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Ethics, Problem Framing, and Training in Qualitative Inquiry

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This article examines the ethical issues bound up in the ways research problems are initially framed: the questions asked, the temporal and spatial frames of the study, the ways participants are defined. It explores the consequences of thinking through ethical issues using recent reconceptualizations of *agency* and suggests extensions of the ways researchers define *participants* for ethical purposes. The article concludes by examining some of the reasons for the relative neglect of such issues in graduate research preparation.

Keywords: *ethics; research design; graduate research training*

A full ethical analysis of research with humans must reflect not only on how research is conducted but also on what research topics are pursued . . . what questions are investigated—and what questions are neglected.

Sherwin (2005, p. 157)

Discussions of ethics in qualitative inquiry usually focus on events taking place within a temporal frame defined by researchers' interactions with the people they study and write about—quandaries that emerge during access negotiations, in the course of inquiry, or later with the publication or use of the research (e.g., LeCompte, 1995; Roth, 2005; Thorne, 1980). The main concern across these contexts is that researchers be open and forthright with participants, respect their rights, and do research that could benefit them or at least does them no harm (Strike et al., 2002).

Different ethical issues emerge, however, when we look beyond these temporal borders to consider the problem-framing processes that often begin before face-to-face encounters with participants—decisions about the topics, events, and activities to study; who to treat as participants in these

processes; how to pose our research questions; the spatial and temporal scales at which to investigate phenomena; and the forms of representation to use in communicating what we find out about them. The bulk of this article is concerned with clarifying the senses in which these are ethical decisions. In concluding, we note the relative neglect of such issues in methodological and ethical discourses, and consider ideas for making them more central to graduate research training.

Agency and Ethics

Problem-framing decisions entail ethical stances inasmuch as they shape the implications of the research for the agency of its participants. The sense of this claim depends on how one understand the concepts of *agency* and *participant*. Conventional ethics discourses (e.g., Strike et al., 2002) define participants as the people researchers work with directly—talk to, watch, or turn into numbers or other representations—and conceive of these people as possessive individuals (MacPherson, 1962)—independent, calculative actors for whom agency is an internal capacity. On these assumptions, ethical dangers emerge when researchers undermine that agency—for example, by denying participants the right to refuse to participate, by using deception to get access to events they consider private, by withholding information about the risks they encounter through participation, and so forth.

From this perspective, a key component of the researcher's obligation is to accurately explain to potential participants what is being asked of them, to lay out the risks and benefits of participation, and then to allow people full exercise of their agency in giving or refusing informed consent. As risks of physical harm are relatively rare in qualitative research, the main areas of concern are "deception, manipulation, and the unveiling of secrets" (Cassell, 1982, p. 22). According to a recent summary,

From our earliest forays into research settings, we are told to limit our deception of our participants; to be precise and rigorous in our design, collection, and reporting of data, and not to humiliate human participants. . . . Qualitative researchers are told to identify our biases, values, and personal interests . . . and to always respect the experiences of our participants. (Dougherty & Atkinson, 2006, p. 293)

Such obligations are obviously important, and what follows does not imply any de-emphasis on them. Rather, we want to add a set of concerns.

Many theoretical approaches in the social sciences conceptualize agency differently than the perspective summarized above. They treat it not as an internal capacity but as a contingent product of people's participation in spatially and temporally extensive networks that define who they are and what they can do (e.g., Callon & Law, 1995; Cooper, 1998; Dewey & Bentley, 1949; Fuchs, 2001; Harvey, 1996; Latour, 2005; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993). The ability to act from this perspective is constituted through and inseparable from one's use of cultural tools, artifacts, organizations, and communication systems in socially organized situations. Agency is a product of the way people define or appropriate identities, craft associations and networks, and mobilize other people and resources to participate in and influence processes that begin and end outside their immediate settings.

