

5-2011

# Cultures in the Making: An Examination of the Ethical and Methodological Implications of Collaborative Research

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### Recommended Citation

Siry, Chrstina; Ali-Khan, Carolyne; and Zuss, Mark, "Cultures in the Making: An Examination of the Ethical and Methodological Implications of Collaborative Research" (2011). *CUNY Academic Works*.  
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## **Cultures in the Making: An Examination of the Ethical and Methodological Implications of Collaborative Research**

*Christina Siry, Carolyne Ali-Khan & Mark Zuss*

**Key words:**  
collaborative  
research;  
educational  
inquiry; ethics

**Abstract:** This paper explores ethical and methodological implications of collaborative research, and we discuss our examination of ways to work towards participatory, ethical relationships in research. Our core concerns pertain to the experiential, lived and qualitative relations within emergent research communities. Questions that have guided us include: What does "we" mean in research practice? How do we become a community of researchers? What forms of relations are shaped in the continuous process of inquiry? Whose interests are served? How can a community of researchers and their participants, formed and sustained by reciprocal, ethical relations, of trust, shared knowledges, curiosity and friendship, emerge? Key to approaching these is examining the contingent epistemological goals of research. We discuss four essential elements in the ethical qualities of research as a community of practice that stand out for "us."

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### **1. Introduction**

We wish to put into question the composition, integrity and durability of researchers, including ourselves. We are uncertain about the very viability of some purportedly shared relations of knowledge between researchers and the communities into which they participate and practice. As we see it, the production of research knowledge is generated in uneven conditions of power, cultural capital and media, and is never disinterested in its structure or methods. We believe that the organization of time and of access, fieldwork time, resources, archives and recording, for instance, militate against any simple productivity that would reduce research work and temporality to alienated commodity production.

Therefore the co-production of knowledge cannot be expressed, read and experienced as might the production of an object. We also think it is important to note that at every level knowledge that is co-produced is lived and felt. We argue that the triad of ontology, epistemology and axiology are never more closely connected than when they are pressed together as real concerns in the voices and lives of different people jointly engaged in producing a single work. [1]

We are educators and educational researchers, and in this work we ask questions of the nature of relations between researchers and the communities they practice in, and, specifically, we explore questions of inter-researcher relations. Sometimes these are one and the same. We believe that the relations between researchers themselves, the supposedly "horizontal" level of traditional fieldwork, must be brought to constant reflection and negotiation if it is to adhere to truly participatory principles of collaboration. If researchers who work together do not commit to rigorous reflection, and to revisiting this commitment to rigor, (individually as well as collectively) then we contend that they (we) run the risk of slipping into unequal and perhaps inequitable power relationships. We have noticed how the everyday practices of "getting things done" in research can push against the notion of equitable collaboration. In addition, as personality dispositions steer us, and friendships compel us, the nature of any collaboration becomes increasingly complex. We believe that this is not our problem alone, and that it merits examination. In the following sections we will discuss our examination of ways to work towards truly participatory, ethical relationships in collaborative research, as well as the tensions that emerge through this process. [2]

## **2. Shared Foundations**

Grounded in cultural studies and critical theory, and borrowing terms from Michel FOUCAULT (1982), Pierre BOURDIEU (1980), and Paul RABINOW (1996), "we" want to ask: What is the lived quality of our ethical relations within our research communities? How are they established discursively with science's epistemological claims and how do they function as a means for making knowledge? Can we ever fully ascertain and address the complex intersections of the non-discursive, experiential richness of any social field- as these intersections are always mediated by implicit hierarchies of skills, differentials in symbolic capital in literacies, media expertise, fieldwork protocols, the spacing and intensity of bodies and gesture? [3]

"We" think that relations between researchers, researchers and the community, researchers and knowledge, and the community and knowledge all remain primarily tacit despite the way that they are formally explicated in research documents and agendas. Anthropomorphically we think of these relations as living entities, in that (as we see it) they involve relationships that demand acknowledgment. In the service of honoring these relations we believe it is important that we do not rest (even if assured by Ethical Review Boards or Institutional Research Boards that we are being "fair"), that we think on our feet as well as with our heads, hearts and intuitions, and that we allow ourselves to be perpetually disquieted by the very act of being in the research relationship. Gaile

