

Research Ethics and a Case of Positionality



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Several years ago, a research group of university faculty and graduate students met to discuss a study of a middle school classroom in a school of a large number of immigrant families to the United States. The research questions incorporated issues of student identity, school belonging and success, and life outside of school. The study received general support to take place within several months of researcher observation and participation: classroom interactions among the teacher and students and student peers, small survey, focus group and individual conversation especially, and intriguingly, on what students themselves had to say. In the meeting, one of the faculty members raised the question of positionality: to add a statement to the proposal that situated the researcher's background as a former teacher, native-born American, middle class and female. The question was raised by another faculty about the purpose of the statement, that is what, why, and how the researcher's statement was important as ethics for the study. At that point, one of the faculty members piped up: "She will be laughed out of the academy without it!" This closed down the conversation as members of the group indicated their affirmation of the interjection. The group's response did indeed indicate the widespread acceptance of the practice of asserting positionality as a major theoretical and practical standard of ethics.

Introduction

In educational research in the USA and elsewhere ethical practice is a central concern of the work. Various nations have their own standards of ethics amid a general focus on research's aim for furthering knowledge. This chapter takes up current

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practices in attending to epistemology and ethics within American quantitative and qualitative traditions and especially within a contemporary emphasis on inquiry for social justice. The principal focus emerges on the practice of positionality. The thesis is that incorporating researcher position as an ethic is a misuse, a misunderstanding of elements of philosophical and social science theorizing based in feminist perspectives. The place to begin is that positionality is basically epistemological.

The hypothetical example that opens the chapter serves as a premise. Following an introductory comment about the methodology, the case incorporates these elements: research ethics in empirical traditions, positionality with its connections to social justice, feminist origins of standpoint and reflexive positionality theories in two sections, and concluding discussion with a final consideration of the opening hypothetical.

The use of “case” in the chapter title is deliberate. This is a case about ethics. Comment on this approach comes from a marvelous philosophical re-start by the late Stephen Toulmin. His point concerned the need for re-affirmation of a tradition within philosophy long taking a back seat as a second, indeed ancient, pillar of modernity. The first pillar was epistemology and the second was ethics. He writes,

Aristotle saw intimate connections between ethics and rhetoric: for him, every ethical position was that of a given kind of person in given circumstances, and in a special relation with other specific people, the concrete particularity of a case was ‘of the essence.’ Ethics was a field not for theoretical analysis, but for practical wisdom, and it was a mistake to treat it as a universal or abstract science. (Toulmin 1990, pp. 75–76)

The case at the close points to the need for an expanded ethics in US educational research today. Overall, it is not surprising that seeking knowledge to combat societal and educational problems takes center stage: education and schooling are enterprises in which improvement for all participants, especially those in most need, is crucial. However, the urgency of this need, especially of social justice for achievement in school of minority males, an important contextual factor. However, there have been two unintended results: One is the masking of ethics and the other is the invisibility of girls and women in contemporary educational research. In the latter regard, It is important that typical researchers today have little or no familiarity with feminist theorizings from a couple of decades ago. The chapter brings these viewpoints to the fore.

Research Ethics

To begin the case, it is important to understand that general ethical practices.

are not only desirable but also required in US empirical research. Research is typically organized by methodology, quantitative and qualitative, within disciplines and fields. The Anglo-American model is hierarchical led by the natural sciences followed by the social sciences and applied fields. This hierarchy functions in conceptions of epistemological rigor resulting in funding emphases.

An initial ethical practice is required for all research known as IRB, proposal review by Institutional Review Boards at each institution under federal connections and guidelines. The seriousness of IRB is reflected, in part, in an infamous origin, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, under the auspices of the U.S. Public Health Service between 1932 and 1972. Therein 600 African American males were unknowingly injected with syphilis and denied treatment when it was available. Revelation of this practice led to *The Belmont Report* in 1978 and legislation enacted by the US Congress. IRB reviews pay special attention to vulnerable populations that include children, students, minorities, and the economically/educationally disadvantaged as well as the incarcerated and those with disabilities. As an ethics, thus, it is specifically designed to protect research participants and includes elements of consent and confidentiality. In addition, various academic and professional associations have codes of research conduct that can serve as ethical guides; among them are the international networks around the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association.

There are standard practices that students, researchers, and then mentors follow that are learned through courses, texts, and actual inquiries. Over the past century or so of educational research, specific methodological practices have emerged within quantitative and qualitative traditions. While new knowledge is the ‘aim,’ this generally means building on past understandings in a process of induction. A key issue across empirical methodologies has been the evolution of theorizing about objectivity for truth claims. One summary statement is found in a late nineties methods textbook in which the author, Donna Mertens, cites a post-positivist position: “Analysts place considerable emphasis on science as a method for reducing or eliminating effects of personal values on observations and try to be value-free” (Mertens 1998, p. 21). Specific measures are employed and tests are administered to override subjective bias. Design features might well include standards of survey implementation, population sampling, and the like.

