Dusting Off: Recollections and Reflections from the Field

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Abstract: In the process of reflecting on an action-based ethnographic study, the author comments on the process of recollecting and the crucial work of researcher reflexivity before embarking on a new inquiry with a former student. The notion of “dusting-off” represents shifts in thinking long after leaving the field and reflecting on previously collected data. This process prompted the need for a different way of remembering prior to conducting subsequent research. Post-modern perspectives on narrative analysis and Critical Race Feminism (CRF) inform this reflective essay.

Keywords: Ethnographic approaches, Reflexivity, Narrative Analysis

The stories we tell are those that are available for our telling (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). They permeate every aspect of our lives and shape the way we think, feel, and act (Lopez, 2002). I recall many of my students’ stories … particularly the girls from El Coro1 Group. I first met them as 7th graders at Urban Middle School. They were all active participants in a college access program that I administered both at Urban Middle School and later at Central High School. The Latina girls named the group El Coro to signal the orchestration of discourses that only we were a part of (Taylor, Veloria, & Verba, 2005). In the midst of storytelling, we bonded over laughter and sometimes tears, a healthy mix of both joy and sorrow. Both ethnic and gendered identities surfaced, but at the time I was preoccupied with concerns of objectivity and with the importance of modeling professional behavior in ways that limited further connections along cultural and gendered lines. This would later haunt me, especially after phasing-out the program and no longer being a part of their daily lives. How invested did I allow myself to become, or not become? Does objectivity really matter when it can potentially limit interactions between participants and researcher? Who decides? Why does it matter? Why would my decisions later haunt me?

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1 The Chorus
In retrospect, I regretted acting on the dominant perception that I could not be both: a researcher who could also relate to their stories because they mirrored mine. This reflective essay addresses the saliency of researcher reflexivity at multiple levels of the research process.

I recollect memories from the field and comment on the process of dusting-off before embarking on a new inquiry with a former research participant from El Coro Group. I take the stance that if researchers are to include the experiences of Latinas and their communities, they also need to examine the relevance of their own life experiences and consider their own values (Hidalgo, 1999). Poststructuralist theory is useful in theorizing multiple selves (Lather, 1991). By foregrounding multiple selves we enact the ways we have been influenced by socio-cultural, political and economic factors, as well as hierarchal power structures and social arrangements (Nieto 1992, Foucault, 1980). Who was I during the research process? Who did I become after leaving the field, dusting off field notes and theorizing about previously collected data, researcher practice and positionality?

**Dusting Off: Recollections and Reflections**

After El Coro Group was a distant memory, I revisited themes from that study and began to reflect on the multiple selves that were available, yet trapped by the dynamics of positionalities, subordination, and research paradigms. I began to ponder: how did I write about me, them, and us? What decisions were made? What was made visible and what was not? Essentially, I began to critically explore the importance of researcher reflexivity. In the backdrop of conversations about college, I recalled the girls’ preoccupations with issues of respect, societal stereotypes, their relationships with their mothers and their perceptions of schooling practices. These factors are not often associated with college access, yet are important to the process of accessing college as well as to a healthy construction of self (Taylor, Veloria, & Verba, 2005; Ward & Veloria, 2005; Veloria, 2011).

However, during these conversations, I masked myself and insisted on exploring school-based interactions, grades and college exploration. I did this as an attempt at neutrality, as a way of controlling my questioning and presentation, which resulted in both an overwhelming sense of responsibility coupled with an uneasiness in the pit of my stomach (Montoya, 1994). The girls, however, saw right through me. The relational and familiar pull I felt was strong; they knew, but I resisted it. Their stories vividly resonated with me and I secretly took pleasure in knowing that I could relate so well. Their actions signaled an emotional connection and sometimes their words chipped away at my masquerade, “Come on, Miss, you know you were raised like that, too.” Denial of emotion, spiritual needs, and nurturance lead to physical ailments that manifest when one ignores the signals (Hurtado, 2003), and I ignored the signals. It wasn’t until I literally dusted off files and replayed audio tapes that I began to ache for the novice researcher in the field. I began to explore the role I played in eliciting our narratives and through this process the interconnectedness of our stories began to crystallize. Of course the girls had picked up long before I did which is why they drew me in ... in ways that would challenge me both as a Latina and as a researcher.
Even back then, Amelia’s narratives captivated me the most, "You know what it’s like, Miss," she would say whenever we crossed over the terrain of schooling experiences to the more fluid flows of mixed-messages received from our mothers, the duality of living in two worlds, and making-sense of what it means to be Latina (Veloria, 2011). Recollecting became a painful process that evoked painful memories and a great deal of questions. Would it have been beneficial had I shared more about my upbringing and background? Why did I feel the need to keep my distance? I was interested in expanding on my initial inquiry, but where to begin? I knew there was a great deal that I still wanted to explore, but I wanted a student’s perspective; someone who could be honest with me about who I was back then.

