themes that were common and divergent in our narratives easily transformed into a collaborative group autoethnography project that drew from our various lenses of experience and knowledge. Multiple narratives became the focus in our group autoethnography, although individuals' accounts are included to enrich and deepen the themes discussed. Comparisons and contrasts are highlighted and explored as a means to raise new questions and refine ideas, generating "mediational spaces" (Valencia & Herath, 2015). Moore, Scaduzio, Plump, and Geist-Martin (2013) referred to their collaborative autoethnography on faculty-student mentorship as offering fruitful opportunities to share ideas, generate new research, and refine identity. This study is such an example.

Findings and Discussion

While we began with the focus on "identity and qualitative research," our process discussed above resulted in themes which were really much more action oriented and reflected what we did, and subsequently, how we valued what we "were doing." The question of identity

became one of “doing,” and so the themes emerging from our analysis reflect “doing” more than “identity.” Given that this is an autoethnography, we honored the process of emerging themes and our results, doing so in a way that also reflected the gap we had identified in the literature. In our case, it turned out that “being” a qualitative researcher hinged deeply on “doing” qualitative research. Six themes emerged from our introspection about who we are and why we do qualitative research that are as follows: (a) building epistemology, (b) making/doing good research, (c) as an art or craft, (d) why does qualitative research need legitimating? (e) qualitative research as a social bridge, and (f) stewards of people’s lived experience.

Building Epistemology

The purpose of qualitative research over time has been to explore daily lived experiences that describe and define our social and cultural worlds, largely giving precedence to those voices which have traditionally been unheard or under-represented. In this context, being a qualitative researcher is grounded in a deeper philosophical approach, not only to conducting research, but also to being a researcher and person in the world. The kind of research we conduct and the ways in which we conduct that research is often predicated on how we think about and live in the world. As Ponterotto and Grieger (1999) argue,

For an academic scholar, a crucial sense of identity revolves around one’s research identity. This identity defines how one perceives oneself as a researcher, with strong implications for which topics and methods will be important to the researcher. Naturally, one’s research identity both influences, and is influenced by, the paradigm from which one operates. (p. 52)

We are grounded in the kinds of stories we tell, how we tell them, what we think of as truths, how we imagine the future given what we know today, as well as how we see the implicit and sometimes explicit knowledge these experiences represent. As such, the kind of research we do is likely philosophically rooted in our daily non-research lives as well.

As qualitative researchers, we are interested in understanding the gaps, interpretations and assumptions that surround our daily experiences as researchers/people in the world. As academics, we are interested in how knowledge is both produced and then represented to others. One participant shared that,

The idea of the search for a single truth or reality did not ring true to me in the context of my own philosophical beliefs... Berger and Luckman’s discussion of the socially constructed world made much more sense to me. How do we know what we know? There are things we say are real and true. But how do we know these things or ideas are real and true? I could envision this theory underpinning the work I wanted to do.

This thinking echoes the findings of Reisetter et al. (2004), particularly their discussion of the “affirmations.” The authors write:

These participants described three major experiences that formed their insights about this qualitative inquiry. First, all noted a paradigm shift, a powerful recognition that the qualitative approach was not simply a different method, but also a complete reconstruction of their views of research. Second, they recognized the congruence they felt between their own beliefs and the precepts of qualitative research. Third, they took pleasure in their emerging senses of themselves as

academic researchers in the qualitative research tradition, essentially affirming their research identities. (p. 8)

There are many ways that qualitative research can allow for emerging questions and individual narratives – but overall it is most often positioned against the “reality” of large population samples where individual idiosyncrasies and anomalies are ignored, and where an average is seen as appropriate and normalizing in a good way. Building an epistemology for qualitative researchers means that an average is not necessarily the goal. Rather, we seek the original, the unique and even the quirky stories, which become new ways of looking at what is real and what daily lived experience can be like.

Building epistemology through narratives and stories in a systematic research-oriented way becomes a refined practice and a true craft in which and through which qualitative methodologies are central. The task of building epistemology is central to qualitative research, and it is in tandem with the belief we have regarding what knowledge is, how it is created, who creates it and how it should be heard, understood, and represented. In this way, we came to understand that “identity and qualitative research” was tied intimately with “doing” – seeking, documenting, listening, and interpreting individual narratives to build epistemology.