CANNELLA and Yvonna LINCOLN distinguish between two main perspectives on ethical conduct in qualitative inquiry with one perspective being that ethics is "a regulatory enterprise that creates an illusion of ethical practice" and the second situating ethics as "a philosophical concern for equity and the imposition of power within the conceptualization and practice of research itself" (2007, p.315). As we work to have research "approved" as ethical, there is a danger that in protecting subjects with formal papers, the more complex and nuanced philosophical concerns for ethics as an embedded component of inquiry is marginalized in the enactment of the research itself. [4]

Conversely we believe that unexplained or unexplored research relations fill the research context with ambiguities and tensions. By framing ethics as both discourses and practices (WEINSTEIN, 2008), and recognizing ethics as embedded within inquiry, we squarely situate ethics as a social practice (ROTH, 2004). This ongoing social practice of engaging in, and with, a critical ethical stance is interwoven with and inseparable from methodological considerations as we engage in inquiry. We believe it is vital to attempt to articulate expectations, to make explicit, whenever and wherever possible, the purpose and place of our research practice within communities that we participate in. We are firm in our conviction that in order for research to be truly ethical and not exploitative we must make clear that we wish to be "visitors" who are also assistants to the needs, values and resources of those who have invited and accepted us. Paul RABINOW (1996) asks us to think how our research, whether in social or natural sciences, is instrumental in the birthing of "forms of life." How are the social relations in sustained inquiry reproduced even as new forms may become manifest? As we attempt this we also believe that the same theoretical and ethical spotlight needs to be returned toward its purported sources and motivations, directed at the working relationships between researchers. [5]

### **3. Situating "We"**

We are a university professor, a graduate student, and a post-doctoral researcher. We are all educators and we have all written with our students as well as with peers. Our "researcher identities" are grounded in our work as teachers—we are teachers of elementary, secondary, and university students, and our teaching and research intends to be as participatory as is possible within the institutional structures (that we continually seek to push against). As this paper unfolds, we intend to situate ourselves more fully through our retelling of our own experiences as researchers working towards ethical, reflexive, collaborative practices. [6]

Our theoretical/conceptual explorations have emerged through our individual research studies, which utilize methodologies of participatory approaches including critical ethnography (CARSPECKEN, 1996), cowriting (LANDER & ENGLISH, 2000), coresearching (SIRY & ZAWATSKI, forthcoming), and visual methods of children's representations (EWALD & LIGHTFOOT, 2001). The conceptualizing of this work has emerged from our ongoing relationships within the structures of academia. The mode of inquiry we utilize here is necessarily one

of collaboration, as we work together with each other to generate theory, raise questions, explore purposes, and in turn generate new theory and questions. To that end, we have collaborated in critically examining our roles as researchers within the hierarchical structures of schools and universities. In doing so, the following questions have been highlighted through our synthesis of these projects: [7]

What does "we" mean in research practice? How do we become a community of researchers? What forms of relations are shaped in the continuous process of inquiry? Whose interests are served? How can a community of researchers and their participants formed and sustained by reciprocal, ethical relations, of trust, shared knowledges, curiosity and friendship, ever emerge? Through the exploration of these key questions, we have considered our work as researchers and teacher educators and inquired into the ways in which we can begin to use these questions to work towards improved, more just, research communities within our own contexts, individually and collectively. [8]