Such a conception of agency raises ethical issues very different from those outlined above.¹ First, it implies a shift in how we define ethically relevant participants. Locating agency in the discrete individual centers ethical concern on the people with whom researchers interact face-to-face. As Massey (2002) suggested, the implicit assumption is "that we care first for and have our first responsibilities towards those nearest" (p. 3). By contrast, thinking of agency as an ongoing product of transactions and distributed relations points toward "an ethics, a politics, of connectivity rather than of nested territories. Specifically, we could open up a bit more the question of (the possibility of) responsibility and care at a distance" (Massey, 2002, p. 3; Strathern, 2006).²

Responsibility at a distance means attending to how the processes researchers examine in the lives of the people and events they encounter directly are also constitutive of lives and events elsewhere. What our research says about these processes can potentially aid distantly located people by providing them with resources that help them scrutinize and reshape those processes—or it can reinforce limitations on their agency by mystifying these processes (making them appear natural and immutable) or by creating forms of knowledge or systems of access that reinforce the power of extra-local institutions and organizations over them.

This is not to suggest that everyone, near or distant, who is involved somehow in the processes being studied should count as a participant. Consider as an analogy the normative definition of participation implied in Young's (1990) argument that "wherever actions affect a plurality of agents . . . all those agents should participate in deciding the actions and their conditions" (p. 251). If one imagines that the effects of a person's action radiate with equal force in all directions through the networks they're in contact with, then in principle an action has implications for an indefinitely

large system of relations and a vast number of people. Indeed, one criticism of Young has been that “in the increasingly interdependent world that globalization is creating, ‘the plurality of agents’ affected by our actions includes just about everyone” (Callan, 2004, p. 79). However, the complaint is overstated. Although it may be useful, for example, to think of the president of the United States as a participant in some of the networks that intersect in a neighborhood elementary school classroom—recent administration policies have influenced pedagogies, curricula, testing practices, and so on—the implications of research on that classroom for the president are very different than for the teacher and students in it. We can call the latter obligatory participants in the sense that the processes studied impinge on their lives in substantial ways that they can avoid only at great cost and effort, whereas the president remains a discretionary participant whose identity and well-being are not dependent on the processes studied and who can sever connections with them without great cost or effort.

Yet, even this is too simple. In addition to the research’s ethical implications for members of the classroom—are the researchers dishonest or disruptive, does their work favor some participants over others, will their accounts invade the privacy of the people depicted, will it help them in any way?—it can also be consequential for the agency of people in the classroom next door (e.g., by describing how another teacher deals with administrative constraints or collaborates with parents) or in schools across town who work within the same administrative regimes, for people in classrooms in other school systems who use the same pedagogies or curricular materials, and so on. These latter groups, we want to suggest, are obligatory but extended participants.

Participant, then, is not a sharply bounded category but a gradient organized across at least two dimensions: one defined by people’s sociospatial relations to the researcher’s fieldwork (from people we work with directly to people with whom we never come into contact), the other addressing their relations to the networks studied (which can be obligatory, like the teachers in the example above—see also Emanuel & Weijer, 2005—or discretionary, like the president;³ Table 1):

Identifying extended participants involves a preliminary analysis of how distantly located people are connected to the organizations, processes, circuits, and networks that shape the settings and groups researchers work with directly. The object of ethical concern is not boundary marking (dividing what is from what isn’t ethically permissible) but relation shaping: structuring, insofar as one can at the proposal stage, the entailments of a research endeavor not just for the safety and well-being of immediate participants

Table 1
Dimensions of Participation

	Obligatory	Discretionary
Immediate	The teachers and students the researcher studies	For example, administrators in the school or district, etc.
Extended	For example, parents, teachers in other classrooms and connected schools, etc.	For example, politicians, state officials, business executives, and others involved in shaping school policy

but also for extended participants whose lives and livelihoods—even if they never have direct contact with us or our projects—are dependent on and powerfully affected by the relations, settings, and institutions we study and who cannot detach themselves from those processes without significant effort, cost, or risk. In the next section, we briefly review a case from the literature to further specify how these implications might work.

