

Positionality and the Pen: Reflections on the Process of Becoming a Feminist Researcher and Writer

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During her years as a graduate student, the author was involved in not only the outward process of research but also the inward process of developing her own identity as a researcher. This article outlines her experiences as a woman and as a researcher engaging in the process of becoming a qualitative researcher and writer. It grapples with the issues she faced during her fieldwork, specifically, with concerns about her own positionality in relation to her research participants, and discusses how feminist methodology both challenged her and allowed her to see herself as part of a research community. By telling her story, she hopes both to create a more honest analytic process for her own research and to reassure other young feminist researchers that they are not alone.

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During my years as a graduate student, I was involved in not only the outward process of research but also the inward process of developing my own identity as a researcher. This path was extraordinarily difficult for me. It was through the combined activities of reading, course work, fieldwork, and thinking through my dissertation that I was able to find a home for myself in the research world. This article outlines my experiences as a woman and a researcher engaging in that process. It grapples with the issues I faced during my fieldwork, specifically, with concerns about my positionality in relation to my research participants. Finally, it discusses how feminist methodology both challenged me and allowed me to see myself as part of a research community.

MY OWN PLACE IN RESEARCH

Maria Mies (1983) has termed the experience of being a woman scholar and attempting to conduct "value-free research" as a type of "schizophrenia."

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Her phrase aptly describes my own experiences adapting to life as a social scientist. During graduate school, I struggled to bridge the divide between my personal beliefs and the research methods in which I was being trained, to mend the split between my research participants and myself (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Dubois, 1983; Fine, 1994).

I began fieldwork on my first day of graduate school as part of a gender equity evaluation team for a regional branch of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. I continued to do research at four different urban clubs during the next 5 years. One of these sites became the setting of my dissertation research, and I visited it steadily over the course of 4 years.

My undergraduate training, 5 years prior, had been in the humanities. My work experience ranged from the legal world, to feminist activism, to mental health education. As a newly entering doctoral student, therefore, I was learning the ropes of social science theory as well as research. The novel position of social scientist did not fit with my view of myself. I was not one to see people as objects or individuals as representatives of groups or phenomena. I was not comfortable with being invasive or with my own role in the production of knowledge from others' life experiences. The setting of my fieldwork highlighted my disconnection with the research process.

As I became immersed in theory and methods, I was simultaneously absorbed into the world of minority, urban adolescence. My fieldwork experience was a far cry from academic life on campus, as well as from my own adolescence in a middle-class, mostly White suburb. I became painfully aware of the differences that separated me from the youth and staff at the club. So aware that at times, it was difficult to remove myself from that experience and concentrate on the task at hand, engaging the youth and learning about their experiences. At the same time, I felt a sense of discomfort during classroom conversations about research on "minority," "inner-city," and "lower-class" youth. I recognized these categories as, in some ways, describing the adolescents with whom I worked. Yet in no way could these categories capture the unique nature of their experiences or persons. The research we read rarely contained individual voices or stories. I became concerned about the ways in which researchers categorize and count, amalgamating humans into lumps of data. I questioned empirical science's claim of objectivity. I became disturbed by the prospect of becoming one of those researchers. I was walking a fault line between my heart and my head. What I sought, but did not yet have a name for, was Dubois's (1983) "passionate scholarship," modes of research that privilege values and empathy.

Had I been more comfortable with the role of researcher, perhaps I would have eased more quickly and effortlessly into the new experience of people and place, settling my schizophrenic split without deeper questioning. Yet in retrospect, my greenness was an advantage. It forced me to consider my positionality as a woman, a feminist, a researcher, and a member of the White, educated middle class in a way in which a more seasoned researcher may

have been too comfortable to recognize. My newness led me to consider both my research participants and myself as holistic people. I would later come to learn that my concerns were more than personal and reflected issues raised by feminist researchers during the past 20 years. The personal is not only political; it is intellectual, theoretical, and part of the process of research (Acker, Barry, & Gseveld, 1991; Denzin, 1994; Mies, 1983).

