Main Article:

Voice of the Researcher: Extending the Limits of What Counts as Research

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Abstract

Social sciences research is entrenched with particular values, beliefs, norms, and practices that students, faculty, and researchers reproduce over time. In this article, the author argues for extending what counts as research within the social sciences to be more inclusive of differing methodologies and writing genres. Using personal narrative, diaries, and poetry, the author demonstrates unconventional ways of thinking about, doing, and writing research. He situates his personal experiences as a Ghanaian/American student within relevant literature to illuminate the merging of his home cultural values with those of the academic community and the contradictions and struggles associated with this process. Ultimately, the story portrays the journey of a graduate student as he challenges traditional research norms to open up spaces for underrepresented students to feel more at home within academe.

1. Introduction

Why is it that most of the current crop of legal storytellers are black or brown (Bell, Delgado, Patricia Williams, Matsuda, etc.)? Do white people tell stories, too, but deem them not stories at all, but the truth? (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 47)

> It really makes me uncomfortable that as I progress in my academic career, I'm farther away from people who are not able to pursue doctoral degrees. I worry that I'll lose sight of the reason I came here and be sucked into the competitive, status-oriented game. So, how do I speak "for and about" others not in this position and simultaneously work to create conditions in partnership with others where they can speak for themselves? After all, doesn't everyone's story deserve to get heard? . . . How do we work to expose our multiple selves to others in a holistic fashion? I hate when people cannot be themselves in certain academic contexts, but I fear that this happens all too often for members of "oppressed" groups (e.g., women and people of color). (Author's personal diary, January 29, 2003)

My given name is Stephen Nii Amu Kwei Quaye, but my chosen name is Stephen John Quaye. My family immigrated to the United States from Ghana, West Africa shortly before my third birthday. A shy and awkward boy, my elementary school classmates teased me--my Ghanaian middle name, my accent, and my different skin tone. And so, I started with the easiest part of my identity to change--my accent. At home, I spoke in my native Ghanaian accent, emphasizing my sisters' names in different places (Pámela and Príscilla) and discarding the *r* in words that ended with the letter r (sister became *siste* and car became *ca*). However, at school, I effortlessly perfected my Americanized accent and worked hard to pronounce words completely (sister as sister). I developed fluidity in two languages, so to speak, as a *bicultural* person (de Anda, 1984; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). The subsequent identity alteration came at 15 years of age, when I legally changed my Ghanaian middle name from Nii Amu Kwei to the most common and simple American name that came to mind--John. No longer would my peers butcher my name, nor would I endure the smirks each time teachers called roll and stumbled over my middle name. As a first-year master's student, I finally acknowledged that despite these superficial identity changes, my race still never allowed me to become fully American. I can mask my manner of speech, modify my dress, and even change my name, but to most people, I am still just another Black person.

I am in a constant state of tension--betwixt and between two cultures, not a full member of either (McLaren, 1986; Meyerhoff, 1982; van Gennep, 1960). Some researchers and authors refer to this condition as biculturalism (de Anda, 1984; Valentine, 1971), while others call it double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) or double lives (Haroon, 1999). My entry into the United States initiated my bicultural socialization process; however, my name change signified my desire to gain membership in the American community while simultaneously remaining a part of my Ghanaian culture but denying aspects of it.

The excerpt from my personal diary given above combined with the aforementioned background information on my cultural identity forms the motivation for this article. I contend that the personal is an essential part of the research process even when persons try to hide behind veils of neutrality, hegemony, and objectivity in studies. As noted by Valerie Janesick (2000):

> I would like to point out that qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design. The myth that research is objective in some way can no longer be taken seriously. At this point in time, all researchers should be free to challenge prevailing myths, such as this myth

of objectivity. (p. 385)

My premise is that research is political and "messy" terrain riddled with contradictions, choices, compromises, and most importantly, self-exploration. Throughout this undertaking, I infuse diary excerpts, poetry, and personal narrative to illustrate my evolving understanding of what counts as research. I advocate for extending what counts to be more inclusive, "radical," and counter-hegemonic in research; by doing so, more students will be able to feel at "home" within and beyond academe, discover and cultivate their voices, and become connoisseurs (Eisner, 1998) and critics within their respective disciplines.