Framing Heat Death

In 1995, a heat wave in Chicago resulted in the deaths of more than 700 people, a disproportionately large number of whom were poor, elderly, and African American (Klinenberg, 2002). Events like this can be framed in different ways as researchable problems. When the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) set out to analyze the deaths, it used a case-control design that matched pairs of survivors and victims living in the same areas:

Holding constant the age and location of the subjects, the epidemiologists would be able to determine a set of individual-level factors—such as living alone, having a medical problem, or owning an air conditioner—that affect a person’s capacity to survive the heat. (Klinenberg, 2002, p. 79)

Problem definitions with this kind of formal structure, and there are parallels in many other areas of inquiry, abstract people from specific places (neighborhoods with histories, etc.) and historical time. As pointed out by the sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2002), whose account we draw on here, the CDC’s approach plotted victims in a kind of statistical or causal space (Abbott, 2006):

Studying matched pairs culled from the same location . . . ruled out the possibility that their study would capture neighborhood or regional differences in heat wave mortality or the broader social context of the catastrophe. If there were risks of living in an impoverished, institutionally depleted, or politically neglected neighborhood or region, the CDC analysis would not help identify them. The CDC study directs the attention of public health agencies to the particular set of individuals who are more vulnerable to heat-related problems, but not to the places where such problems are likely to be concentrated. (Klinenberg, 2002, pp. 80-81)

Klinenberg (2002) framed the problem of the deaths in a different way, asking "how the city's social environment," not just the environments of the neighborhoods with high death rates, "contributed to the devastation" (p. 18). This focus on "the social and political production of deprivation and suffering" entailed "a broad perspective on individual, community, state, and symbolic levels of the city in order to illustrate the ways in which diverse actors and institutions are collectively implicated in making a major urban event that they experience individually" (p. 21). Klinenberg thus compared neighborhoods with similar socioeconomic characteristics but different heat-death rates and tried to explicate the historical processes that had shaped the social ecologies of these neighborhood. He studied things like the organization and distribution of public services in the city, the administrative construction of heat deaths, the political responses of city leaders to the problem, the actions of public safety officials, and the social construction of the heat wave in news media coverage.

In addition to the methodological differences between the two frames, we want to argue that they contrast ethically across three overlapping dimensions. First, they locate agency differently. A problem frame simultaneously posits two linked stories: an explicit event narrative of the particular processes and situations being studied, and a second, often implicit change narrative of who can act on such events and what kind of knowledge they need to influence them. A frame like the CDC's—by focusing on obligatory participants defined in terms of individual attributes and dispositions (age, income, beliefs, etc.)—makes heat death itself yet another attribute that can be understood in terms of its association with these variables. This implies a change narrative in which city administrators and officials are not participants in the event itself (their attributes, after all, are irrelevant to the CDC's analysis) but discretionary participants in possible stories to come. They are the people who have the agency to alter future heat-related events, and the study is framed to produce knowledge they can use to develop new ways of monitoring and providing assistance to individuals.

Klinenberg's frame, by contrast, provides an event narrative in which heat death is analyzed as the product of a particular sociopolitical configuration of historically deep and geographically extensive relations. The implicit change narrative of such an account defines a broader range of participants—including not only administrators and care providers but also real-estate developers, businessmen, scientists, and most especially city residents in Chicago and elsewhere—whose actions in the future could influence heat-death processes and for whom the kind of knowledge he produces could be useful in collective, political responses.

Second, the kinds of spaces and times in which the two problem frames locate events have implications for agency. By constructing heat death in terms of the attributes of individuals, the CDC's frame loosens the study's attachment to the specific settings and historical conjunctures in which the heat wave unfolded: It's a story of the relation of attributes in a causal space, not of deaths in particular Chicago neighborhoods. The contrast is not simply one of focusing on individuals as opposed to places. State bureaucracies and medical and epidemiological researchers commonly treat people as individuated containers of attributes and then aggregate them to make claims about the incidence of disease or mortality in populations, places, or periods (Poovey, 1995). This makes it possible to "naturalize links between disease and identity" (Briggs, 2005, p. 278). Similar strategies are used in fields like educational research to naturalize connections between forms of deviance or poor academic performance and places like slum, ghetto, and inner-cities schools.⁴ Place in such frames becomes a static container instead of a setting for action. By contrast, when Klinenberg grounded his work in the concatenation of economic processes, urban politics, housing patterns, and community practices in a specific place and time—Chicago, 1995—the location of the study became a potential point of articulation for not only the people whose circumstances can be explicitly linked to it—the residents of the Chicago neighborhoods he focused on—but also for extended obligatory participants in situations where the same kinds of deindustrialization, neighborhood transformation, and diminutions of public space and public life are at work.