Methods resources take one or both of two tacts regarding ethics; the first is embedded in design as specific tools and the second, considerably less acknowledged, is reference to traditional philosophical positions. Mertens’s treatment of ethics incorporates the three principles that are central to IRB: beneficence, respect, and justice (p. 24). Another popular textbook from John Creswell incorporates IRB and emphasis on processes of data collection and reporting. Overall, Creswell states this: “Ethics should be a primary consideration rather than an afterthought and it should be at the forefront of the researcher’s agenda” (Creswell 2012, p. 23, citing Hesse-Bieber [and Leavy] 2006). Creswell adds respect for the research site as well as its audience. Moreover, ethical use of specific research tools to which Mertens and Creswell refer in all research is perhaps the most important. This is generally how researchers enact IRB and more. Once again, here is Creswell: “[Research] needs be honestly reported, shared with participants, not previously published, not plagiarized... and duly credited to authors that make a contribution” (Creswell 2012, p. 279). Overall these are matters of right and wrong.

Building on commitment to distinguishing right from wrong in research practice, the second tact is to expose researchers to how western philosophy has traditionally

considered ethics. With an extensive background in ethics, Clifford Christians's contribution to *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Christians 2011; see Denzin and Lincoln 2011) is very helpful. Christians's starting point is the philosophical project of the Enlightenment with its separation of knowledge and ethics, is and ought, facts and values. Within the dawn of modernity, the center is the promotion, as he puts this, of the autonomous self (see also Stone 2005). Building on ancient ethical values of rationality and virtue, the individual is capable and responsible for this ethics. In Christians's words,

Consistent with the presumed purity of individual liberty over the moral order, the basic institutions of society.... [and reflecting various European thinkers and states] were designed to ensure 'neutrality of different conceptions of the good. (Christians 2011, p. 62, citing Root 1993)

Much more can be said about traditional western ethics. A modern emphasis on individual autonomy has assumed two paths that researchers might bring to bear on their inquiry. One is Immanuel Kant's logic of ethical duty, in the vernacular to be true to others as one would be true to oneself. The other is from John Stuart Mill and others to instrumentalize a utilitarian calculus for the good of society. While the latter might appeal to social justice, it abstracts from and masks individual actions. Both western views envision society as aggregated individuals. Importantly since these traditions entail processes of self-disclosure, it is thus not surprising that well-intentioned researchers view positionality as an ethical stance.

Positionality and Social Justice

The second element of the chapter's case is positionality, the belief in and practice of inserting an 'ethic' of self-disclosure into the research process. This typically comes in a statement as part of a research design, as in the hypothetical above. Positionality is accepted and affirmed widely across today's educational research methodologies, often taken for granted. Researchers, as implied above, believe that it is especially pertinent for education because of aims for improvement of the lives of children, youth, families, and communities often through schools and schooling.

Positionality has become standard practice across various critical research and scholarly traditions and sub-traditions that do extend beyond education and have been developed within various disciplinary orientations of qualitative research. Many identify themselves with a social justice tradition and thus recognize the central places of identity, critique, and politics in their inquiries. One example of a sub-tradition's initial presentation within positionality is found in a 2004 collection on postcritical ethnography in educational research. Building from a marriage and critique of critical and interpretive ethnographies, here are the editors of the volume:

Positionality involves being explicit about the groups and interests the postcritical ethnographer wishes to serve as well as his or her biography. One's race, gender, class, ideas and commitments are subject to the exploration as part of the ethnography. Indeed position may be so important that it can be seen as an epistemological claim as in... [Patricia Hill] Collins'... standpoint epistemology.... Positionality also involves 'studying up'... [so] that the focus... may well be institutional arrangements and social movements... or more powerful as with whiteness studies. (Noblit et al. 2004, p. 21).

As one of the editors continues about his own research, positionalities, and note the plural, are particular. They do, however, form a unity for him in an investigation, “[carrying] with it its own situatedness, multiplicity, history, and... forms of privilege” (Murrillo 2004, p. 156).

There is some textual evidence of advocacy for positionality in the general teaching of research methods but it is minimal and thus across the academy it remains the purview of specific research courses and mentors. Mertens, cited above, very briefly connects positionality in educational research to an emancipatory paradigm from the mid-to-late nineties with the acknowledgement that all knowledge is contextual (Mertens 1998, p. 185). Juanita Johnson-Bailey, an African-American educational researcher, presents a narrative study in which Collins is also referenced by her. Raising issues of ‘researching across cultural boundaries’, she concludes this: “There is no righteous ground.... Each story is... a balancing act. The forces to be reconciled change as positions shift” (Johnson-Bailey 2004, p. 138). These shifts are specific to who the researcher and researched are and for her the cultures and margins that are traversed and biases contained (ibid.).