During fieldwork, I was acted on as well as acting. My activity influenced the lives of the youth; their activity influenced my life and identity. This interplay was at times difficult to balance. Within my first few months of fieldwork, Patty,¹ a teen girl I was getting to know, told me that she was going to jump another girl. The interaction began when I asked Patty what she would be doing that night. "I gotta do something bad," she replied, pulling me aside. We spent some time talking in a back hallway of the club. Patty explained the circumstances of the situation. She felt that she had to proceed with the fight to protect her best friend, who was being threatened by another girl. I had to decide how much to interfere in Patty's life:

"Is there any other way to deal with this?" I ask Patty. "I tried to talk with her. I did. I was on the phone with her up until I came here. 'Cause she's my friend too. I don't want to have to jump her. But she won't listen. I keep tellin' her that her jumping my best friend won't change anything. . . . I tried to talk her out of it. But now, [exhale of breath] violence is the last resort. I don't have no choice." "Have you thought about the consequences for you?" I ask her. "What if the cops show up? You don't want to get in trouble with the law. You told me you want to go to school on a basketball scholarship, you can't be getting in trouble with the law." She shakes her head. "And what if she has a knife?" I ask Patty. "What if it escalates?" She shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders. "That's why I've got my friends coming with me. I mean, [exhale of breath] I've got plenty of people," she says, tapping her chest and putting her arms to the side in the motion of a circle. . . . "Patty, I just don't want you to get hurt." "I know, I'm not. That's why I've got my friends coming. And I ain't carrying no weapons," she pulls up her baggy T-shirt to reveal the top of her sweat pants. "I don't want to get into that," she says. I shake my head. "But I don't have a choice," Patty insists. "I tried to talk. I thought," she says, pointing to her head. "I did think. I thought and tried to talk but it didn't work so I don't have any choice but to jump her." I shrug my shoulders. "I know, Patty, you did think. That's good. You did the right thing. You tried to talk, but I'm against violence, so I just can't say that what you're doing is alright."

Our conversation continued for a few minutes more, and I emphasized that I wanted to see Patty at the club the next time I came, safe and unharmed. But when she left, I knew that she was probably going to go through with the fight.

I had to make a choice between allowing Patty to leave the club, with the knowledge that she may involve herself in a violent situation, or telling the staff at the club what she had told me. I was new to the site and was still trying to gain the trust of the youth. I knew that breaking that trust might have consequences for my future ability to have frank conversations with Patty as well as other teens. I was left with the unnerving feeling that I had placed my role

as a researcher over my empathic concerns. By striving for the objective lens for which scientific theory calls, I had disconnected myself from my own personal motivations for conducting research: to help improve the lives of individual youth.

In retrospect, I believe that I made the wrong decision in not intervening in Patty's plan. As a 1st-year researcher, however, I was torn between recognizing my own role in the lives of the research participants and following the mantra of "participant-observer," which in pure form calls for participation without bias or influence. Today, I recognize this premise as impossible. It was that tension that I confronted in that first, uncomfortable encounter.

In my attention to developing my identity as an "objective" researcher, I focused on separating Patty and her peers from myself and my concerns. I did not recognize that this was not only impossible but also undesirable. As Dubois (1983) pointed out, the "knower" and the "known" are inseparable. Patty and I were both engaged in the process of knowing and being known; she was exploring me, and how much she could trust me, just as I was studying her. By concentrating on the gap, not the link, between us, I unintentionally made Patty an object of research rather than a participant. Minimizing the split between researcher and participant, on the other hand, can curtail objectification (Cook & Fonow, 1990). Examining the space between the "subject" and "object," what Michelle Fine (1994) has called "working the hyphen," can help to illuminate how both individuals are implicated in the construction of knowledge and identity. I was unable, however, to allow the connection between Patty and myself to become a valid site of study and knowledge (Cosgrove & McHugh, 2000; Olesen, 1994). Instead I stepped back into the role of observer.

My discomfort in the situation stemmed from acting in a way contrary to my own values. The removal of emotionality from the research process seemed to me the "correct" action as a researcher but felt profoundly unnatural. As I became further acquainted with feminist theory, I found I was not alone. This disjuncture between personal experience and scientific expectations has been the site of much feminist criticism. In R. Campbell and Wasco's (2000) overview of feminist social science, they defined the goal of feminist research as capturing "women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women's voices as sources of knowledge. In other words, the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome" (p. 783). That process, they continued, must be inclusive of feminist values of equality and respect. My early gut reaction that removing my own values and empathic reaction to Patty from the research process was unnatural at best and hypocritical at worst thus tapped into one of the overarching feminist criticisms of the scientific process (Cancian, 1992).