Whether and in what ways any participant uses research depends, however, on a third ethical feature of problem framing—how it positions the project in communication networks and relates it to the knowledge-making projects of different actors. The relationally defined participants and geographically and historically grounded settings that appear in Klinenberg's book do offer different possibilities for agency than the CDC's account, but identities and locations are moving targets. Identifying the range of actors

involved in producing the conditions of heat death does not give one access to them, and “Chicago 1995” may seem as abstract to a reader in 2007 (even a reader in Chicago) as the CDC’s depictions of individuated actors in statistical spaces.

Drawing on Foucault’s concept of *governmentality* (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006), Briggs (2005), in an analysis of medical discourse, uses the term *communicability* to point to the ways

access to the production and reception of authoritative knowledge about disease [or other public issues, we would argue] is distributed, and . . . how this communicative process is ideologically constructed in such a way as to make some people seem like producers of knowledge, others like translators and disseminators, others like receivers, and some simply out of the game. (p. 274)

Problem frames both presuppose and help certain frames of communicability. By aligning research with existing forms of publication and circulation (e.g., newspapers, film, academic journals and books, World Wide Web fora, performance venues), various locations for collecting, synthesizing, and disseminating knowledge (e.g., universities, state bureaucracies, community organizations, or other groups), and legal monopolies on resources or services (as in medicine and to a lesser extent education), problem frames shape the points of articulation at which different kinds of participants can connect with the research and the knowledge it produces. They also shape how the project is bounded or cut (Strathern, 1996)—that is, the extent to which it is open to revision or extension at later dates by different actors, in particular by extended or obligatory participants.

In this respect, the CDC’s investigation and Klinenberg’s work are in principle amenable to different kinds of appropriation. As Briggs (2005) suggested, people “structure their schemes of self-surveillance and self-control by interpellating themselves as producers, disseminators, or receivers of particular types of discourse—or as not being ‘in the loop’” (p. 274). Problem frames shape knowledge into forms that allow particular kinds of interpellations—the CDC’s knowledge commodities position most of us as consumers, Klinenberg’s as people who can in dispute, add on to, update or extend the work—though how much of this is actually likely in practice depends on how the research is connected to the knowledge-making practices of neighborhood associations, activist groups, and political factions in Chicago or other cities.

Organizational Production of Problem Frames

The ethical fault lines of problem frames are undoubtedly more complex than our illustration suggests, and the entailments of frames like the CDC's and Klinenberg's could be parsed in other ways. However, we hope to have made at least a *prima facie* case for considering problem framing as a key site of ethical decision making. The issue we want to consider now is how to bring critical attention to bear on it, especially at the point where researchers first begin to learn ways of problem framing—graduate research training.

It is during graduate education that researchers acquire long-lasting predilections for certain kinds of frames. Nader (1976) suggested that "the questions that are top priority during one's graduate training become the questions we continue to work around as well developed professionals" (p. 178). At the least, the bedrock of readings and theoretical languages students assemble in graduate school shape a kind of academic habitus that gives direction to the ways their interests later evolve. "Schools of thought," as Bourdieu (1967) remarked, "may, more often than is immediately apparent, represent the union of thinkers similarly schooled" (p. 343)—and schooling unites thinkers not just by inculcating theoretical and methodological allegiances but by nurturing deeper and often implicit assumptions about what counts as a good topic and how to frame one as a researchable problem (e.g., Erickson, 2004).

How graduate programs might go about drawing attention to the ethical entailments of these processes of topic selection and problem framing depends on their assumptions about agency, in this case the agency of the students. A lot of methodological and ethical writing seems to conceptualize students as sovereign actors learning to make independent design, fieldwork, and analysis decisions.⁵ Commenting on ethnographic fieldwork, Restrepo and Escobar (2005) suggested that such a conception of the researcher as autonomous, free-floating agent is an

expression of the bourgeois imaginary of a "free individual" who "decides" by him/herself what he/she "wants" to "study," when, where, how and for how long, while the people "studied" are located in the "passive" place of being observed, being the "informants," and so forth. (p. 110)

Although Restrepo and Escobar think this imaginary is fading, the infrastructure of organization and training built around it seems to us largely intact. The idea of the sovereign researcher recurs across levels of methodological discourse, from data collection, where the individual researcher is

said to “build” or “construct” data and analytic categories (e.g., Erickson, 2004, p. 486; Sipe & Ghiso, 2004, p. 474), to writing, where representation is treated as a rhetorical and compositional problem for a sovereign author. Within this discourse, ethical guidelines, rules, and cases seem intended to function as amplifiers of individual conscience (e.g., Strike et al., 2002).