Social justice discourse and aims are increasingly present in social sciences and professions training and methods texts. In the epilogue of the well-regarded *Sage Handbook* referenced above, editors Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln point to this emergence of social justice purposes. They write,

While it is the case that not all qualitative researchers aim for social justice explicitly... it is the case that many now ask themselves what the outcomes of their research will produce in terms of more extended equality and less domination and discrimination. (Denzin and Lincoln 2011, p. 716)

In the same volume, sociologist Kathy Charmaz does address research through a broad definition of social justice:

[Social] justice inquiry... [means] studies that attend to inequities and equality, barriers and access, poverty and privilege... and their implications for suffering.... [It] also includes a critical stance toward social structures and processes that shape individual and collective life. (Charmaz 2011, p. 359)

She continues with suggestions for a wide range of research approaches who take social justice as a “for granted concern” and “who begin with an explicit value stance and an agenda for change” (ibid.). Importantly she embeds an ethic when she states, “[For] those who identify themselves as social justice researchers, “‘shoulds and ‘oughts’ are part of the research process and product” (p. 360).

In education, social justice as an aim is increasingly found in teacher education that might mean greater research emphasis. Examples are critical pedagogy and

culturally-relevant pedagogy, the former with its own roots in the writings of Paulo Freire. One collection from recent decades is edited by Gloria Ladsen-Billings and William Tate. This an example from theorists and researchers who have been, for some, named as ‘critical curriculum theorists.’ The broad diversity of social justice approaches is present in the introduction from Ladsen-Billings in ties of social justice to public interest. She summarizes the general issue of justice within research: “We cannot hide behind notes of neutrality or objectivity when people are suffering so desperately.... If education research is going to matter, then we have to make it matter in the lives of real people around real issues” (Ladsen-Billings 2006, p. 10).

From the hypothetical above, positionality claims begin in categories of race, class, and perhaps gender among brief specifics. Each researcher determines his or her position and what detail is needed. Given wide use, positionality may have already achieved a normalization, an acceptance without question. What results is absent understanding of its epistemological roots—and not as an ethic.

Standpoint Positionalities

The third case element is ‘standpoint positionalities,’ a catch-all phrase for several epistemological theories. As indicated above, qualitative social justice researchers often cite Patricia Hill Collins’s writings of a standpoint theory as their source for their own positionality ethic. Her work is appealing in many ways that emphasize its narrative form and its politics. Two aspects, however, are misunderstood: a standpoint is precisely an epistemology and it is feminist. This detailed treatment of Collins’s black feminist thought demonstrates its appeal and is meant to render a corrective understanding of her project. It is followed by additional support for feminist standpoint epistemologies from Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock, with a note about the contribution of Dorothy Smith. In what follows, Collins’s capitalization of terms is her emphasis and meant to honor this.

Patricia Hill Collins. Collins is currently Distinguished University Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, USA, formerly with a long tenure at the University of Cincinnati in African American Studies and Gender Studies. Her undergraduate and graduate academic training was primarily at Brandeis University with a stop at Harvard. Her project is primarily situated in the now classic, *Black Feminist Thought* (2009), originally published in 1990 and re-edited subsequently.

Collins’s text is a theoretical analysis positing a standpoint position, a privileged knowledge, based principally on the historical experience of US black women. Its thesis is a relationship of oppression and activism of individuals and collectives evidenced textually in literature, music, and other representations most often of daily life. As asserted in the initial volume preface, its theoretical rigor brings together insights from “afrocentric philosophy, feminist theory, Marxist social thought, the sociology of knowledge, critical theory, and postmodernism” (Collins 2009, p. xiii). For present purposes, it is important that the text does not read as conventional social science inquiry; it is not empirical except in displaying ‘reports’

of existential life. While Collins does not employ this terminology, it is more like philosophy as feminist literary criticism.

Black feminist thought is a standpoint theory, an epistemology. First, it is based in unique and predominantly silenced experience. Second, it is a philosophical claim of privilege representing a historical—and contemporary—group. Third, it is feminist, aiming for societal change and empowerment. Fourth, it entails a separation of epistemology and ethics. To begin, Collins's first essay from 1986 and her subsequent text, *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins 1986, 2000, 2009) have to be historically situated both in the evolution of Anglo-American science and social science theory and research and in a similar theoretical trajectory of feminist theory. Now several decades old, this was a period of widespread acceptance of notions of 'social construction of knowledge'; indeed the title of the volume's first part emphasizes this idea. From a base in traditional modern science, Collins introduces her stand toward the objectivity/subjectivity debate from mid-century:

I found the movement between my training as an 'objective' social scientist and my daily experiences as an African-American woman to be jarring.... I discovered that the both/and stance of Black feminist thought allowed me to be both objective and subjective... to be both a respectable scholar and an acceptable mother. (2009, p. x)

In addition to this basic stand toward epistemology, while Collins brings together insights from a range of theoretical traditions, her unique approach is to place black women's lives and literatures at the center. Specifically, she writes,

An experiential, material base underlies a Black feminist epistemology, namely collective experiences and accompanying worldviews.... This alternative epistemology uses... standards that are consistent... for substantiated knowledge and... criteria for methodological adequacy. (pp. 274–275)

As a black feminist, Collins writes also about the feminist debates of her day and the movement especially among minority scholars for emphasis on difference rather than sameness in experience and theory (see Kohli and Burbules 2012). Here she is in some detail,

I have deliberately chosen not to begin with feminist tenets developed from the experiences of White, middle-class, Western women and then insert the ideas of African-American women. While I am quite familiar with a range of... White feminist theorists and certainly value their contributions to our understanding of gender, this is not a book about what Black women think of White feminist ideas... [or about theoretical comparisons of any traditions]. (p. viii)

As indicated above, Collins's writings have strong appeal to social justice researchers perhaps because of the style and content of writing. Her text is lovingly researched, documented, and narrated. Many might desire to emulate it. For example, in a chapter on historical images of black women, she overviews the specific depiction of Black single mothers. Incomplete, stereotyped images of the mammy and the matriarch appeared in social science and in fictionalized accounts beginning in the 1950s. A dominant social science view contrasted to the writings of black women playwrights and novelists such as Lorraine Hansbury and Paule Marshall depicting the lives of strong black women in their families.

Her work raises three issues that concern the use of a black feminist epistemology by researchers seeking an ethic: the uniqueness of speaking as a feminist theorist from self-disclosure for a specific group and an issue of appropriation, a particular ethic stance from Collins that is typically not acknowledged by citation and explication, and the nature and history of standpoint theories themselves. Collins speaks to the first two and very briefly to the third that is turned to in the next section on additional origins of feminist epistemology. Issues one and two are related and take up the issue of whether Collins intended black feminist thought to be an epistemology or an ethic, and what she proposed as a related ethic for her. It seems clear that in the first edition, continuing into the second, her aim was to claim her own voice and through her research advance voices of other Black women (Collins 2000, 2009). Importantly, she writes that as she privileges black women's thought, she does encourage other groups to find their own standpoints but not, significantly, to replicate the knowledge, wisdom, empowerment, and social justice viewpoint that she presents. She offers this invitation: "By placing African-American women's ideas at the center of analysis, I not only privilege these ideas but encourage White feminists, African-American men, and all others to investigate their similarities and differences among their own standpoints" (p. ix). There remains, however, a significant question of when a line of appropriated citation is crossed, a matter of ethics. Indeed, another question is whether standpoints are feminist or must be.

One final significant point from Collins is her own ethics, written about within the standpoint epistemology but distinct. Taken in order in her text are its two components, the ethics of caring and the ethic of personal responsibility. First, she describes the ethics of care initially thus: "[The] ethic suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (pp. 281–282). Here she points to a 'convergence' between this ethic and 'connected knowing' in 'women's ways of knowing' (Collins, p. 283; see Belenky et al. 1987), the important feminist research from the eighties. Significantly too, there must be support for care in "access to social institutions that support an ethic of caring" (Collins, p. 284). Personal responsibility, the second component, means that one is accountable for knowledge claims as they point also to "an individual's character, values, and ethics." She continues,

Many African-Americans reject prevailing beliefs that probing into an individual's personal viewpoint is outside the boundaries of discussion. Rather all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal. (p. 284)

For Collins these ethical components are central to knowledge validation from the specific social location of black women (see p. 289). Pertinently she almost never uses the term 'positionality,' although it does appear in the preface to the second edition of her text from 2009: "Whereas this edition remains centered on U.S. black women, it raises questions concerning African-American women's positionality within a global Black feminism" (p. xiii). New times place her voice within a larger project of social justice. Here is her evolved conclusion: "[The] struggle for justice

is larger than any one group, individual, or social movement.... [It] is a collective problem that requires a collective solution” (p. xiv).

Sandra Harding. The turn to Harding’s feminist standpoint epistemology helps the case of positionality with additional attention to its roots. It is understandable that Patricia Hill Collins wishes to present her standpoint as original and not derivative of other feminisms and feminist experiences, however, as she acknowledges, other standpoints were extant and indeed encouraged. Harding currently holds professorships at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Michigan State University. Harding’s undergraduate training was at Rutgers University, this followed by a dozen years spent in part as an elementary teacher. Her doctorate is from New York University in philosophy. Her professorial career included extensive appointments primarily at the University of Delaware and UCLA. Early writings focused on the nature of science, especially feminist corrections; later writings extended into multicultural and post-colonial approaches to these issues.