Feminist researchers have also highlighted the importance of positionality. The researcher's awareness of her or his own subjective experi-

ence in relation to that of her or his participants' is key to acknowledging the limits of objectivity. It recognizes the bidirectional nature of research. I am subject, object, and researcher. My participants are subjects, objects, and actors. To assert otherwise is to be disingenuous about the process of research, especially qualitative research.

This was never more apparent to me than while conducting my dissertation research. During that time, I spent anywhere from 1 to 4 days a week at my site, a youth organization located near an urban public housing project. From coaching volleyball to judging a baby contest to attending a funeral, my activities were flung far afield from traditional, empirical research. Anyone who has worked with adolescents knows that it is impossible not to be affected by their energy, their intensity, their unique combination of cruelty and charm. And anyone who has spent any length of time within a community of people knows that it is impossible not to feel emotionally connected to the lives of those within that circle. To deny such influences would be to deny the humanity of both researcher and participant. Through examining the humanity of both, we learn more about our topic and ourselves, we bring richness and honesty to our research. To a feminist researcher, this is critical.

The Researcher's Role

As part of the evaluation for which I conducted my initial fieldwork, we provided feedback and summary reports to the clubs. My relationship with staff at the club was, therefore, complicated by my position as an evaluator, not just as a researcher. Although with time staff tended to forget about this aspect of my job, I was aware of it. Certain staff took a "reporter's" stance toward me, launching into a litany of their current activities and projects whenever they saw me. This made me uncomfortable and I tried to discourage such interactions. My role was highlighted, however, in the end-of-year meetings with club leadership and staff.

In the first such meeting, the staff were amazed at the amount of information we had gathered over the years. The club director felt that we had "hit the nail on the head" in terms of our analysis. We praised the efforts of one staff member, Cheryl, and talked a lot about things she had said and done. After hearing herself quoted, Cheryl laughed and said,

"Oh my god! My good pal Nancy who was by my side these 2 years, I didn't know you were remembering all that! My god!" [The club director] laughed. "Yeah, well the hidden cameras." [The principal investigator] said something about the girls following Cheryl out for her cigarette breaks. "Were you everywhere?" Cheryl asked me laughing. "Yeah, in the bathroom, there she was in the next stall," [the club director] said smiling. Cheryl laughed. [Another staff member] made a joking comment about tape recorders. Cheryl shook her head and smiled. "Wow, I didn't realize how much you were able to take in." "Yeah, I

figured you were so busy you wouldn't have time to notice all that," [the club director] said. Cheryl added "I'm glad I didn't know because if I had realized, I would have been always watching myself and stuff, but this way I was just relaxed and whatever." "Well, we're only using that quote in a good way," I said laughing.

Although this was a lighthearted interaction, I was aware of its deeper implications. I managed to blend in, but my "true identity," as a researcher, was "revealed" by our report. I was no casual member of the community; I was recording their every movement. Cheryl acknowledged that an awareness of that probably would have changed her behavior around me. Despite the complimentary comments about our accuracy, there was also a vague sense of discomfort on the part of some staff.

My remark that we had only used the quote "in a good way" attests to my own discomfort. During my time in the club, I came to know some youth and staff quite well. This was part of the goal. Both the evaluation and my dissertation research aimed to explore individual experiences of the site. Yet this also meant that I had to balance my relationships with these individuals as a researcher and as a human. As I got to know staff and youth, they often shared personal stories with me, including information about mental illness, pregnancy, and family issues. Although this deepened my appreciation of their individual experiences, it also led to a profound discomfort as I thought about the fact that I would return to my office and record their comments in my field notes. Such recording felt dishonest to me as a woman who believes in empathic human relationships. Yet my role as a researcher demanded thorough field notes. I balanced that role precariously on my feminist shoulders.

Early in my fieldwork, I did not know how to define myself as a researcher. I did not fit into any mold comfortably. In my 3rd year of graduate school, I discovered feminist researchers who were asking the very questions that were tumbling around my brain. How do we privilege individual experience in research? How can we make any claim to objectivity? How can we respect and value the participants and be truthful to their experiences? I had found a name by which to call myself and a framework in which to analyze my own experiences. I discovered that my need for self-reflexivity was part and parcel to feminist methodology. Privileging individual experience extends to considering the experience and influence of the researcher in and on the research process.