Although I kept in touch with all of the El Coro girls, I heard from Amelia the most. I had a lifeline in the form of constant e-mails and phone calls from Amelia. In between chatting about school, we would engage in conversations of the past. I recalled one e-mail in particular in which she had written about her first semester at college in which she commented that everything is going well, except one thing, my roommate’s dust always ends up on my side of the room and I need to mop every other day. Mop – what the heck? I recall thinking. The issue seemed so trivial to me, but then I recalled the insistence my mother placed on cleaning and the idea no longer seemed absurd. When visiting her at school, a different kind of remembering emerged; one that prompted me to further deconstruct and critique how I had previously remembered Amelia and the other girls (Belanky, et.al. 1997).

I went to visit Amelia. It was a clear, crisp, chilly afternoon. The leaves had just started to turn and throughout the scenic view I thought about what a departure this setting was from the familiar, run-down and dreary school where we had carved out a small space to meet for so many months, for almost two years.

The time had finally come for what we had spent so much time talking about, dreaming about, and romanticizing. This typical New England college town represented many years of hard work and dedication. When Amelia met me in the parking lot, I immediately noticed that the infamous “freshman 15” were starting to creep—I dared not make a mention of it. I was eager to go up to her room to see if she really had a mop. I had just recently e-mailed her to find out how things were going, and somewhere between “great” and “I like it here” she made mention of the one thing that was not so “great”—“Somehow my roommate’s dust finds its way to my side of the room . . . I have to mop every other day.”

Who in their right mind brings a mop with them to college? I recall asking myself out loud after a good giggle. I reclined [in a chair] and looked about the sea of paper around me, and recall not having a care if it ever got picked up. But then I remembered. I remembered my mom and what it was like to grow up in a household where there was a huge emphasis placed on cleaning. “Men like women who know how to clean,” my mom would say. All of the sudden, the idea of the mop no longer seemed absurd.

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2 Amelia is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the student
Upon entering her room, I immediately noticed the mop tucked into the bucket in a corner. She proudly showed me the laptop she had bought with summer earnings and the stash of snacks she smuggled from the cafeteria to satisfy late night cravings. As she talked about her courses, new friends and former classmates back home, I could not help but think about all of our conversations, all of what she had shared and wondered if there was anything I could have said or done to help her make more sense of the sometimes conflicting messages she received at home, the insane cleaning that is so dramatically emphasized, and the sometimes abusive practices that take place behind the backdrop of maintaining a clean home (Field Note, 10/17/06).

Amelia was physically in a new place, even a new world, but clearly her social position—as defined by gender, race, ethnicity, class—affect her perspective and her sense-making ability at college (Holland et al., 2008). Even my initial reaction—*who in their right mind brings a mop with them to college?*—later shocked me. Had I not known Amelia? Had I not listened to her many complaints about having to go home and clean the house? How about all of the girls chiming in with similar tales—*el corito*\(^3\) of tales, interrupted by tears, laughter, and *gritos*\(^4\) of validation? (Taylor, Veloria, & Verba, 2005). The concept of entering a new world continued to play in my head. While in *El Coro* Group, Amelia was asked to think about what she would take to college. Following is Amelia’s unedited essay (*transcribed from Figure 1; bold added for emphasis by author*):

> There are many things which I would considered to bring to college. But, my personality, values and experiences are the most important things I would bring.

> A strong personality like the one I posses can’t be hidden. Because I am sensitive, strong, laudable, caring, and stubborn. When I fix my mind to an idea I will do anything to make it true. Even though it took me awhile to build such personality, I have mastered it and lately have achieved. I hope that by bringing this to college I would be a step further to achieve my major goal, my career.

> Along with my personality comes my background and my culture. Born in the Dominican Republic, raised in the United States by a mom which grew up with old customs, I live between two worlds. One the main focus is the household and school while the other is school. Even though I hate this I am able to multi-task than many people. I am able to attend school in the morning, work in the afternoon, and help out with my other world; clean the house, help with my brothers, and still achieve in school.

> I have it twice as hard as my peers, but is not all negative. This is something that I would bring to college, is something that I would pass down with little emphasize. The clash between my two worlds have created values for me that if I wasn’t in this situation, I would have never learned.

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\(^3\) The Little Chorus  
\(^4\) Shouts
Most important my experiences. I have experience what envy does to an adult, friendships, and what it means, love, hate, gossip, and stereotypes. I have a story for everything that I mention above. My experiences is something that would help succeed because I seen and went through so much that it takes a lot to hurt me and put me down.