In practice, however, the sovereignty and autonomy of researchers seem limited, perhaps increasingly so. For example, research frames are shaped by the technologies used to record and document events, the requirements of Institutional Review Boards (Cannella & Lincoln, 2007; Lederman, 2006), and the geographical, economic, and political relations that link researchers to the people and places they study (Clifford, 1992). The groups, organizations, and politics qualitative researchers study often restrict research access (Deyhle, Hess, & LeCompte, 1992; Sjoberg & Nett, 1968) or channel it toward subordinate members (Nader, 1972; Priyadharshini, 2003). Funding agencies often predefine problem frames to fit their agendas, leading Brennis (2004) to observe that “before one can . . . ‘write culture,’ one must first write money” (p. 582; Cheek, 2000, p. 410; Denich, 1980, p. 173; Myers, 1990; Tardy, 2003, p. 17). The academic field itself makes certain kinds of problem frames seem more viable as academic currency than others (e.g., Restrepo & Escobar, 2005).

Moreover, of course, graduate school generates its own constraints. Although in principle nothing prevents a student from adopting moving standpoints and inter- or multidisciplinary perspectives, in practice course work and examinations encourage a kind of regurgitative mastery (Campbell, 1969) of local canons, whereas the micropolitics of programs pressure students to attach themselves to established faculty members and align their work with the problems that interest the single professor whose decisions determine their immediate futures (cf. Morse, 2004, p. 494; N. Smith, 2005, p. 892). Such influence needn’t be intentional on the advisor’s part. A researcher famous for working with oppressed groups recounted an episode:

A student of mine . . . asked me if she could design a dissertation around the gendered and classed lives of elite white women. I was embarrassed that I had somehow set up an expectation among students that poverty was “in.” (Fine, 1995, p. 73)

As D. Smith (1987) suggested of professional academics,

We have learned in our training to proceed from within the conceptual frameworks, the epistemological presuppositions, as well as to find our way around in the organization of camps, schools, and factions of the discourse.

We have learned to . . . confine and focus our “insights” within the conceptual frameworks and relevances given in the discipline. (p. 73)

Calls for fields like educational research to tightly align doctoral preparation with the theoretical and philosophical traditions of the disciplines (Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2004; Labaree, 2003; Metz, 2001; Page, 2001; Pallas, 2001), to intensify training in methods, and to focus research efforts on problems with immediate policy relevance (e.g., Golde & Walker, 2006; Shavelson & Towne, 2002) may lead to a situation in which students are led, without explicit debate, to assimilate established disciplinary frames, develop reified methodological skills, and fit their work into others’ research programs or questions.

Doing so, of course, may produce some worthwhile research, and students often benefit from adopting programs of research already in place. However, taking their interests from advisors, or from the agendas of funders or gatekeepers, means that students probably have little access to the processes of negotiation and struggle that produced those interests in the first place. When fields of study already parsed into pre-defined problems, the ethical issues associated with problem-framing are hidden.

Problematizing Problems

The answer, we think, is not to put the onus on students to individually overcome all of the constraints on problem framing noted above. If it is the social organization of training and research practice that is forestalling deliberation about problem frames and their ethical entailments, what’s needed are new organizational processes. We conclude with some admittedly sketchy speculations on what these might look like.

At present, students develop research problems for dissertation proposals in close consultation with a single advisor for narrowly defined audiences of committee members or funding agencies. Such arrangements are essential for guiding students across the long trajectory of a qualitative dissertation, but they could be strategically loosened.

Imagine a public document, preceding the traditional proposal and written for a broad audience, that would describe the events and processes to be studied in sufficient detail to allow a general reader to analyze the ethics of the proposed frame across three dimensions.