PRIVILEGING THE INDIVIDUAL

The importance of individual experience to feminist researchers comes out of the interpretivist paradigm, grounding research in the everyday lives of women (M. Campbell, 1998; Olesen, 1994). Feminist researchers such as Dorothy Smith (1987, 1999) have emphasized the importance of making daily

experiences “problematic.” They recognize that activity is “located in society and history and embedded in social relations” (Acker et al., 1991). Methodology that recognizes the self as historically located and produced through daily experience, language, and activity (Bloom, 1998) naturally privileges everyday lives. Furthermore, it allows questions, theory, and problematics to emerge from participants’ narratives and experiences (Bloom, 1998; Harding, 1987). It recognizes the multiplicity within any category and seeks to examine the experiences of those traditionally excluded from the production of knowledge (R. Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Harding, 1987).

Yet it also requires acknowledging one’s own role in the process. As I proceeded with my dissertation research, I was constantly considering my own relationships with Cheryl, other staff, and youth both inside and outside the club walls. I could not ignore that the social positioning and personal values I brought with me to the site influenced my research and the human relationships I was forming in the process. The self-reflexivity that has become a traditional part of feminist research requires acknowledging the multiple positions that the researcher occupies in relation to her or his participants as well as in the world as a whole (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Mies, 1983; D. Wolf, 1996). Jayati Lal (1996) has noted that in her own work, “the many locations that shape my identity and notions of self influenced my choices, access, and procedures in research and also permeate the representation of research subjects in my writing” (p. 190).

I was personally confronted by exactly this issue when I decided to explore the importance of race in youths’ experiences at the club. It seemed to me that the youths’ common racial background² provided a basis for making the club a comfortable and accepting place. The housing project from which the club drew many members is primarily African American. The neighborhood feels segregated from the rest of the city, and conversations with youth about leaving the projects confirmed that belief. Although a few staff members were White, there was a shared urban, Black culture that served as the base of the youths’ experiences. This was evident in the dialect that youth and staff used, the cultural references made, and even the fact that BET was the channel of choice on the club’s television.

The assumption of a shared racial background was highlighted, in my eyes, by an interaction I had with a 5-year-old girl in the bathroom at the club:

Suddenly a head appeared under the wall separating the 2 stalls. “Hey!” I said. “What are you doing? Don’t be looking at me!” I said, putting my hand down to push her head back to her side. There was giggling from the other stall. . . . The head appeared again. . . . We went through this one or two more times before she stopped and left the stall. . . . I came out of the stall and . . . asked her her name. She said “Monica.” “Are you White or Black?” she asked me.

This question took me aback. As a blondish-pale-fairly-freckled-half-WASP-half-Jew I had never been taken for African American:

"I'm White," I said. "Do you wish you were Black?" she asked me. "Well, no, I do read a lot of books by Black women and listen to a lot of music by Black artists, but I don't wish I was anyone other than who I am."

I was so taken aback and surprised by Monica's inquiry that I was not sure why she asked, let alone how to respond. I concluded that Monica assumed that everyone in the neighborhood was African American and therefore, if I was there, I must be Black. Despite my own pondering of the deeper implications of her question, the conversation continued on a lighter note:

"Do you call farts farts or poots?" "What?" I asked. "Farts or poots?" "Um, farts," I said. She then proceeded to try to make farting noises and tried to lock me in the bathroom.

Although Monica quickly followed her racial inquiry with a follow-up about naming bodily functions, I still took the incident to heart. I probably gave her first question more weight than I should have in thinking about the role of race in club members' lives. I did not give enough consideration to her ability to shift from the topic of race to farts and what that meant about race's place in her daily experiences. Dubois (1983) insisted that no science is value free because we are all "shaped by culture," and our belief system inevitably influences our questions and interpretations. My interpretation of this incident, and what I was willing and able to see in it, was clearly influenced by my own positioning and values (R. Campbell & Wasco, 2000; DeVault, 1995; Ladner, 1971). As a researcher, I was blinded to certain meanings of Monica's actions because they contradicted my own set of beliefs (Katz, 1996).

Beginning from an assumption of the importance of racial commonality, I went on to ask youth about race in a variety of ways. To my surprise, all kids, even the few White and Hispanic youth, said that race was not an issue in the club or their lives. At first I found this difficult to believe, and I continued to push on the topic. I saw race everywhere I turned in the club because I was separated from the majority of youth by my own race and class. My own experience of the research site was literally coloring the questions I asked. I made the mistake of not privileging my participants own daily lives as a source of knowledge (Acker et al., 1991; R. Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Katz, 1996). Instead, I attempted to make their experiences fit with my own research agenda. It was only when I recognized this, and made a conscious effort to listen to what the youth were saying to me, that I was able to uncover their more complex, multidimensional experiences of a variety of social categories, including race but melded with social class and gender. My positionality eventually allowed me, I believe, a more nuanced analysis of race, class, and gender issues. But it first required self-reflexivity to understand and overcome my biases and expectations.

