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A personal reflection on immigrant inquiry

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Powerful stories emerged when a team of university researchers interviewed classroom teachers taking classes at a Southern California university. These teachers, immigrants like me, were recipients of an educational grant for Latino bilingual teachers. One woman I interviewed shared a childhood experience in elementary school:

When I was a child in Mexico, learning to communicate with my family, friends, and other people involved in my life, language brought me feelings of pride and joy. My first years of language development were very satisfying. At the age of six, my experiences with language changed dramatically! I moved to California ... When I moved to this country I brought my customs, my experiences, and my language. These qualities were not appreciated by the members of my new community. When I used my language to try to communicate with my peers, I was ridiculed. (Monica, Azusa Pacific University, 1995).

Listening to this woman's voice led the researcher to wonder about the meaning of research in terms of framing inquiry questions, gathering data, and analysing the findings.

When one envisions the traditional concept of research, three images come to mind - the big 'R' (Hubbard & Power, 1993), number crunching, and the 'lone ranger' (Wasser & Bresler, 1996); the researcher/professor, the insider, owner of knowledge and member of the academy who advises the classroom teacher, who is the outsider in the intellectual arena. Valuable educational research comes from collaborative processes between university professors and classroom teachers.

As teachers-researchers embark on the process of discovery in search of truths, they engage in relationships with informants. Developing relationships requires implicit moral and ethical responsibility, mutual respect, and reciprocity. As a result of wondering together, teacher-researchers are finding the richness of diversity of perspectives brought about by looking at research issues through multiple lenses. Qualitative methodology assists researchers in discovering important questions, processes, and relationships.

Relationships become the central focus of interpretative research where all participants collaborate as researchers and learners. Traditionally informants have been seen as outsiders (those to be observed or studied), not fully aware of the researchers objectives. Relationships with informants are affected by the social dimensions and political contexts in which research takes place. Investigators must be respectful of informants, communicate honestly their research intentions, and avoid the participant-observer syndrome. A participant-observer position creates an unequal relationship in which the researcher is the 'knower', thus objectifying the informant who is left in a powerless position. 'Objectivity' becomes the buzzword for validity in research circles; ignoring the fact that interpretative research requires subjectivity and reciprocity in a transactional context in which the 'knowing' or meaning arises from the relationship between the 'knower' and the person who 'knows'.

In general researchers have paid little attention to the personal side of research - the ethical responsibility of building relationships with informants. Are these relationships

forged to meet the needs of a research study and a researcher's agenda? What is our responsibility as researchers in the relationship between investigator and informer? As researchers, we may need to look at 'doing' research as part of our mission for bringing about social justice. If so, then our relationship with informants should be honest, reciprocal, and transactional. Moral and ethical considerations arise when researchers' hidden agendas contribute to an almost concealment 'conspiracy', however subtle, and questionable clandestine methods of collecting data. William B. Shaffir writes 'Researchers frequently pretend to participate more fully in a community's activities when in fact they are detached observers. And often they ask deceptively innocent questions to gather data that would not otherwise be readily available. Such deceptive practices, I believe, are as inherent in field research as they are in day-to-day life' (Shaffir, 1991, p. 80).

Engaging in qualitative/interpretative research leads to varying degrees of intimacy in the development of relationships between investigators and informants. Some of these relationships may, in effect, develop into friendships. However, friendship implies honesty, reciprocity, and trust, and the sincerity of such relationships may come into question in the context of research.