Beginning in the mid-seventies, Harding was among few white women and even fewer women of color who were in university departments in philosophy and the natural and social sciences. Many chose to start where they could in response to Enlightenment science and dominant modern epistemology. In writings primarily from the mid-eighties, self-identified feminist philosopher Harding publishes two texts that incorporate and extend standpoint epistemologies. She writes,

The feminist standpoint epistemologies ground a distinctive feminist science in a theory of gendered activity and social experience.... It is useful to think... [of these theories] as ‘successor science’ projects: in significant ways, the aim to reconstruct the original goals of modern science. (Harding 1986, pp. 141–142)

With regard to science, the initial point was to argue that it was traditionally—and always—socially situated and representative of “men’s distinctive activity and experience” (p. 142). Moreover in science, the feminist project was to be directed by social values and political agendas. The first agenda is largely known as ‘liberal,’ and sought to place the values and agendas of women alongside those of men.

Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s lives (Harding 1991) continues from *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986). In the latter, she offers a series of grounds from and for feminist epistemological claims to science. These are selected and synthesized here in five “grounds,’ but not firm foundations (1991, p. 137). First is using women’s lives to decrease “partialities and distortions... [from within a gender-stratified society... [in which] women and men are assigned difference... [and unequal] activities” (p. 121) Second of great importance is recognizing women’s locations as ‘strangers’ to the social order. Importantly here Harding cites the work of Collins and what alternative epistemologies can reveal. This ‘ground’ captures also the observation that within the same culture... [of minorities or majorities] there is in general a greater gap for women than for men... [over] what they say... or how they behave”(p. 125). The additional location of women as oppressed in relation to oppressors is sometimes useful as that of the feminist researcher as “outsider within’ a traditional discipline or field (see pp. 131–132).

Third is connecting feminist theorizing to political activism. Harding explains, "The need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement... [and differs from a perspective... [which] anyone can simple have]. (p. 127)

Importantly in activism, she adds, "some men have been feminists, and some women have not" (p. 128). Fourth is viewing and valuing the "dailiness of women's lives" as significant for understanding the lives of both women and men. Credit from Harding for these insights goes to, among others, sociologist Dorothy Smith and historian Bettina Aptheker, also both writing in the seventies (Harding, pp. 128, 129; see Smith 1987; Aptheker 1989). Finally fifth is re-conceptualizing historical and contemporary ideological dualisms that stem from the millenniums-old relationship of nature to culture. Harding understands that men as makers of culture continue to dominate women's transformations that are still largely invisible (p. 131).

It is important to see that Harding's work, as that of Collins, has continued to evolve over her career. Beyond the scope of this case, her continued connections of science to issues of multicultural and postmodern life remind as in educational research that issues of dominant theories of epistemology continue. The 'culture wars,' in which she played a central part, and perhaps especially in educational research, are not dead.

Nancy Hartsock. Political theorist, the late Nancy Hartsock is largely credited as the originator of feminist standpoint theory; she died of cancer in 2015. Hartsock's academic career was spent in the political science department of at the University of Washington. She earned her doctorate from the University of Chicago in the early seventies in that field and held several brief professorial appointments before coming to Seattle. In only 2 years following her degree, ground-breaking writing on a feminist historical materialism began to be published by her. The major work, *Money, Sex, and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* was published in 1983. It focused on the sexual division of labor that extended across her academic lifetime into political attention to global, gendered economic issues. Besides its origination, the importance of Hartsock's theorizing is its place in a particular tradition within feminisms, that of Marxist-inspired radical formulations. While some conceptions seem old today, materialist, sociologist researches remain active.

Hartsock's analysis begins with presentation of an ideal type of the social relations of women's and men's activity that is not to be attributed to individuals. Rather the focus "is on institutionalized... practices and on the specific epistemology... manifested by the ... sexual division of labor" (Hartsock 1983, p. 233). While recognizing the differences in women's lives due to race and sexual preference, nonetheless she asserts that there are commonalities among all women in 'western class societies.' As a group thus, there are two contributions in common, subsistence and childrearing. She writes, "Whether or not all women do both, women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings, and all women are forced to become the kinds of persons who can do both" (p. 234). While traditionally divided social relations between men and women in the west appear to have shifted some, the norm and the reality worldwide still exist. One of the most

important contributions from Hartsock concerns the extension of Marxist notions of production to focus on reproduction. She explains, “women’s experience in bearing and rearing children involves a unity of mind and body more profound than is possible in the worker’s instrumental activity” (p. 237). Here enters ‘the body’ that assumes feminist significance in later decades.