#### **4. Considering Critical Relations: Ontology as Evidence**

In framing our theoretical/conceptual perspectives around notions of the ethical quality of research practice, we are intent on keeping open critical reflection on the relations that are generated within our work, in particular, the kinds of "friendship", reciprocity, and rapport that can emerge. This project attempts to reflect and advance a critical ontology saturated and sustained by and within participatory ethical and axiological relations. Key concerns revolve around issues of trust and the ethos of friendship as we think about co-constructing research and writing in participatory ways. Central to this also has been highlighting the ethics of working with students, and the structures at play in establishing friendship and bonds with our students, as we are immersed in an educational culture in which we are cautioned by our colleagues not to get "too close" in our collaborative writing and research. Critical pedagogue Joe KINCHELOE, drawing from and continuing the work of Paulo FREIRE, notes that accepting objective criteria and holding the truths of rationality over those of passionate engagement (2008) is "dangerous" as objectivity is both a myth and a construct that has harmed disenfranchised populations. In contrast, passionate engagement is a subjective and openly partisan and engaged stance that demands that knowledge production not be severed from real world relations. We believe that the distance that we are expected to keep from our participants imperils not only our research but also our very humanity. As we whitewash our research to sanitary ontological positivism we concurrently wash ourselves clean of passion and human connections. We challenge the paradigms that hold fast to conceptions of ethics that are anchored in the normalcy of research/researcher distance as sound practice. [9]

Yet we recognize that the appeal of distance and objectivity is not simply one of convenience. Although we may believe that affairs of the heart and soul should be at the core of our intellectual endeavors, we are aware that relationships between individuals who do not have the same power positions yet are working

together are always in danger of being abusive, exploitative and romanticized by those who are not in danger of being harmed and who sit comfortably at the top. We wish to struggle with this, as we believe that a deep analysis of ethics involves being fully engaged with a reflective and politically literate analysis of our positions as researchers. Issues of power are always present in human subject research, especially in educational research where researchers are also academic practitioners who are working with those who are our "students." We have examined methodological approaches to try to ensure that their voices are as privileged as ours, yet ultimately, we are the initiators of the work. Within our theory generative process we have specifically focused on issues of friendship and trust and respect within these collaborative writing/researching relationships. [10]

The critical ontology we pursue is also a critical ethics. In discussions of research relations that by definition revolve around the knowledge production, axiology, epistemology, and ontology intertwine. Echoing RABINOW (1996), we ask, how does a shift to studying practice from the ethical "reconfigure the practice of knowledge?" (p.6). Ethics is ethical practice and ethical interactions. As we practice reflexivity with these issues, we believe that this act engages at once the full spectrum of our common lifeworlds: including the potential for the reciprocal expression of our senses, perceptions, theoretical curiosity, passions, interests and disciplinary and "folk" knowledges. [11]

## **5. The Ethical Qualities of Research as a Community of Practice**

Motivated by the desire to work towards ethical practice and praxis, we believe it isn't sufficient to raise questions with the goal of deconstructing our roles as "researchers" vis-à-vis the "researched." Rather, the act of deconstructing supports us in a theory generative reconstruction that positions us to move towards a more ethical practice. The goal of such work is the pursuit of equitable, ethical practice. We attempt to reconceptualize research as a denunciation of the will to truth, seeking ways to present the multiplicity of perspectives inherent in social life and to place "others" in the center of our work, rather than at the margins. This is our challenge as critical researchers, for simply providing the "voice" of our participants is far from enough, as we remain patronizing gatekeepers of the act of "giving voice" to others. Rather, we work together to "reconceptualize, rethink, and generate a new understanding and practice of research that could join the decolonialist struggle" (CANNELLA & VIRURU, 2004, p.147). Key to this process is examining the epistemological goals of research. To this end we delineate four essential elements in thinking about the ethical qualities of research as a community of practice that stand out for "us":

1. What Paul RABINOW (1996) calls *philia*, or the kinds of friendship that might form in sites for ethical reflection.
2. A dialogic reciprocity and recognition of differences in social capital, if not power over the direction, time and structure of the research project.