The ethics of building relationships with informants requires researchers to fully disclose their intentions and to regard informants as co-inquirers or co-learners seeking to better know themselves and to impact on their communities. Researchers need to co-exist with informants in a climate of mutuality and self-respect, recognising the complexity of human relationships. Peter McLaren adds '... the researcher must also attempt to be critical of the assumptions that inform the moral authority that shapes his or her own analysis' (McLaren, 1991, p. 156). Doing research with culturally different populations requires researchers to abandon the concept of defining reality according to white, Western perspectives, thus assuming a privileged position over informants (and even condescending attitudes); we must 'locate the other in ourselves through self-reflection' (McLaren, 1991, p.162). As co-inquirers and co-collectors of data, we also become co-reflectors and co-analysts, and ultimately, co-constructors of knowledge. Carol Christ adds: 'The root of our scholarship and research is Eros, a passion to connect, the desire to understand the experience of another, the desire to deepen our understanding of ourselves and our world...' (Christ, 1987, p. 58)

Consequently there is a need for honouring the roles of informants; valuing self-honesty and reciprocity; and respecting the cross-cultural dimensions of the relationship. How do we define our role as researchers, regarding ethical and moral considerations, while maintaining validity and reliability in supporting a mutual journey in the search for truth? In identifying informants, researchers must ensure the informants' choice in participating in the study and willingness to become co-inquirers and learners. Reciprocity in research relationships is essential to help establish trust and to avoid feelings of exploitation from the informants' point of view. Another emerging category in intimate, reciprocal relationships between researchers and informants is the measure of vulnerability on both sides, as Asher and Fine describe:

Ultimately, by entering field settings and establishing relations with others, we discover some measure of vulnerability that is often so dominant in the lives of subjects. For even as we strive mightily to be researchers, we learn that, after all, we are but human beings. (Asher & Fine, 1991, p. 205)

The author can account for intimate moments during the research inquiry in which participants (researcher and informants) felt free to express vulnerability in their common journey of self-discovery. As a researcher who is conducting a longitudinal study (with non-Hispanic faculty members) I felt the angst, ambivalence, and discomfort of engaging in a research relationship with Hispanic (primarily Mexican-American) informants whose ethnic and linguistic characteristics were similar to my own Portuguese-American background. Sometimes it was painful to identify with the informants in terms of experiences of prejudice and discrimination; to avoid being caught in destructive victimisation while recognising injustices and encouraging empowerment strategies. While there are differences in our cultural backgrounds, the many similarities often catches me amidst the turmoil of cultural marginality, assuming the roles of both investigator and informant. In empathising with some of the challenges facing the informants, I was faced with my own struggles for identify and belonging in a common journey of self-discovery. The discernment of feeling 'caught' between two cultures posed adjustment challenges which I can identify in myself, as well as in the informants.

Perhaps one the most salient points of the research is the ability to decide how much of the information revealed is authentic, how much is 'saving face', and how much is not shared, but considered private, family business. As I inadvertently began to envelop myself in the research, I considered the ethical issues of the study - the sincerity/legitimacy of the research, the validity of our 'discoveries', and the degree of intimacy with the informants. And although we as researchers hope to create a 'legally and morally correct' environment, we cannot be totally unbiased in our findings and implications. Biases and subjectivity are expected in qualitative, interpretative research studies. However, just as researchers and informants are seen as co-inquirers and learners, their conclusions must also be collaborative endeavours.

In order to bring greater legitimacy and authenticity to my research, I relied on opinions and suggestions of researchers, some of them Hispanic themselves, who have done research with Hispanic populations. Marin and Marin's work, *Research with Hispanic Populations*, for example, offers many insights. They caution researchers not to make assumptions and generalisations for all Hispanic populations which are based on a study with a particular Hispanic group: there are differences in culture and language within Hispanic/ Latino groups. The authors point out that even the word Hispanic, which refers to ethnicity and not race, may not be accepted by all Latino immigrants - Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and others.

Marin and Marin agreed on certain values and characteristics common to Hispanic populations: Allocentrism (the preference for intimate, nurturing, and respectful interpersonal relationships); *simpatia* (generally avoiding conflict, emphasising pleasant social interaction, showing respect and dignity for others); familialism (strong identification with nuclear and extended family); gender roles (somewhat male dominated); power distance (maintenance of '*respeto*' in interpersonal relationships), and time (less adherence to rigorous schedules). (Marin, 1991, pp. 11-17) All of these values and characteristics will affect relationships in research with Hispanic populations.