Part of her treatment also returns in earlier attention to Freud-inspired, psychoanalytic object relations theory. Led by the work of Nancy Chodorow, the point is still that women and men grow up through different experiences in relation of their parents and their separation and individuation from them. This dualism, Hartsock posits plays out in the gendered hierarchy originating from the nature-culture split, the first female-identified and the second male-identified.

Finally Hartsock describes what a standpoint can do: it can move beyond these historical relations. Here she is:

Just as a proletarian standpoint emerges out of the contradiction between appearance and essence in capitalism... [as historically constituted] by the relation of capitalist and worker, the feminist standpoint emerges... [out of the] differing structures of men’s and women’s activity in Western cultures. (p. 246)

What brings this standpoint theory forward to today is this conclusion: “it expresses women’s experience at a particular time and place, located within a particular set of social relations” (ibid.). Hartsock’s aim for this standpoint theorizing is to envision and work toward ‘a fully human community,’ “structured by a variety of connections rather than separation and opposition” (p. 247).

Dorothy Smith. This third case element ends with one other origin, an honorary mention of the work of sociologist Dorothy Smith. She was born in England, did undergraduate work at the London School of Economics, and emigrating, her doctorate at UC Berkeley. Her academic career centered at two Canadian institutions, the University of British Columbia and the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, now part of the University of Toronto. She is today in her nineties and retired. Her work too has Marxist roots and as contributing to the early theorizing about standpoint. She is perhaps best known for her intervention in sociology, introducing women’s perspective as ‘radical critique’ of the discipline and into North American social sciences (Smith 1974). One interesting contribution concerns the training of graduate students with which this chapter, this case, began. Here she is: “As graduate students.... we learn to practice the sociological subsumption of the actualities of ourselves and of other people. We find out how to treat the world as instances of a sociological body of knowledge. The procedure operates as a sort of conceptual imperialism” (Smith 1974, p. 8, 1987). As the other feminist standpoint theorists, she is well worth reading.

Reflexive Positionalities

The fourth component of the case of positionality and the second strand of feminist theorizing is found in empirical social science studies, often named as ‘feminist ethnography.’ This tradition, as standpoint writings, makes knowledge claims but herein are significant differences from standpoints. The theory arises within research in which the basic relationship of researcher and researched is questioned in branches of anthropology and sociology. The reflexivity tradition gains prominence in later decades of the twentieth century; it has complex and multidisciplinary theoretical roots drawing beyond questions of science. It is often identified with post-modernism, a term whose overuse made it virtually irrelevant, while its ties to extended social philosophies such as poststructuralism have been useful. Treatment in this case differs from standpoint theories because the tradition is not primarily identified with key figures, although the work and leadership of Cuban-American anthropologist Ruth Behar is often cited (see the collection, Behar and Gordon 1995). Most important to the case, the tradition has incorporated attention to ethics that will figure both implicitly and explicitly in this brief introduction. A detailed treatment is well beyond the scope of this chapter: educational researchers are encouraged to read across now several decades of writings to gain a broader theoretical overview. Indeed a traditional ‘research review’ seems contradictory to the tradition. Four exemplars form the basis for analysis in this case: these are from Kim England (1994), Kimberly Huisman (2008), Lorraine Nencel (2014), and Naomi van Stapele (2014).

In addition to reflexivity and positionality, key concepts interwoven throughout these studies include voice, agency, representation, intersubjectivity, and reciprocity—and ethics. Underlying are common feminist themes of differences, fluidities, and multiplicities. Overall in this feminist strand, positionality is embedded in relations of reflexivity and in which ethics often is acknowledged as embedded in epistemological inquiries. In general there appears agreement on values that Nencel related are “grounded in notions of engagement and radical empathy and... [in methodologies that highlight agency and create]... discursive spaces” (Nencel 2014, p. 76).

Reflexivity theory begins with the relationships of the researcher and the researched. In its early formulations, a modern ontology remained but with emerging recognition of problems of differential power relations. Over time feminist researchers desired to undermine the conventional research relationship because of its inherent ethical issues. Kim England offers a set of possible relationships: “reciprocal, asymmetrical or potentially exploitative.” She posits that

most feminists usually favor the role of... [researcher] supplicant, seeking reciprocal relationships based on empathy and mutual respect... [that] explicitly acknowledge... [her] reliance on the research subject to provide insight... [and] by shifting a lot of power over to the researched. (England 1994, p. 82)

Methods might include what she names as ‘real or constructed dialogues’ to get to people’s own terms, to be open to challenges to the researcher’s views, and a

“self-critical, sympathetic introspection.... about the consequences of the interactions with those being investigated” (ibid.). Interestingly, in feminist geography, in her own work England complicates the ‘ethicality’ of identifying place in a study—this beyond conventional confidentiality. What is so crucial to the reflexivity tradition, and to the present case on positionality has been the theoretical centrality of ethics that appears in various terms such as empathy just named. Here is Kimberly Huisman: “the endless... ethical dilemmas that researchers face make it important for them to share their... [own] stories and strategies to address the challenges they... [face]” (Huisman 2008, p. 373). Theory thus emerges within the specifics of research and ethics is not only central to research practice but also to reflexivity discourses.