3. Attempts to surpass the individual as the point of reference for expertise, leadership, planning, assessment, vision—for a developing, if at first, tenuous, constellation of group identities.
4. Abandoning the image of "disinterest"—what BOURDIEU (1986) called *illusio* (in RABINOW, 1996), in recognizing the position of the researchers within and not outside the social field and its history. [12]

Concepts such as "researcher" and "researched" are socially, culturally embedded, and thus contingent (RABINOW, 2008). As we move forward in our own deconstruction and reconstruction of "researcher" we frame these elements within our own projects. In the next section we use these four points to guide us as we ask, what is the nature of our specific "communities" as they change, restructure, dissolve and are often reconstituted? [13]

### 5.1 *Philia* within research and towards ethical practice

*Philia* refers to the kinds of friendship that might form in sites for ethical reflection, and it is nothing less than an "ethical and epistemological practice" (RABINOW, 1996, p.15). *Philia* is a term that has been used to discuss and represent friendships through the centuries, and in fact has a significant role in the writings of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and other ancient Greek and Roman scholars. In this paper, we concern ourselves specifically with RABINOW's conceptualization of *philia*, yet we also recognize that the philosophical concept of *philia* has been discussed with a variety of foci (e.g., DEVERE, 2006). In fact, the Greek term *philos*, while often having been simply defined as the love within friendship, is a term that represents a wide range of emotional meanings (KAHN, 2010). [14]

Teaching and learning are pedagogical spaces in which deep forms of friendship can develop (WAGHID, 2008). When thinking of the kinds of friendship that might form in ethical teaching and research relationships, we highlight here our own writing/research relationships with each other. We feel comfortable in situating *philia* as central to an ethical practice, as we also can situate our experiences and standpoints towards a critical ethical perspective through our own relationships with one another. Of the three of us, two of us began to explore the ethics of collaboration and methodological approaches to cowriting and coresearching together when participating as doctoral students in the other's course on Qualitative Inquiry. Our collaborative investigation of key ethical issues in working with our students began within our relationship of *philia*, as we were situated to take risks in our exploration with, and through, the support of each other. As this relationship of friendship supported our inquiries, we took risks with the professor of the course as well, and these were supported by his interest in, and appreciation of, the work that we were doing. The composition and the nature of our research relationship was a part and parcel of the trust and friendships that developed as we inquired and learned together. [15]

## **5.2 Dialogic reciprocity and recognition of difference**

As we refer to a dialogic reciprocity and recognition of differences in social capital, we are talking about the difference between participant or fellow researcher positions. We conceptualize these positions as both those that are formally acknowledged, such as "community member with researcher" and those that organically or informally accrue between those who technically exist in parallel positions. The differences in social capital (however acquired) result in a different amount of power over the direction, time and structure of the research project. These differences can become manifest in reflecting and discussing the quality and quantity of work, roles, comfort and familiarity with academic and technical languages, embodied habits, use of various media and differences in the "uses" of time and space. [16]

One of the ways in which these different power positions comes to the fore in working with our students is in the ways that we are (individually and collectively) able to control time. Institutional, organizational deadlines are structures that are often not possible to maneuver around. Those of us who work in academia are generally positioned to be able to organize our time and responsibilities in ways that work towards such immovable structures as publishing or grant writing deadlines, as those around us are often in the same situations. However, as one of us has found out when working with teachers as coauthors and coresearchers, the different professional responsibilities we all have impact the time that can be devoted to research projects. The realities of the classroom should, and do, take precedence over writing and research projects. Recognizing differences includes recognizing the privileged positions that we each bring to the process of research and seeking flexibility in project roles and deadlines to address the realities of each person's situation. While time is a resource in conducting inquiry, difference is a valuable resource as well, as it can provide a nuanced complexity that layers multiple perspectives and experiences into the act of inquiry. In this recognition of our differing positionalities, we need to be continually vigilant for unintended/unexpected oppression within and from our work. [17]

## **5.3 Bypassing and surpassing individualism**

As we work to bypass and surpass the individual as the point of reference for expertise, leadership, planning, assessment and vision, we work to develop a constellation of group identities. Politically this idea is in part grounded in our belief that individualism has been over-enforced in educational settings. The idea of "do your own work" reflects the broader ethos of American individualism (SIRY & ALI-KHAN, 2011). The corollary notion is that a group is nothing more than a mass of isolated individuals. This emphasis on the lone individual not only isolates all of the actors in a group but it works to undermine any sense of the collective power. Research practice as we envision it, becomes embodied in acts that contribute, disturb, or build fragile and temporary "cultures in the making." [18]