In my relationship with this group of Latinas, I found that these characteristics played an important role in framing questions, collecting data, and analysing findings. During our interviews/conversations, I sometimes felt that my questions may have been offensive or demeaning for the informants. Such an example would be questions concerning the

educational level of family members. I was unsure if some of the responses were influenced by allocentrism, familialism, and *simpatia*, and I wondered if some of the responses were less than candid because the women wished to provide socially acceptable answers while protecting the privacy of family members. At such times I identified culturally with the informants - I am not sure how much I would be willing to divulge about myself or my family; or to allow myself to be the 'subject' of a study. My subjectivity and empathy become even more apparent when informants shared instances of ethnic and linguistic discrimination. My own painful experiences surfaced, making it difficult, at times, to continue my role of researcher. However, I felt that my cultural commonalities with these informants enabled us to develop a higher level of intimacy, trust, and reciprocity. Some of the women felt comfortable enough to address me by my first name; however the majority still called me 'Dr. Pacino.' They needed to make these choices according to their level of comfort with me. I realised that although they saw me as a friend, they were also respecting my position as a university professor. I also knew that my level of familiarity with them needed be void of condescending attitudes.

After almost three years of developing a relationship of mutual trust and respect, we had been able to show some vulnerability - they had been able to cry in front of me and I in front of them. One of the most interesting parts of our relationship was our religious affiliation. As Roman Catholics in a predominantly Evangelical Protestant campus, we had been able to affirm our Christian faith. Our reciprocal relationship had enabled us to become co-learners on a common journey. My uncertainty, discomfort, and subjectivity in conducting this research continued; I knew that these emotions/feelings were part of a process of self-discovery for the informants and for me as the researcher. I also knew that I could provide my co-researchers with an additional cultural lenses.

Marin and Marin suggest effective ways for conducting research with Hispanic groups:

The use of same-ethnicity research personnel (interviewers, experimenters, observers, etc.) will enhance the quality of the data and the rates of participation in the study. Minority research participants should be compensated for their efforts in proportion to the demands placed upon them by the researchers. In collecting survey data, telephone interviews are not only more economical but may provide more valid responses, especially when the survey deals with sensitive or highly personal topics.' Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 60).

Investigators should be careful to avoid over-generalising to all Hispanics when the individuals studied belong to a very specific subgroup.' (Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 41)

When planning studies with members of unfamiliar ethnic or cultural group, researchers should immerse themselves in all aspects of the culture so that they are able to perceive the world from the perspective of the individuals being studied. To gain knowledge about a new ethnic group, the researcher should contact social scientists or key informants who can provide validity checks on the researcher's observations. (Marin & Marin, 1991, p. 74).

Implications

Researchers must:

- be aware of researchers' roles and the roles of informants;
- understand the importance and value of relationships based on reciprocity, honesty, and trust;
- raise the degree of intimacy between researchers and informants;
- be aware and sensitive when working with culturally diverse populations, in terms of ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, gender, and religion;
- be aware of researchers' possible condescending attitudes toward informants;
- be aware of informants' level of disclosure, and possible tendency to provide socially desirable responses;
- allow informants co-choice in research involvement, as co-inquirers / co-learners.
- consult informants and include their input in developing and revising research protocols (interview questions, surveys, data collecting and analysis).

Another potential consideration of the social process is whether or not, or the degree to which, researchers may or may not become moralisers in dealing with culturally different contexts (even when faced with controversial issues/situations). A further ethical consideration is the fact that most research on cultural minorities has been done by Anglo researchers. We need more minority researchers doing studies on their own cultural groups, as well as on other groups, including Anglo populations. Researchers also need to develop culturally appropriate research instruments which are not offensive to the cultures being studied. Analysis of findings and conclusions must also be culturally sensitive and non-condescending. As researchers, we must support a mutual journey of self-discovery and in sharing our stories.

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