Two different approaches to discourse are found in the exemplars. The first is ‘discourse analysis of a narrative text’ that begins from positionality, explains Naomi van Stapele, of both the research participant and the researcher: “The research participant has power in the production of knowledge as she has her own agenda... and decides what to share and how to share, i.e., using words, silence and/or body language.... I am also ascribed subject positions by my research participant because I am positioned... [within relations and discourses]” (van Stapele 2014, p. 75). Both agency and subjectivation are part of the narrative process. For van Stapele, “people are agents of their own positioning.... [and simultaneously shape and are shaped by] discursively demarcated spaces and allotted subject positions” (ibid.). The researcher’s discourse analysis seeks to reveal these positionings—part of this process also is to be constantly self-reflective and question the framing of the narrative of the research participant (p. 76).

The second approach to discourse again comes from Nencel who, unlike van Stapele’s implicit and self-reflective process, explicitly inserts her positionality into a reflexive text. At one stage of a multi-temporal inquiry, after gathering interview data she made a textual decision as an interpreter, to be an actual protagonist in the study. She writes, “I narrate from my perspective. I tell the stories from within the context I heard them and I do this by using ‘I’ intermitting this with dialogue” (p. 78). Her general point is that decisions like this occur for the researcher within numerous fieldwork relationships, for the researcher, let alone the researched. Some, one might suggest, positively facilitate the project and others negatively complicate, of course depending on one’s point of view. One contribution from her research is evident in specific research context: the historic background and contemporary lives of prostitutes in Peru. While she does not name ethics as central, there is her need to protect participants against harm and to be respectful of their own agency (ibid.).

A final introductory contribution comes from Huisman reporting on dangers within reflexive research, ironically that “can lead to more exploitation than traditional positivist methods” (Huisman 2008, p. 372). Importantly challenges remain even for experienced researchers who ‘do structure’ through researcher and researched relationships. She names three tensions that “[are] related to my shifting and sometimes contradictory positionalities and the way in which they... [do] not mesh with my own values” (p. 379). These are tensions within the researcher, with

the academia, and with the research community. These are entwined as shifting identities and positionalities that at bottom are ethical. This reflexive essay may be especially for to early researchers.

Through the elements thus far presented, the concepts named above are often interwoven through the work of individual researchers. This is important because there is no one ‘standpoint’, even politically, by which to conduct feminist reflexive research. England adds an interesting aspect to the question of ethics and epistemology: this is the vulnerability that is always present in intersubjective research (England 1994, p. 87); considering this surely is a matter of ethics.

Concluding Discussion

In addition to describing the general system of research ethics in the US, the point of this chapter has been to present a case about positionality, a practice of self-disclosure by educational researchers particularly those with aims of social justice. The major contribution has been a return to roots in feminist epistemologies: standpoint and reflexivity theories as positionalities. This specific focus has left out other aspects of research that constitute a set of pre-concluding comments: a small but significant tradition of feminist research in education itself and a much larger tradition of theoretical and empirical attention to and in intersectionality studies that also has feminist roots.

Prior is an important caveat that there are educational researchers who have attended to ethics. An example is from Sherick Hughes and Julie Pennington in setting out methods for autoethnography. They write, “engaging in autoethnography means welcoming the opportunity to learn about your participation in one or more cultural groups, communities, and contexts while contributing to critical social research” (Hughes and Pennington 2017, p. 1). Such engagement entails “writing against oneself as one... [is] entrenched in the complications of one’s positions” (p. 10). They name their ethics stance as ‘relational ethics’ since “the study of the self is rarely done in a social vacuum... [and must recognize] the connectedness between researcher and researched and the communities in which... [one] lives and works” (Hughes and Pennington 2017, p. 85, citing Ellis 2007). Methods of triangulation and member checking from qualitative research are recommended by them. When these are impossible to use in a self-study, perhaps an ethic of fidelity would apply.