A dialectical understanding to social life, including the relationship between the individual and the collective, is central to considering ways to work around a sole

focus on individualism. Grounding our work in an appreciation of the dynamics of these dialectical and reciprocal relations allows us to move towards a mutually beneficial, continually shifting community of practitioners. With a focus on this dialectical relationship, research develops on both individual and collective levels. As we craft our analyses and interpretations, we revise and alter both the words on the page as well as our perspectives. This dialogic, collaborative construction of ideas (and identities) mediates the process itself, as we find new distinctions in our words, confront differences in perspectives, and consider diversity of styles within and between our research communities. As such, in each act of researching, we both continually reproduce a culture of ethics as well as produce new forms of it (ROTH, 2004). [19]

As we have worked together as coauthors we have each often found that it became hard to untangle authorship. We do not know who wrote what in our joint texts if the multi-colored "track changes" feature is removed in a draft. Individualism becomes a useless construct as our work is not the work of multiple individuals but rather it is the work of a collective intellect. Jerome BRUNER stands out as a theorist who called into question a theory of mind that separated mind from culture (1996). We find his critique relevant to our work as the product of our collective mind, (the text that we produce) is an indivisible artifact. Writing in and around each other's thoughts is a delicate dance that is embedded within positions of power, and it is in working to push away from individualism and towards a focus on the collective construction of the act of inquiry that these issues of power can be highlighted, and ideally deconstructed and reconstructed to move the research relationship towards an ethical, critical, practice. [20]

#### **5.4 Recognizing and acknowledging multiple motivations within research**

We contend that ethical research has to abandon the image of "disinterest"—what BOURDIEU called *illusio* (in RABINOW, 1996), approaching research as a "neutral" act—one that is indifferent and without emotion. In abandoning this state of *illusio*, we must recognize the position of the researchers within and not outside the social field and its history. This requires of us recognition and acknowledgment of the multiple, often conflicting motivations and desires that set research into motion. As one of us engaged in coauthorship they found that the desire of the student coauthor to be heard was deeply emotional. The desire of the educator was not as emotionally invested as the student, as the educator/researcher has a voice that already exercised power in the world. Power in this instance is defined as the ability to influence others. The student expressed seeing the writing project as what appeared to be validation of self. The motivations of the participants were different but parallel as the researcher became emotionally invested in the student's need to be heard. This example illustrates the fallacy of "objective" motives in knowledge production, as well as the ways in which the act of researching together shifted the motivation of the "researcher." [21]

The often emotional, personal, desire we find in our students to "tell their stories" through the asking and investigating of questions that are relevant to us

collectively compel us more deeply than other, more mechanical, research motivations. However, it is well known that qualitative researchers often have difficulties getting their proposals approved by governing bodies, "because they come face to face with their participants and care about them" (ROTH, 2005). The institutional structures that control decision making as to what kinds of research can move forward (through either granting permission, funding, or both) consist of a collection of people grounded on a historical assumption of what "research" entails, and tend to bring with them a positivistic perspective of neutral, one that challenges the notion of researching with participants. From our perspectives, nothing within the act of research is "objective" and it is critical to not only acknowledge this to and with each other as we engage in inquiry, but also to work to highlight motivations between the researchers—as we learn of each others' motivations we also learn more about our own, and through this process the individual motivations shift and change, individually as well as collectively. [22]

## **6. Reflexive Dialogue as Central to Working Together**

As we work to deconstruct, reconstruct, and reframe research to hold ethics as central to the process of research, we heed CANNELLA and LINCOLN's caution of the distinction of ethics as a regularly practice versus ethics as a "grounded philosophical disposition and way of being" (2007, p.317). These four elements we have explored above can come together through critical dialogues that specifically focus on broadening the conception of research and that require a continuous reflexivity around ethics, especially as embedded within issues of collaboration. In creating spaces for these conversations we are able to shed light on embedded systems of power. "The link between reflexivity and ethical research seems to rest on transparency" (ETHERINGTON, 2007, p.604). [23]