2. The Neatness and Messiness of Research

"Who am I becoming?" is a question I posed daily to myself at the master's level and now at the doctoral level. On some days, I find my emerging persona appealing; other days, I am petrified by whom I see in the mirror and through text. In my diary, I refer to people being who they are within academic spaces. Several scholars have written about the silencing of particular viewpoints, experiences, and research traditions within academia. According to bell hooks (1994):

> Even though students enter the "democratic" classroom believing they have the right to "free speech," most students are not comfortable exercising this right to "free speech." Most students are not comfortable exercising this right--especially if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas, feelings that go against the grain, that are unpopular. This censoring process is only one way bourgeois values overdetermine social behavior in the classroom and undermine the democratic exchange of ideas. Students who enter the academy unwilling to accept without question the assumptions and values held by privileged classes tend to be silenced, deemed troublemakers. (p. 179)

Akin to hooks' "troublemakers" reference, the Black students in Joe Feagin, Hernán Vera, and Nikitah Imani's (1996) study describe the abundant presence of *White spaces* (i.e., social spaces predominantly occupied by White people) at their colleges and universities that subtly reinforce their isolation and "alien" statuses. Repeatedly, certain students receive messages from faculty that in order to be deemed credible by academia, they must write in a detached way, utilize large, quantitative datasets, and ensure that their findings generalize to several groups beyond themselves. These messages indicate that personal, subjective, and messy accounts are trivial and are to remain in the purview of creative writing or English courses. The following table illuminates some differences between the privileged academic community and its correlate, my marginalized home community as a Ghanaian in the United States.

Table 1. *Values of Differing Communities*

Privileged academic community	Marginalized home community
Detached	Connected
Impersonal	Personal
Passive	Active
Objective	Subjective
Truth	truths
Value-neutral	Value-laden
Lack of attention to social identities	Conscious of social identities

Though I normally hesitate to present stark dichotomies, as doing so oversimplifies important aspects of each end of the spectrum, I do so here for the purposes of illustration. In so doing, later I demonstrate how I blur and blend these tensions to review what counts as research.

The academic community values shown in Table 1 appear "neat" and natural, that is, hegemonic. Research in social sciences aims at, among other things, explaining individual behavior and explaining outcomes of social interventions. Neat researchers should hide values and emotions and write in a systematic manner; scholars should not use poetry, personal narrative, and the like because they are too difficult to evaluate. Another diary entry reveals the ideals of my home community:

> I wonder if it's okay to speak for others? It really bothers and concerns me that much of what is written about "oppressed" groups has come from individuals in more privileged positions. I know I will (and do) contribute to that as well. I want people to write their own stories and speak for themselves. In fact, this dilemma troubles me so much that I've been thinking of ways I can enable persons in "my" dissertation to write their own stories rather than me recreating their narratives or speaking on their behalves (Alcoff, 1995). Even if I use their direct quotes, ultimately, my name is the one attached to the document, and therefore, it is mine. Many people in academe have built their prestigious careers and statuses based on the lives of people in far less privileged positions; this is highly problematic. However, I also wonder, if they (privileged persons) don't write about these experiences, will the marginalized people ever be heard? (Author's personal diary, November 3, 2005)

My home community values embrace close attachment with participants and attention to the ways in which they construct their understandings of reality. My beliefs are messy because pondering how to represent participants and include them as integral members of the study poses a challenge to the ideals of neutrality and objectivity. Multiple truths exist given the diversity of perspectives and interpretations of participants. Additionally, researchers aligned to my home community values write their accounts in an active voice, which identifies the author, making her or him a central part of the research endeavor. The question then becomes, how do I merge seemingly opposing values so that my experiences of biculturalism, tension, and double

consciousness lessen, thereby enabling me to feel more at home within academia as well as my Ghanaian culture?

3. Redefining the Nexus Between Identity and Research

In August 2002, I enrolled in my first graduate-level college student development theory course. My professor, Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, outlined the following expectation in her course syllabus:

> One of the best ways to understand student development theory is to connect it to our own experience. In order to use the narrative mode of knowing, we will write our own stories to "get inside" the particulars of student development. Then we will use the theoretical perspectives to reflect on our own stories, using the rational mode of knowing. (Baxter Magolda, 2002, p. 9).

Given the interplay between personal stories and theory represented in the syllabus, I now describe the development of my racial identity (i.e., personal narrative) and understanding of research.

3.1. (Re)Writing Identity

The course in student development theory prompted me to think of myself as a racial being for the first time. Growing up in predominantly White environments, striving to hide and shed my Ghanaian identity, I seldom considered my Blackness. I thought I made it within White society because I achieved academically, spoke proper English, and was not a threat to my White peers. I embodied the norms that some within White academe deem important and normalize, as evinced in the following entry in my diary:

> Growing up, I desperately wanted to be White--to be seen as a White person. I used to dream about coming out of this Black body of mine and transforming into the White skins that surrounded me each day. I turned on the television and images of White beauty, worth, and significance infiltrated my awareness; I walked around campus and the same visions filled my mind. Everything and everyone around me was White--the campus, my professors, friends, and even the characters in my readings. These experiences caused me to detest reading; I could never see myself represented in books. I grew up not knowing who I was because I felt trapped-- trapped in Black skin, but not understanding that skin. I didn't have any Black friends or teachers who could help me understand what it meant to be Black. I simply wanted to fit in and no longer feel out-of-place. Was that too much to ask--to be seen and acknowledged for who I am? (Author's personal diary, September 29, 2002)