When I pack my things and make my check-list these things will be my first three. It’s who I am and who I will polish up as time goes by without every forgetting where I come from.

(personal essay, 04/28/05).

The need for reflexivity arose along with new questions. What had I missed? I wanted to learn more, but I knew that a new inquiry had to go beyond revisiting data. Where would I begin and what did I need to do beforehand? To prepare for my new inquiry, I revisited previously collected data by listening to audiotapes, re-reading field notes, writing analytic memos about previous field notes and by reflecting on my comments on the margins, reading high school papers, and reviewing Amelia’s college admission essay. I did all of this to look for patterns. Patterns are not static maps, schemes, models of closed systems, collections of definitions, or sets of “if-then” relationships among coding categories.
They are descriptions of processes and networks of relationships through which things are moving and changing (Nespor, 2006).

My wheels were spinning, yet I felt anxious about where and how to start. The more I read the more questions I had. However, I was unable to articulate them in a concise, clear manner, and wrestling with so many thoughts, questions, and feelings put me in an almost paralyzed state. To speak is to take up a position in a social field in which all positions are moving and defined relative to one another (Hanks, 1996). What could I possibly contribute if I could not articulate my questions? What position could I possibly take? It took me some time to realize that I was not so much taking a position as stepping onto a moving dance-floor (historically shaped and propelled) where dissonant orchestras of social relations battle to define the rhythms (Nespor, 2006).

Cooper (1998) notes that such a take on the world poses methodological problems:

We are not good at thinking movement. Our institutional skills favour the fixed and static, the separate and self-contained. Taxonomies, hierarchies, systems and structures represent the instinctive vocabulary of institutionalized thought in its subordinating of movement and transformation. (p.108)

The impetus to move forward was the realization that whereas the current body of research has clearly demonstrated that descriptive individual-level characteristics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status combined with institutional factors, including contextual issues such as the quality and social climate of P-12 and postsecondary schooling provides very useful information; what is often not included is how this occurs, how students make sense of their experiences, and thus navigate figured worlds (Koyoma, 2007).

Amelia’s journey would provide an example of how she negotiated these spaces, the different worlds she entered, and how she was received by the educational system. I hoped she would be able to shed light on what I had missed and could have done to better prepare her to enter these institutional spaces. Following some of Amelia’s movements would allow me to account for her path, not in the fashion of ecological psychology or time geography (Baker & Wright, 1954; Hagerstrand, 1970, cited in Nespor, 2006), but in recognizing that people are simultaneously moving at multiple scales, enacting multiple selves through different circuits, and along different trajectories (Nespor, 2006).

This was my move onto the dance floor. Given our history and the data I had previously collected, I could look at Amelia’s movement over different temporal frames—go back, explore the present, and look ahead—all the while noting differences in what and how things were done at different places and times. Pace and temporality became important, and memory became critical: If setting and place are dissipative articulations, how do they maintain identity over time? How do we remember, delete, and reconstruct the past and its relation to the present and to possible futures (Nespor, 2006)?

By then I understood that to comprehend the issues involved in making the transition to college, one must contend with multiple tensions in education by addressing the connections between culture, society, and learning, and by interrogating broader schooling experiences, rather than examining the singular dimension of the transition to college (Koyoma, 2007). As such, I drew from a previous dataset for themes and topics to discuss. I also surveyed the college access and college transition literature,
looking for ways to complicate the discourse with respect to Latina students and capitalizing on our current conversations as a way to elicit narratives.

I initially had proposed to revisit themes from the action-based ethnographic study during three or four individual meetings. As Carspecken (1996) indicates,

> The most effective way to use qualitative interviews with subjects is to get them to describe events they remember taking part in: to begin at a concrete level where a specific action situation is recalled and then to work toward articulation of interpretative schema that the subjects applies in many diverse situation. (p. 39)

I had hoped that in the context of our meetings, our discussions would not only be about revisiting data and recollecting but also about her new experiences. As such, I decided to use a semi-structured interview protocol, hoping to capture what Carspecken (1996) refers to as “social routines, the distribution of routines across related social sites, constraints and resources affecting social routines, cultural forms associated with social routines, subjective experiences, and life history narratives (total or partial).” I embarked on this project by focusing on the “telling” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005).

**A NEW INQUIRY: EXPLORING MULTIPLE SELVES**

Connelly and Clandinin (2005) recommend that narrative inquiry begins by exploring “three commonplaces: temporality, sociality, and place (or sequence of places)” (p. 479). They posit that what makes an inquiry narrative inquiry is the simultaneous exploration of all three. Due to my multiple roles as former college advisor, teacher, confidant, friend, and researcher, I needed to tailor an inquiry that would be appropriate for the living and the telling (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005). Being aware that my multiple selves would impact my interaction with Amelia, I focused on constructing an inquiry that drew on a postmodern epistemological orientation to conducting qualitative research; that is, a collaborative form of narrative inquiry (De Haene, 2010). My new inquiry marked a shift from a representational to a constitutive conception of language; knowledge is then understood as relationally created in communicative praxis (Anderson, & Goolishian,1988; Guba & Lincoln, 1995, 2005; Kvale, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1992).