Making/Doing Good Research

One participant shared, “in our technology-driven, fast pasted world it is difficult to find people to listen. Qualitative research gives us time and space to engage in true dialogue.” Our team discovered that we have a specific approach to gathering, hearing, and making sense of stories. This approach of listening defined for us what we experienced as “good” research – without excluding other forms of “good” research. In our view and experience, good research touches on and fulfills the intention to uncover and document unique daily lived experiences, including those that may be perceived as different or “othered,” marginalized or under-represented. This may not reflect all qualitative researchers, however, as participants in this autoethnography, doing qualitative research moves us to explore how the words people use reflect how they think about their world. In fact, qualitative researchers strive to discover, hear, and document these stories and interpretations because it feels “wholesome” and good to do so on a more integral level. It might be argued that disrupting the narrative of the median, the average and the normal, so common in quantitative research, is central to what qualitative researchers strive to represent. One participant shared, “qualitative encounters don’t necessarily allow me to completely “walk in the shoes of others,” however, they can open windows through which I can glimpse, build empathy, reframe prior thinking and then bring those techniques to future work.” Another said,

... for me, qualitative research is about learning more. I wanted to explore the depths of the experiences simple surveys or questionnaires, or secondary data could not provide. I wanted to provide an opportunity to develop, as Faulkner and Faulkner (2009) said, “...knowledge where little or none exists.” (p. 5)

In acknowledging that “we live in a world of norms,” Davis (2006, p. 3) presents a fascinating account of the origins of the word “normal.” The term only came into popular usage in the 1840s and Davis argues that it is “less a condition of human nature than it is a feature of a certain kind of society” (p. 3). To better understand the idea, he turns to statistics, which were originally used to collect information about the State. The connection between statistics and human beings was made in the early 1820s in the context of medical statistics “to illustrate the natural history of health and disease” (Davis, p. 4). Soon Quetelet coined the term “l’homme

moyen” – the “average man.” Davis (2006) argues that there were significant social implications to this new concept, notably the justification of an “average class” and “bourgeois hegemony” (p. 5).

The impact of statistical norms or averages is still very much in evidence today. There is an expectation that people ought to fall within the category of normal. “We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above average” (Davis, 2006 p. 3). Using statistical terminology, those people who fall outside of the expected range are considered to deviate from the mean. Moreover, we tend to extrapolate this statistical term into creating identities for some people. So, those who do not meet our expectations might be described as deviant. Such stereotypical descriptions often result in practices of discrimination, marginalization, alienation, and exclusion.

What does the definition of average have to do with doing good research? We argue that when researchers define good research purely by quantitative measures, valuable knowledge and experiences get lost. We are unable to adequately capture the experiences of a wide variety of people living vastly diverse yet interesting and worthy lives. We become bound by hegemonic discourses that prevent us from seeing and valuing a range of difference. Qualitative research methodologies and methods allow us to rigorously interrogate, understand and mobilize what might otherwise be hidden and never come to light.

As an Art or Craft

We argue, given our findings, that qualitative research is a more complex and multidimensional space than presumed by those who are not trained in it or do not practice it. We agree with Dryden (2013) when he says, “the researcher’s identity is continuously shifting, affected by an ongoing ‘relationship to the world’ that potentially alters in the course of the research itself and in every other moment of experience” (p. 45).

Based on our own anecdotal evidence, many quantitative researchers think that qualitative research starts and ends with “the interview,” where participants are asked a series of questions, and then themes are simply selected when they represent the most dominant voice or an idea which by majority is focused on, found, and written up. The link to theory or a social consciousness and social change is simply not required, delineated, or sought in this more simplistic caricature of qualitative research.

However, the need for a philosophical underpinning and a social/conceptual theoretical reference point is crucial. Such a need is contrary to “objectivity” and “evidence-based” research, which favours neutrality, and seeks an average which is seen to reflect reality. Social change is inspired by and reflects minority voices, special interest groups and those previously ignored. To ensure those voices are heard qualitative researchers seek to integrate creative methods into their inquiry to best represent a wide range of knowledge and experiences. This approach can be more powerful, more expressive and can delve deeper into the topic of inquiry than other forms of research.

One participant spoke of her various qualitative research identities, such as “voyeur” because of the “intense pleasure” she receives from “hearing other people’s ‘stories.’” She said,

And I like that word [stories] because it applies to everyone; everyone has stories. We like to use more sophisticated words – “narrative,” “discourse,” and that’s ok, except I think they somehow remove us – diminish the humanness of the qualitative interaction, creating an exclusive vocabulary... So perhaps instead of “voyeur,” I could call myself the less provocative term “listener,” or “story

catcher,” like the “song catchers” of the past who would travel around collecting folk songs.