1. *An ethics of visibility and location.* The document would explain how different kinds of participants are constituted in relation to the processes to be studied and how the researcher plans to identify and analyze the constitution of participants across social, geographical, and temporal relations.
2. *An ethics of communicability.* The document would include a preliminary map of the networks of communication through which the research knowledge would circulate. Would research materials be archived or available to others—which others, at what places and times, and under what conditions? Could others add to the knowledge? How would they do so? What kinds of reports or products might be produced? How might the knowledge gained from research framed this way be used by the differently situated participants?
3. *An ethics of association.* The document would describe how the knowledge to be produced by the research could be connected to existing communities, political movements, activist organizations, and policy agendas.

Such documents could be made publicly available in venues ranging from meetings with community organizations and activist groups to Internet publication. For the latter, departments (or networks of departments) could establish online fora and invite comment on the proposed frame and suggestions for its improvement. Instead of treating ideas for studies as private intellectual capital, the process described here would follow a kind of open-source model of development. That is, graduate students in other sites would not only be encouraged to critique the frames but also to borrow and resituate them, ideally in ways that would allow studies carried out in different settings to be linked.

There are clearly problems with these suggestions. It would be hard to get people to participate—Graduate students could be encouraged to contribute comments and post their own frames, but potential participants outside the academy might see participation as wasted effort. A second concern is that problem frames are fluid. Ethnography and other forms of qualitative research have emergent designs. As Ragin (1992) and others noted, cases are often “delimited or found in the course of research” (p. 220). Making a frame public might harden it prematurely.

Third, the current practice of keeping problem frames out of public view until fieldwork is written up may be important for protecting innovative or politically weak schools of thought. Funders, for example, might shy away from topics and problem frames that attract controversy. Publishing proposed frames might also make it easier for powerful groups or individuals within the fieldwork setting to undermine studies they think would not be in their interests. Gatekeepers could exert new pressure by weighing in with

comments and criticisms. The creation of more open arenas for presentation and deliberation of problem frames could even foster new academic geographies in which departments at dominant universities extended their influence by more explicitly defining fashions or orthodoxies.

These problems reflect part of what we're trying to draw attention to: the lack of public spaces for discussing the ethics of problem framing. If, as the commonplace has it, researchers should fit their methods to the problem, then attention to problem frames and their ethical entailments should be at the heart of ethical discourse, and if, as we've suggested, problem frames are organizationally produced, then such attention will depend on changes in the social organization of methodological discourse.

Notes

1. As the citations in the article indicate, the idea of agency as a distributed capacity, or more accurately a distributed accomplishment, is shared by a wide range of theoretical perspectives. There are, however, other, very different takes on the concept (see, e.g., Hitlin & Elder, 2007) that might raise ethical issues different from the ones we examine.

2. Compare the related distinction made in medicine between "quandary ethics," which focus on risks and benefits to individuals, and "social ethics" which attend to the structural or systemic organizations of risk or harm—"the strikingly patterned pathways to both sickness and care" (Farmer, 2003, p. 208).

3. Participants themselves may also have strong positions on extended identities (e.g., L. T. Smith, 1999). Indeed, a third dimension might be culturally bounded or legally defined groups like tribes, organizations, communities (see, e.g., LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Makkar, 2002; Stoecker, 2005).

4. Berliner (2006), for example, recently suggested that "neighborhoods that perpetuate the culture of poverty, cannot help but have that culture spill over into the schools their children attend" (p. 980). The school is neatly detached from the neighborhood, and the latter becomes a homogeneous pathogenic agent.

5. Participatory action research (PAR) approaches are exceptions as they insist on deference to community representatives in problem definition (e.g., Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; L. T. Smith, 1999). However, even here—and PAR projects would be difficult for many graduate students (cf. Maguire, 1993; Nygreen, 2006)—the implicit picture is of a sovereign researcher choosing to share agency with participants. PAR researchers are warned against "cooptating" participants (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Fals-Borda, 2000, p. 631; Nygreen, 2006, p. 18), reifying "local knowledge" (Kalb, 2005), and "replac[ing] one set of dominant voices with another" (Gaventa & Cornwell, 2001; Stoecker, 2005).

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