THE RESEARCHER'S RELATION TO THE PARTICIPANT: UNMASKING SOCIAL POWER

Identifying societal power relations is one of the focal points of feminist methodology (Acker et al., 1991; Olesen, 1994). As Fine (1992) has highlighted, "Power asymmetries structure gender relations." Fine and others have also emphasized how gender "braids" with social class, race, and other social categories to constitute distinct relations to social power (Dill, 1987). Feminist research, therefore, requires critical examination of the sources of social power (Harding, 1987; Marcus, 1986). It implicates the researcher as well as outside relations of authority. As I proceeded with my dissertation research, I had to examine my own relationship to the participants in terms of the larger rubric of social power beyond the club.

In the winter of my 3rd year of fieldwork in the club, I conducted two focus groups to explore themes that emerged in youths' discussions of experiences of self in the club. These focus groups helped me to develop pilot interviews. I conducted interviews in the spring and explained to youth that this was a learning process for me. I asked them to provide me with feedback on my questions and to let me know if they thought a question did not make sense.

Nicole, an African American teen girl who was 14 at the time, was one of the first pilot interviews I conducted. I had known Nicole throughout my time at the club. She was an active member and participated in all the girls' groups and sports. Nicole is a friendly, outspoken girl with a warm smile and bright eyes. Intelligent and responsible, she is both physically and personally attractive and an engaging interviewee. During my interview with her, the issue of positionality and social power emerged in her reaction to one of the questions. The following is an excerpt from my field notes from that day:

[Nicole] had an interesting response to the question about what she thinks it means to be Black (which was how she identified her race/ethnicity). "I don't think that's a good question," she said shaking her head. "Okay, why not?" I asked. "'Cause you know, everyone says that race don't matter no more but then they all ask us like what it means to be Black and if it don't matter then why does everyone want to know?" "That's a good question," I said. "I can tell you why I am interested in it. I think that we like to pretend that race doesn't matter anymore but unfortunately, I think that racism still exists. And White people a lot of time think that race doesn't mean them. You know, like people think that race only applies to people who are Black. And so I am interested in what race means to different people, you know? Like for some people it seems to be important to have a sort of connection to their culture. And for others that doesn't seem to matter as much." Nicole nodded. "Yeah, yeah, nah, I know what you mean. . . ." [I then continued] "So, no, I think that is a very good point and if it's not a good question then it's not a good question and that is good for me to know."

Nicole's reaction pointed out to me that despite my attempt to share power with the youth in these interviews, I was still the researcher and looked at her

as the subject. I was still asking the questions from a different plane. Despite my attempts to create an interview based on issues that the youth brought up in our focus groups, my own assumptions had still objectified Nicole and her peers and reproduced them in a way congruent with how they are represented in society at large (Bhavnani, 1993). I had not succeeded in making the interview as participatory as I had hoped. My asking Nicole about her racial experiences, from my own position as the White researcher, objectified her in a way that she, rightfully, resisted.

Furthermore, I was part of the "everyone," the people who come and ask Nicole and her peers about their racial experiences. My need to ask about racial experiences demonstrated my position as part of the racial majority and thus, in clear relation to Nicole in terms of social power. In addition, as the researcher, I had the power to "name" the issue—I defined the research topic and gave different aspects of it value according to my own beliefs (Acker et al., 1991; Dubois, 1983). Nicole, however, confronted me on this and challenged my definition of her experience. Interestingly, Nicole had no problem talking to me about gender inequality. In this instance, where our social positioning was in one aspect shared, she was willing and able to articulate and discuss the issue. We shared our experiences of gendered social power with each other during the interview, shifting our relationship as researcher and participant around the different categories we inhabit (Mies, 1983; Phoenix, 1994).