A critical lens on shared practices can take form through cogenerative dialogues (TOBIN & ROTH, 2006), conversations in which participants (often teachers, students, and other "stakeholders" in the process of teaching and learning) come together to discuss shared experiences, with the explicit intention of improving practices moving forward. These conversations are intended as reflexive lenses or resonators of shared experiences. These are central to working together within a research/teaching relationship to reveal unexamined (and likely unconscious) practices. These open up how we "hear" and recode one another all the time. Dialogic strategies, implicit or explicit, might become "evidence" of the interpretive matrices that researchers and the "researched" co-habit. As such, a dialogic, cogenerative focus is one that develops an ethical praxis (STITH & ROTH, 2010). Reflexive focus can bring attention to discourse, attending to what has occurred with the explicit purpose of considering the complexities inherent in ethical, collaborative practices as the work is actually unfolding. This also can emphasize ethical research as a construct that is critical of itself (LINCOLN & CANNELLA, 2009). [24]

## **7. Challenges of Seeking Ethical Collaborative Research**

Our efforts are complicated by the regulations that oversee institutional research. Regulations can imply and indeed, create "the illusion that moral concerns power issues, justice, protecting other human beings (and soon) have been addressed with no further need for concern" (CANNELLA & LINCOLN, 2007). The will to power is manifest in a will to knowledge, as the power to close off inquiry. 'Truths' do this every day. As we challenge the will to know, and the role of "researcher" and "researched," we confront the inertia of institutional structures that want anticipated outcomes, hypotheses, anonymity, and researcher neutrality. Indeed, these are the often contradictory perspectives of ethical research practices, yet we need to recognize the reality of being grounded in one as a philosophical, ethical stance. At the same time, we need to be able to meet guidelines for governing boards that seek objectivity and the illusion "that conducting research itself is an ethical activity" (LINCOLN & CANNELLA, 2009). As an example, one of us submitted a research proposal to an institutional governing board for a research project that was to take place in an international context with a population that would be unable to read complex academic language. The governing board, however, insisted on this language being used, rendering the consent forms effectively useless. Other more substantive issues of how participation in the research might impact the social position of the participants were left unaddressed. These more complex issues are (we believe) at the heart of ethical research, but as they are by definition elusive, they are not a part of formal governance, while small research details are subjected to intense scrutiny. [25]

## **8. Implications for Researching "With"**

In an age where "accountability" is ever more the coin of the academic realm we wish to push back and join those who instead call for research paradigms that frame "accountable" not as careful but instead as caring. We note KINCHELOE and TOBIN's (2009) caution that the death of positivism has been much exaggerated and we stand with those who are ethical anti-positivists. We ask all researchers to think about questions of ethics as primarily ontological questions. A critically informed ontology can only be practiced in the shared making of a community of practice. The nature of our being together is never independent of our conceptual representations, affects and methodological commitments. Our interest in generating sustained reciprocal collaboration requires the articulation of existing and shifting values and interests. Ontology is not static and autonomous; it is historical, contingent and emergent. It is made by human practice. Research as work can give voice to the unvoiced nature of our assumed common nature and values. A critical ontology as a critical ethical practice also sets traps for the epistemological wolf stalking disciplinary knowledge and its production. Collaborative, ethical research can disclose and reveal unknown undercurrents and ways of becoming. Within research practice, collaboration can express an ecological co-habiting and becoming of ethical communities. The roads toward the making of our small research communities intersect and integrate the contradictions and complexities of the social fields of our historical era. For collaborative communities to resist the combined force of cultures of

domination, competition and positivism, they must start and continually attend to their ethical composition. [26]

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## Citation

Siry, Christina; Ali-Khan, Carolyne & Zuss, Mark (2011). Cultures in the Making: An Examination of the Ethical and Methodological Implications of Collaborative Research [26 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(2), Art. 24, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1102245>.