From above, a useful brief summary of contributions by feminist researchers in education is found in Kohli and Burbules’s *Feminisms and Educational Research* published in 2012, referenced previously in this chapter. They document the presence of feminist theorizing in education particularly coming to the fore in the nineties (see Stone 1994). Foregrounding the tradition turned to next, they write,

The intersections of race, class, gender, region, religion, and other identity and subjectivity positions have disrupted... the fiction of a unitary notion of women’s experience.... {Further the] theoretical and political frameworks of feminist materialism and

poststructuralism, as well as postcolonial and critical multicultural theory, have produced some of the most cutting-edge feminist educational research in... [recent] decades. (Kohli and Burbules 2012, p. 88)

They highlight the work of theory and research by feminists in education such as Patti Lather, Deborah Britzman, Leslie Roman, Wanda Pillow, Annette Henry, Cynthia Dillard, and Cris Mayo. Of note, much feminist research in education in very recent decades has been led by minority scholars such as African Americans, Henry and Dillard, and Latinas such as Sofia Villenas. An early, now classic collection is *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, edited by Elizabeth St. Pierre and Pillow (St. Pierre and Pillow 2000). Richard Milner, along with Hughes, are African American researchers in education. The latter's text does briefly mention feminist contributions; the former, in presenting a well-considered theoretical framework of positionality, foregrounds race and culture but does not include gender in his intersections (Milner 2007).

Finally, feminists have also founded a contemporary tradition in intersectionality studies. It might be argued that it has superseded positionality theories: this is beyond the scope of the present case. Similar to the idea of multiple and shifting positions as part to reflexive writings, diversity is emphasized, and most important, intersectionality writings are connected to broader social movements with a leading role by minority scholars and research activists. Collins's later work is part of this tradition but the origin of the term is usually credited to African-American law scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw from 1991. In a recent text written with Sirma Bilge from the University of Montreal. Collins and Bilge name the six core ideas of intersectionality: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice (see Collins and Bilge 2016, pp. 25–30). One additional core idea of using intersectionality as an analytic tool is to posit these concepts across contextual domains that are structural, cultural and interpersonal.

It is important to understand that intersectional frameworks are epistemological, paying particular attention to politics, to the interconnections of inquiry and praxis. In the language of Collins and Bilge, the idea is “working at the intersections, especially in the lives of disenfranchised groups. Experiences of these groups are significant because they are especially “to broaden and deepen understandings of human life and behavior” (p. 36). Importantly for this case of educational research, while intersectionality studies are found across the academy, Collins and Bilge especially discuss relevance for professional fields. These range from criminology to public health, to education. In the latter, they name possible applications in “teacher training, curriculum design and research on pedagogy for schools” (p. 39). Three ideas from these authors are pertinent: first, to warn against simplified identity claims, second, to see the complexities of interconnections of race, class, gender and nation within “unjust systems of power... [as ‘isms’ that get lost in shorthand terms that become meaningless]” (p. 201), and third, to warn against intersectionality's ‘success’ that might not but must lead to specific activism (see Davis et al. 2015).

The case. These concluding comments are meant to indicate that positionality is part of larger writing and work both in and out of education. The overall point of the

case is that research always needs to be more than an individual knowledge claim in inquiry that involves relationships of actual persons. It is always ethical, as the research group participants in the chapter hypothetical intuitively knew: they wanted to be ethical. The problem is that they did not understand, probably know of, the feminist roots of positionality. Both standpoint and reflexive positionalities have legitimacy as knowledge projects, but in social justice research, knowledge typically in educational research is not enough for deep change, to combat the systems of oppression just named.

Both standpoint and reflexive positionalities have value in educational research. A summary of contributions points to a difference in approaches to texts. This moves theory to incorporate experience into representations. As the writings of Collins and Harding demonstrate, standpoints are narrative and analytical and 'stand' on their own. As writings in feminist reflexivity studies demonstrated, reflexive texts are 'positioned' to be returned to explicitly within the actual research process. One initial step for educational researchers set on claiming positionality would be to return to the significance of an individual statement at the conclusion of work and in its write-up.

A concluding suggestion is for a methodological addition to a research project that is explicitly ethical. This call is for conversations, interviews or focus groups perhaps mid-project taking up specifics. This should be part of the initial research design and should be attended to in results and in significance of the study. Mid-project is important as potentially sensitive discussion needs to be built on research experience and trust. One long-range change from these efforts is to extend research discourse with a centrality of ethics; short term changes can come within every project.

For this case, the hypothetical with which this case of positionality began now needs recasting as a microcosm of central tenets. The group was well-intentioned. However, what was missing on the part of all participants, both women and men, was attention, a sensitivity, to issues of gender and power. In the group discussion, none of the participants took account of the feminist roots of the practice of positionality, especially as a knowledge claim and not an ethics. There was no discussion further of the gendered status of research participants; immigrant students were categorized as such but there was no attention to gender influence on their schooling experience, especially at middle school age. The teacher and a researcher were women but their power differential was not mentioned. Finally there was no recognition of the gendered dynamics of the research group itself: it probably seemed unnecessary among these social justice researchers. Therein the majority of the group was male who in addition claimed methodological expertise and who did not question their own 'positions.' Knowledge of positionality theories would have helped but, most important, was a commitment to ethics among themselves.

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