Inherent in that learning, in that intensity comes emotion. It may be the emotion attached to listening to stories through one-on-one interviews, or through focus groups. It may be the emotion attached to viewing pictures taken through a photo-voice project. It may even be the emotion attached to stories told through works of art. Regardless of method, to conduct qualitative research requires skill and creativity; some define it as a “craft.”

Why Does Qualitative Research Need Legitimizing?

The nature of quantitative research has become so common and matter of fact, that its limitations and methods are not queried often enough. For example, when variables are named and renamed in favor of a position, they can be collapsed and merged or ignored. When outliers and original results are ignored, a kind of knowledge is being created which depends on blindness to the decisions and procedures in place. The many ways in which mixed methods can be used are still in the early stages of development. At present, the process of mixed methods is often used to simply cluster two fields of inquiry, without much thought to design.

Why, then, does much of the conversation on quantitative versus qualitative methodology focus on the need to legitimize qualitative research? Many quantitative researchers do not train themselves, understand, or read about how to do qualitative research well. They often have teams where few people have qualitative expertise. They also rely on historical notions that privilege quantitative research as legitimate and where qualitative research is disparaged as an add-on that gives them a better but more subjective picture of what the quantitative data have already said. The many strengths of the qualitative research processes are ignored, including: (a) the degree to which rigor is developed, (b) the theoretical thoroughness underpinning or framing the research, and (c) the interpretative voice as a legitimate social and cultural backing. To misunderstand qualitative research acts as a de-legitimizing factor.

At the same time, qualitative researchers undertake this research because they experience a kind of richness and fulfillment in this work. As one participant expressed, it is about “finding pride in my work.” In this way, qualitative researchers must depend on an inner voice, which is sometimes contradicted by the norms and structures of other kinds of research. One participant discussed the issue of legitimizing qualitative research by reflecting on her thoughts of qualitative research as a student. At the time she thought,

I could never be a researcher because I saw the “problems” of society differently than what was being taught – and I didn’t see myself or others I knew well represented in textbooks. These representations often seemed like superficial caricatures of otherwise more meaningful problems, guiding us through the topsoil of people’s realities, almost like a kind of shallow brushing over of realities that I couldn’t align with or see in the lives of those around me... If someone said they were “sad” on a scale of 1-10 in a survey...how could this be compared so someone else’s scale of 1-10? Shouldn’t we ask them to find out more what the daily context of their lives was, the influences of their sadness... Narratives and stories felt emotionally more secure and reliable for these reasons, and perhaps even somehow more honest.

Funding structures, promotion categories, and metrics of success are often designed to reflect participation in large-scale, quantitative studies. There is an urgent need for those who are new to research, and certainly new to qualitative research, to find their voices, and to experience

authority in their work. In this way, we can link the building of epistemology to this experience of needing to legitimize a method which holds many of the same features as quantitative research – but with a different outcome. Stories can be collected in a scholarly way and documented in the context of a systematic approach that relies on a resilient and sinewy theoretical backing. We must be vigilant in arguing that subjective data can and does contribute towards new epistemologies, even as quantitative researchers believe their research is the only way.

Qualitative Research as a Social Bridge

Qualitative research not only requires social interaction and good relationships, but unlike statistical analysis, it cannot occur without strong interpersonal skills and researcher/community networks. Even while researchers are not always active members of a community, they will only be able to conduct research with those community members if they gain the trust of key stakeholders and if they are able to sustain those relationships over time. Being a qualitative researcher is described as stepping onto a bridge with members of various communities. In this way, who we are, how we communicate, how we empathize and connect with others is key to being a good researcher. It can mean being a member of a group, though often also means not being a member, but rather a strong ally or trustworthy partner. In this way, cultural learning can be acquired by being present as a person – physically, emotionally and in the concept and context of the project. One participant defined qualitative research as “cultural learning through inquiry,” also referring to the importance of being aware of one’s social location “where interpersonal relationships develop, even temporarily.” The participant went on to say:

The idea that we step onto a bridge, cross borders (countries, communities, and other spaces) to learn from and with study participants and then leave to return to places and lives established before a research project began can be exciting and dynamic as synergies are generated and ideas bear fruit.

Our values are brought to the table, without intruding, and who we are both shapes and contributes to the data that is collected.

Inquiry occurs as we enter into those communicative spaces between us and the participants to find out more about the meaning they make of their experiences. However, we must also consider, as Lavis (2010) reminds us, that “identity is not theorized as something which pre-exists the context in which it is formed or becomes visible. Rather, it is understood as something which is “performed” by individuals in relation to and conjunction with other individuals or groups” (p. 319). Acknowledging that we are all subjective and working to recognize the shape this takes in knowledge creation is part of the qualitative researcher’s endeavor.