Even today, it is still painful to read this passage. My first student development theory course encouraged me to use my racial identity to formulate my knowledge of research. I learned the importance of one's identity to the research process and how an understanding of self aids tremendously in conducting naturalistic studies. This knowledge played out in another course, where I interviewed 12 first-year White students to understand how they constructed their

Whiteness. Although I was interested in participants' stories, ultimately, my Black racial identity changed in the process, as I reconstituted my Blackness in relation to participants' White identities. For instance, my Black race shaped my interpretation of participants' stories, as I continually considered how my racial identity influenced their willingness to talk candidly about race with me. Maintaining a personal learning diary throughout the course helped me reflect on my assumptions about White persons and White students' comfort with the predominantly White population at the university compared to my feelings of aloneness.

3.2. (Re)Writing Research

In January 2003, I met Cornel West after he delivered a powerful speech, simply titled: "Race Matters." I purchased West's (1993) *Race Matters* at the book signing following his speech and read the entire book the following day. West's text prompted me to seek out more literature focused on race and racism, leading me to discover critical race theory (CRT). This theory gave me an overarching framework through which to make sense of the race relations at my institution and beyond, as well as the basis for my current conceptualization of research. Scholars who subscribe to CRT maintain that the knowledge and particular experiences of racial/ethnic minority people have not been accorded sufficient weight within society and academia in particular; consequently, these theorists argue for "counting" the contributions of people of color as worthwhile (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Villalpando, 2004). Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) note:

> The hope is that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others. Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world. (p. 41)

When the silenced, tokenized, and marginalized stories of students of color are provided ample spaces alongside dominant narratives, a redefinition of what counts as knowledge and research is possible. When dissenters against academe's norms tell their own truths, they open up room for new theories to develop. Divergent theories typically come about because persons challenge their inabilities to explain the circumstances of different people. CRT enables *counter-narratives* about racial/ethnic minority persons to exist, which challenge the neat values often associated with research.

4. Extending What Counts: Key Implications

Since beginning graduate school in 2002, I have read and learned about different research traditions and methodologies--phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989), case study (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995), biography (Smith, 1994; Tierney, 1993), critical studies (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001; McLaren, 2000), feminist theories (Butler, 1999; Hill Collins, 1997; Williams, 1991), queer studies (Rhoads, 1994; Plummer, 2005), grounded theory (Glaser

& Strauss, 1967), ethnography (Fetterman, 1989; MacLeod, 1995; Magolda, 2002), and post-positivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Krathwohl, 1998). Despite the attention given to the philosophical underpinnings of the above, I find it particularly odd that educators have not equally exposed me to distinctive presentation genres--autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004), ethnography (MacLeod, 1995), self-narrative (Chawla & Rawlins, 2004; Rhoads, 2003), performance ethnography (McCall, 2000), and reflexive ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Though it is rare for faculty to explicitly teach students to write in the detached impersonal style common in the social sciences, most are accustomed to doing so (some obviously more successfully and fluently than others) because that is the accepted way of presenting research within academe. The neat, academic writing voice just *is*--it is assumed that one will naturally learn how to write this way. Those who do not write in this manner should not expect rewards and must append disclaimers about why they departed from convention. Yet, as suggested throughout this article, expecting students to demonstrate knowledge in a "one-dimensional" mode can lead to frustration and exclusion among those who feel more at home with narrative, messy research and writing styles. It is important to note that messy writing is not a substitute for clarity in presentation. The research and writing styles I advocate will demand more work and attention to detail since they depart from convention. I contend that writing should always be accessible, particularly if one is endeavoring to promote change.

In his book *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of the Personal Narrative,* Robert Nash (2004) describes meeting with a doctoral student who wanted his help to think through writing her dissertation as a novel. Nash offered the advice that most social scientists would offer: he told the student that a novel would take her into uncharted territory and therefore she should consider writing her dissertation as a scholarly personal narrative instead. Since Nash did not know who would willingly sit on her committee, he recommended that she should rethink her plan and meet with him again. Nash never again saw the student. This story points at three key implications for rethinking what counts as research: research educators should expose students to alternative ways of thinking about, doing, and writing research.

4.1. Thinking About Research

I cannot count the number of times my colleagues speak and write about studies in a detached fashion, referring to humans as "subjects" or "respondents," student stories as "data" or "results," and the overall presentation of a study as fact. We dehumanize participants when we treat their lives as mere data or decontextualized quotes. Research is an awesome privilege that one should not take lightly. We owe it to our participants to think about representing them meaningfully in studies and finding ways to bridge the gap between researcher and participant. Representation also entails respecting varied interpretations, which allow participants' different truths to coexist.