Nicole became one of the participants in my dissertation work. In fact, she approached me about taking part. Despite her prior declaration that race does not matter, during the second dissertation interview, Nicole brought up the issue of divisions within the African American community and how that is played out in the media:

"I mean, it's like whenever there is someone dark they are bad and the light-skinned people are all good. But in my life . . . I don't know. I think they got it wrong." She talked a fair amount about how frustrating it was and how there is no one who looks like her. "You know, I have noticed that too," I said. "I mean, it's great that Halle Berry won the academy award and was the first African American to win best actress and the same year as Denzel and all that, but I was sitting there thinking does anyone else notice that she is about the lightest Black woman you can get?" "Yeah!" Nicole said, her face lighting up and nodding. "I thought I was just crazy and that I was the only one who noticed this and was just crazy. I mean, I love videos and I get so angry when I watch videos 'cause its all them red-bone girls." "What's red bone?" I asked. "Red-bone like," Nicole pointed at her arm. "Like, it just means light skinned. I guess, I don't know why, I guess 'cause you can see the red. Like light-skinned people and White people get red, you know. Like you'd be red boned. But you know I get red too. That's why I like rock. I love rock videos 'cause they don't have any of those color issues where . . . you know it's all red-boned girls."

In this case, Nicole was able to discuss her experience of social power within the African American community with me. Perhaps this was partially due to

the fact that I was removed from the rubric of this aspect of race relations. Yet Nicole's discussion of Black women in the media emphasized the ways in which gender and race are intertwined, creating different relations to social power for women of different races and classes (Dill, 1987; Fine, 1992). It also put the two of us in distinct relation to each other, as women who have different gender experiences based on race. My acknowledgement of her experience seemed to validate her. My analytical notes from the interview summarize the rapport that developed through the interview:

Nicole was incredibly talkative and happy during the interview. She had a lot of energy and spent a lot of time spontaneously telling me stories, sometimes about the pictures³ and sometimes just about other things in her life, although often they spun off the photograph. . . . A few times during the interview, she apologized for talking so much while I was trying to take notes. Each time I told her not to worry about it and I was happy to have her talk so much. Sometimes I would just put my pen down and listen if she was just telling me different stories about herself and her life, rather than risk missing something or seeming inattentive by trying to write everything down. . . . Sometimes . . . Nicole would make a comment about how she always thought she was crazy or was the only one who thought something when I would nod and say that I had noticed that as well or that I had also thought something. At one point she just stopped and looked at me. "I really like talking to you!" she said grinning. "I mean, usually when I do interviews I just answer the question and that's it, but I really feel like I can talk to you."

I was happy that I was able to strike a balance with Nicole where she felt validated and agentic in our interactions.

Feminist researchers have emphasized how women's lives have not been understood by traditional theories and research. They have insisted on the use of women's lives as resources for the generation of "problematics" (Harding, 1987) and alternative understandings of self and subjectivity (Bloom, 1996). I attempted to do this through listening to Nicole, and other youths', experiences and reconsidering the questions I explored in response to their voices.

I would argue, as others have done, that it is important to examine silences in research around axes other than gender as well (Cancian, 1992; Cosgrove & McHugh, 2000; Fine, 1992). It is necessary to scrutinize "all dimensions of inequality" (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988). The challenge for the feminist researcher is to identify and grapple with the power dynamics implicated in the researcher-participant relationship and to examine how her own subject positions, and those of her participants, affect that power structure (Bloom, 1998; Lal, 1996; Williams, 1996; D. Wolf, 1996).

I faced this challenge in the process of conducting my interviews and fieldwork. Sometimes it confronted me directly. Certain club members were wary of me and, at times, expressed hostility to me through teasing. Others, especially older males, simply avoided me. I recognized that my race, gender, and social class (which most youth probably assumed to be middle class) would

influence my interviews. I was particularly apprehensive about engaging with the older males. I had gotten to know many of the girls through the girls' programs. Furthermore, I could often find a point of connection with them based on gender, although this was complicated by very different positions within the gender system. I was separated from the males on three axes: gender, race, and class. I wondered how this would affect my ability to create a comfortable interview atmosphere, for both my participants and myself.

The first boy I interviewed for my dissertation put issues of social power on the table. John is a 17-year-old Black male, part of a group fond of teasing me. I was uncertain how he would react to me during the interview. In response to my asking if he ever "acts in a way that is not really you," John looked me straight in the eye and said, "Yea. Job interview, round different races. . . 'Cause White people look at us, think we're ignorant. I just want to show them we're not ignorant." There was no mystery about where I fit into that equation.