Stewards of People’s Lived Experience

In the way that we have described the movement between building epistemology and standing on a social bridge, qualitative researchers carry a great responsibility, not only to conduct their research well, but to listen and document in a consistent and rigorous way what others share with them. One participant spoke of the experience of hearing and holding people’s stories:

I feel great responsibility in my identity as a qualitative researcher. As I sit across from the participants in my study I feel great responsibility to listen, document, and share that person’s story to the best of my abilities. I am ever mindful it is not

my story I am sharing, but someone else's; someone who trusted me to share their story without judgment, and as accurately as possible. Participants are told I will be completing the analysis, and the analysis is mine, I must take ownership of that. But I must also take ownership of protecting the stories entrusted to me and the people entrusting them to me.

Being humble and developing good relationships with participant communities is essential in this responsibility. It may be that no one else gains entry to those stories or hears them again. So as qualitative researchers, we become the conduit of experiences of the participants. It is clear that researchers endeavor to "respect the inherent dignity and worth of others" (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, p. 2), but it is clearer when we stand face to face with a troubling story, a traumatic event, or a grief-stricken person. We are the "holder of stories" in a way that quantitative researchers are not. This requires us to be containers, not only of those stories, but of our own responses as well.

We are not naïve enough to believe that the role of the steward is without its own issues. It is incumbent upon qualitative researchers who work with participants to trouble this relationship and be clear about its potential darker side. One participant shared her own fears when conducting research in Africa. "Why am I here? What is this strange, white, non-disabled, western woman doing in this meeting room? What do I, with my 'fancy PhD,' know about the lives of these women?" Later, this participant pondered,

As I spend my time with these women – working, visiting, and on our final day, having a "family fun day," I know they have given me more than I can ever give them. But after returning home, I am full of doubt about conducting qualitative research with "human participants." I begin to question my role as a qualitative researcher in the other work that I do.

No matter what we do and how we do it, participants may still see us, the researchers, as holding positions of power and often we do. As researchers, we have all inherited a history of the ways in which participants, particularly those from marginalized groups, have been treated over time. As Pillow (2003) points out in her influential work on rethinking reflexivity and its limits, "Can we truly represent the other? Should this even be a goal of research? Whose story is it – that of the researcher or the researched? How do I do representation knowing that I can never quite get it right?" (p. 176). She favours the idea of "uncomfortable reflexivity," or "a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous" (p. 188). Engaging with such discomfort can actually help us to carry out our responsibilities to our participants in a more significant way. It requires us to be authentic.

Moving Forward: Creating a Community of Practice

It is important as researchers that we connect with other qualitative researchers to create a solid foundation and community through which to practice - but also to engage with mixed methods and other quantitative researchers. There is significant value and importance of ongoing community building among all researchers, not only to support our own work and that of others, but also to train and guide emerging researchers. Improving upon how we understand qualitative research, and our identities as practitioners, is a central aspect to this undertaking. There are many synergies that can develop through our collaborations and we find that we can produce better work and more ideas through these communities of practice. Implicitly, this engages us to produce richer analyses and to seek out harder questions, so that we can be more deeply committed to knowledge production.

The primary author of this paper began to create a fertile place for a kind of qualitative researcher “community” to grow and thrive in 2008. Nine years later, the QRG network is thriving with regular events, and over 200 members. The impact of this community was described by a second participant who spoke specifically of how he, as an emerging scholar and PhD student, “developed (my) identity as a qualitative researcher” in his work with the QRG. The QRG provided him opportunities to learn about “advocacy in the role (of qualitative researcher) and what struggles others went through in doing qualitative research.” Other opportunities included talks on “different topics with different methodologies” and “contributing to the newsletter.” One participant reported:

Most importantly, I learned that I was not isolated and was instead part of a broad research community doing similar work. This feeling of community helped me locate myself and understand where I fit on my level of understanding when compared to other new researchers in the field.

Identity becomes a rich grounding for our daily practices and professional roles, but there is also evidence of our identity migrating and expanding as we develop and grow, truly contributing to lifelong learning as researchers. This occurs not only intra-personally, but inter-personally as well, first as this group has demonstrated but also as the community of qualitative researchers is referenced here. The narratives demonstrate that sometimes identity is developed as a counterpoint to a dominant academic culture, and sometimes it merges and conforms. Certainly, this project has shown us that elements of our qualitative researcher identity can provoke certain stereotypes, but reflection between us also substantiates our sense of value of doing good qualitative research. In this project, it became essential to also recognize the importance of connecting with and discussing this context with other qualitative researchers.

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