4.2. Doing Research

Educators should seek unorthodox avenues for students to explore their identities through research. When working with humans, it is almost impossible not to be influenced by their stories. The very nature of speaking with participants can lead one to question and rethink who they are. I propose that emerging scholars explore these tensions and the role of their identities in research. Storytelling is not suspect but is fundamental to research practice, even to the lives of human beings (Grobstein, 2005; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). To be heard is a privilege not equally extended to all persons. We hear our participants in research when we allow ourselves to be changed and invite the messiness that personal subjectivities entail.

4.3. Writing Research

Another implication concerns the nature of writing. Students should not be deterred from a career in academe because they deem its norms, rituals, and practices too rigid. Nash (2004) could have used his interaction with the doctoral student to traverse new ground, opening up potential spaces for future students to interrogate the established conventions in academic writing. After careful consideration, the doctoral student deemed a novel the most effective and passionate way to present her work and provide an innovative portrait for educators.

4.4. Suggestions for Research Educators

There is one way that research educators can expand what counts in research--by developing reflective assignments for students to contemplate and describe the ways in which their personal values and beliefs shape their dissertations. These reflective assignments can raise myriad questions for graduate student-researchers to consider: What is my role as a researcher? Why does my identity matter when I am constructing interview and survey questions? Whose interests does this research serve? These queries serve as constant reminders about how the personal circumstances of the researcher affect the research process even when one attempts to separate oneself from research. In the study I mentioned earlier about White student identity development, the professor of the course regularly asked me (as well as my peers) to carefully record my changing assumptions and developing insights. My reflections on these personal records drastically influenced my perceptions of participants and provided a tangible forum for articulating the daily frustrations and pleasures of undertaking research. Had the faculty member not asked me to engage in this self-exploration, I might have followed the usual process of neat research, so common in the privileged academic community.

5. Lessons Learned: Blending Neat With Messy

> I long to be recognized for who I am
> I long to be recognized for what I desire
> I long to be recognized for how I see

>I long to be recognized for where I go
>I long to be recognized for why I believe
>
>I long to be seen for who I heal
>I long to be seen for what I stand
>I long to be seen for how I perceive
>I long to be seen for where I am situated
>I long to be seen for why I interrogate
>
>To be recognized and seen for who, what, how, where, and why I am . . . that, is home.
>(Author's personal diary, November 30, 2005)

I often wonder if I will legally reclaim my Ghanaian middle name. Perhaps doing so will enable others to see and recognize me more clearly and completely. This foray into describing my ever-evolving view of research illuminated the trials and joys of conducting research. Sticking solely to seemingly commonsensical academic community values is easier because most are familiar with those norms, beliefs, and practices. However, extending what counts as research is a precursor to fostering a more inclusive and less oppressive academic community.

At this point, some readers might wonder why I should continue within academia given the value clashes described; my hope is that by doing so, I can help promote change. These value differences have taught me some important lessons. Locating mentors who support messy research processes is one important avenue to stimulate change. Even if a student cannot find a supportive faculty member at her or his institution, attending academic conferences is one way to identify persons who challenge the norms of academe. For example, the International Center for Qualitative Inquiry, housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, sponsors the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. At this particular conference, attendees explore issues ranging from how truth is socially defined, narrative criteria of evaluation, the role of voice in research, and performance ethnography--in essence, many of the topics noted throughout this article. Students are joined by faculty, student affairs educators, and researchers committed to exploring divergent worldviews about what counts as research. The conference committee even offers a dissertation of the year award for scholars who utilize experimental writing forms that challenge the established conventions of presenting one's work in a dissertation. Students should be encouraged by the burgeoning spaces for the kind of work advocated in this article.

Extending what counts as research is a complex task with no easy solutions. Because one can push against the standards of academe in multiple ways, I intentionally do not offer prescriptions. However, in addition to the recommendation noted above, another point is worth mentioning. One does not have to favor the neat academic setting over the messy home environment, but can become bicultural (for some time), as so many students of color have, and blend various aspects of each culture. Though I endorse broad changes within academe that enable different students to feel at home, for the time being, it seems that biculturalism is an effective way to realize the necessary outcomes. For instance, there exist outlets for students,

like me, who crave personal research writing spaces--*Qualitative Inquiry, About Campus*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, *Feminist Studies*, *Qualitative Sociology,* as well as books (e.g., the *Ethnographic Alternatives* book series by AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, California). Consider, for example, using multiple writing avenues--traditional and practice-oriented journals, newspapers/magazines, and books for general readers. Not only does this approach develop a student's writing capabilities, but it also enables the student to straddle diverse communities, retaining aspects of whatever their home cultures may be. Research, ultimately, is a messy endeavor with competing values, needs, and beliefs. The challenge is to find one's voice, develop it, and creatively use it. Responding to this challenge is a step towards extending what counts as research.

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