Had this occurred in my 1st year of fieldwork, I may have proceeded cautiously. My own discomfort with confronting racial inequality and prejudice may have prevented me from fully exploring the topic with him. By this point, however, I had become more comfortable with my ability to interview adolescents. I was able to probe without feeling intrusive. I was confident that I could impart my respect for John and his opinions through the interview process. We continued the interview without my making a direct response to his answer. Later in the interview, he gave the following statement:

I walk down the street and people just move out of my way. White people just—I had a little cousin say he wish he was White 'cause they get treated better. [So it's a daily experience for you?] Yea—they lock their doors. People walk by you on the street.

I never denied John's experiences, related them to myself, or reacted defensively. I tried to accept the social power issues being laid on the table. I recognized that our interview was taking place in an isolated moment in time and space, but that did not remove us from the larger social context; the macro-political structure influenced our relationship to each other within the club (Marcus, 1986; Olesen, 1994; Williams, 1996). I believe that John expected to be objectified in the interview, as he was on the street. I did my best to keep from making John an object of study, instead, valuing his voice as an actor (Acker et al., 1991; Bhavnani, 1993).

John's attitude toward me changed following the interview. Whenever I saw him he smiled at me, said hi, and often came over and shook my hand. He was not the only youth whose behavior toward me shifted after our interviews. I am convinced that this was at least partially due to my willingness to acknowledge the power issues inherent in our relationships and to respect their agency.

At other times, the challenges surrounding issues of social power were indirect. Such situations resulted from my own awareness of my social position and, quite frankly, a strain of White liberal guilt. The hierarchical nature of the researcher-participant relationship is further complicated when class and race differences exist (D. Wolf, 1996), as was the case with me. Some have suggested that direct action is the only way to truly help break down hierarchies. Thus, researchers must engage in the research site on equal footing with the participants, doing "any work that needs to be done" (Mies, 1983). This is one area that even if I wanted to, I could not avoid. The clubs are often short staffed and in need of volunteers. I was a consistently present adult. As such, I often served as an extra set of eyes, ears, and hands. Sometimes staff asked me to monitor a room, assist a child with homework, or help lead an activity. I did everything from cut out decorations for bulletin boards, to stuff goodie bags, to serve food at a Mother's Day dinner. Slingsing fried chicken makes for a quick leap off the ivory tower.

My relationship to the community and the research participants was brought to the front of my mind during the spring of my final year of fieldwork, when one of the participants' siblings was killed in an accident. The club organized a drive to assist the family and hosted the repast after the funeral. Club members made a memorial for the youth.

The program director called me the morning of the accident. I spent the afternoon at the club, trying to help out however I could. I collected goods and money from friends and coworkers to contribute to a fund for the family. I attended the funeral and helped serve food at the repast. But I also became very aware that although I was in some ways a part of the grieving community, I was in very important ways separate from it. I left the neighborhood every day to return to my apartment; I did not have to live with the constant reminder of the tragedy. I had access to money and material resources to bring into the community, even if I was living on a student budget. All of this, I knew, influenced my relationship to my participants and my position within the community.

THE INSIDER/OUTSIDER DILEMMA

I was clearly an outsider within the club and community. Yet by the end of my 4 years at the club, my position was more complex. I had been there longer than, if not as intensively as, many of the staff. The issue of being simultaneously an insider and an outsider within a research setting has been discussed by many feminist researchers. The possibility for such multiple positionalities is made possible by the diversity within any social category (Lal, 1996; D. Wolf, 1996). Nobody can be "socially marked in only one way" (di Leonardo, 1997). All human relationships encapsulate multiple subject

positions that take on different salience and meaning in various contexts (Bloom, 1998). This yields multiple ways in which we can be both part of and excluded from almost any social situation. The spring of that year I stood empathically with a foot in the club door but simultaneously with a foot outside, in my own social positioning. The fact that all of us are both outsiders and insiders yields important implications for our research (M. Wolf, 1996; Zavella, 1996).

Although the role of insider-outsider can be difficult to balance, it sometimes provides unique opportunities for information gathering. I found that I was often able to ask questions as an outsider who was not expected to know certain things. At the same time, I had been around enough that staff and youth generally felt comfortable talking candidly, both to me and in my presence. Such a situation occurred during an informal conversation that I came in on with some teen girls at the club. They were commenting on club staff and hiring practices. A popular female staff member had recently left and the reasons behind her departure were not totally clear. I decided to use this opportunity to pursue the situation. In this case, my outsider status combined with my insider knowledge proved helpful:

"So, do you actually know what happened with Cheryl?" I asked Janet [an older teen member]. She shook her head. "Nah, I don't know. They say she quit. But she says she didn't quit. I just came one day and she was gone." Janet shrugged. The other girls at the table nodded. "They put around a petition to get her out of here," Janet said. I raised my eyebrows. "Really? Who's they?" "The parents. They did a petition and sent it to corporate to get rid of Cheryl." "Why?" I asked. "'Cause she was talking to us about sex. And the parents complained about that. But we're grown, ya know? What we do in that young women's group is our business. That was our space to talk about what we wanted to. And I tell you, if it weren't for Cheryl, half these little girls would be runnin' around fuckin'. I'll put that right out there 'cause that's the truth. She's the reason these girls aren't gettin' down." Dynasty and Tynesia both began nodding vigorously in agreement and making comments such as "uh huh" and "that's the truth!" "I mean, she would talk with us, ya know? Well, yeah, you know 'cause you were always right there with us. So you know," Janet said, looking at me and nodding.

The girls were comfortable enough with me as a member of the community to talk about the "behind the scenes action" at the club and in their lives. Yet unlike a staff person, I was not expected to know the details of the situation or to be "on the side" of club leadership.

A year or so later, Janet, who now visited the club only occasionally, defended my position at the club to a younger member. Janet put her arm around me smiling and said, "Man, she's been here longer than you have!" This was especially poignant to me because in the 1st year of my fieldwork, I had felt particularly disliked by Janet, who rarely acknowledged my presence or spoke to me. Four years later, I felt accepted.

Despite that warm feeling, my outsider status was still constantly on display. Slang terms such as *red bone* and *hype* had to be defined for me by youth.

When I asked one girl what a hype was, she looked at me and grinned, tilting her head to the side. "You don't know what a hype is?" she asked incredulously. At other times, my outsider status made kids assume that I did not know things that I actually knew. This was especially true for information about music or gangs. My singing along with a tune on BET served as the fodder for teasing from one boy for more than a year. Acknowledging that I knew about a particular gang led a group of boys to speculate that I was in the gang. These interactions made me the object of jokes and teasing. They also assumed the improbability of my—a White, female, adult—knowing about these things. Although I was the "researcher" and the youth were the "researched," they had transformed me into the object of their own inquiry and scrutiny.

Such was often my experience at the club, as I shifted back and forth from subject to object, balancing my position in the club with my position in academia. I believe that my shifting position as researcher and object was made more poignant by the fact that I was working with adolescents. Many teenagers are not shy about speaking up to adults. The youth with whom I interacted were more than happy to demonstrate to me that I was as much Other to them as they were to me. They shattered any notion I may have had about research participants as passive Others, unable to "reflect back on and affect the researcher" (Acker et al., 1991). On nearly every visit, the teens reminded me in some way of the multiple positions I held in relation to them (Fine, 1994).

CONTINUED CONFLICTS

My own shifting self did not stabilize when I left the field. The process of analysis and write-up continues to raise the same issues I struggled with as I conducted my research. And in fact, they should. Feminist researchers have begun to talk more about the importance of weaving self-reflexivity into the process of research as a whole, including analysis and writing, not just fieldwork (Denzin, 1994). If I were to note the issues and move on, I would be recreating the very research structures that I resisted in those early years (Bhavnani, 1993). I hope that as I become less green, I do not lose the sense of schizophrenia with which I have grappled throughout graduate school. I believe it is necessary for feminist researchers to acknowledge and nurture the fault line along which so many of us walk and work, to nurture it not only in ourselves but also in upcoming generations of researchers. Had I not been provided along the way with assurance that I was not alone in my struggle, I would have surely set my sights elsewhere, leaving research to those for whom it did not pose the same ethical dilemmas. By telling my own story, of struggle and engagement, I hope both to create a more honest analytic process for my own research and to reassure other young feminist researchers that they are not alone. As a community, we must continue to mine the fault line

between feminist and researcher, woman and academic, and uncover the ways in which our work can both emancipate and enlighten ourselves and our society.

NOTES

1. All names used herein, with the exception of my own, have been changed to protect the identities of the youth and staff at the clubs.

2. The vast majority of youth at the club, when I began my research, were African American. During the next 4 years, however, more Hispanic and a few more White youth came to the club. The majority of members are still African American or biracial.

3. As part of the research project, youth were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos that described who they were. Half of the photos were guided by specific instructions (i.e., take five photographs in the club, take a photograph of something that represents something you'd like to be in the future, etc.) and the other half were left up to the youth. Half of the second interview was spent discussing the photographs.

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