Storied lives function in a dynamic, mutual relationship; narratives are both the way we understand and give context to our experiences as well as a medium through which we shape and construct ourselves, our relationships, and our realities (Chase, 2005). According to Connelly and Clandinin (2005), a more difficult, time-consuming, intensive, and yet more profound method is to begin with participants’ living ...as they go about their everyday life, negotiating spaces, and entering figured worlds. In the end, narrative inquiry is about life and living. They caution, however, that although this approach is rich with intellectual interest and potential, it can sometimes be dangerous for the inquirer because of participants’ control over the living, and their movements in their lives (p. 479).

This was something I had to consider seriously for a myriad of reasons: I no longer had easy access to Amelia, as we found ourselves in different places and our role had shifted. By then she was a
college student, living away from home, continuing to get acclimated to her new surroundings while still trying to make sense of it all. Our e-mails and phone calls continued, but our relationship and our conversations had changed. She talked about the not-so-distant past as if she wanted to forget it, but often brought up relatable memories as if trying to make sense of her past. I wanted to ask so many questions that I had not felt were appropriate to ask while she was my student, but somehow this seemed self-serving and I initially did not ask.

I wrestled with whether or not Amelia wanted to meet and continue to share. What would our conversation consist of? If she decided to meet with me, would it be because she felt a sense of obligation? Why did I have so many questions and unresolved issues, and how could I address them? Was engaging in this project mutually beneficial, and if so, how? The phone calls and e-mails continued, which prompted me to think that she too had questions and could somehow benefit from expanded conversations. Postmodern qualitative researchers firmly embrace the social purpose of their activity (Guba, 2005). By this time I refused the stance of disengaged neutrality, and thus felt prepared to fully embrace the responsibility of conceptualizing research as a moral project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Nagging at me was the feeling that there were more conversations to be had and more topics to discuss that would help Amelia make better sense of her new environment and some of the contradictions back home. Postmodern ethnographic research approaches strongly embody this call to activism and intervention. Within these practices, research functions as a conversation that seeks to expand the reach of understanding within the interactive context (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Gergen, 1999; McNamee, 1994, 2000a, cited in De Haene, 2010).

During one of our conversations, I asked her, “would it have been useful if I had shared more about my experiences back then?” She responded by saying “Miss, we knew. You need to understand that at the time I did not know anyone who had even graduated from high school. In you, we needed to see what was possible.” (speaking for the collective). How would I write about Amelia and our new experiences, the openness of our sharing? The fact is that narratives don’t speak for themselves, offering a window into an essential self (Riessman, 2008). Instead, Reissman, (2008), suggests that when used for research purposes, they require close interpretation. She posits that what a close narrative study of a single case can add is a display of how larger social structures insinuate their way into individual consciousness and identity, and how these socially constructed selves are then performed for (and with) an audience – in this case the listener/interpreter. All research occurs within a society. Therefore, society’s beliefs, ideologies, traditions, and structure all impact the research in multiple ways. Feminist objectivity acknowledges the fact that the researcher is going to bring the influences of society into the project. Harding (1987) proposes the concept of strong objectivity in examining not only the context of discovery, and justification, but also the context of representation. It is a process of disclosing the histories, positions, influences, beliefs, morals, etc. of the researcher at every step of the research project; requiring the researcher to disclose her own subject position throughout the research process.

In subsequent writings, I merged our narratives by accounting for my own sense-making of experiences. Embarking on the journey of retracing the path of my action-based ethnographic study taught me that theory should not come from written text only, but from the collective experience - especially that of women of color - for the purpose of ultimately accomplishing social justice that can potentially lead to liberation (Hurtado, 2003). As Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) so poignantly states:
"Necesitamos teoría [We need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries - new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods ...And we need to find practical application for those theories. We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy ...


By dusting-off and exploring multiple selves, I assumed the awesome burden of remembrance for Amelia and the other El Coro girls, and performed this role with laughter, tears, joy, sadness, melancholy and passion (Williams, 1995). I would go on to write about our sense-making of experiences, the figured-worlds we linguistically entered when narrating events and the multiple selves we both enacted during this journey. In the end, knowing that narratives are open to multiple interpretation; I invite others to read our stories and do so with their horizon of being.

REFERENCES


AUTHORS

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