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‘That is NOT what’s happening at Horizon!’: ethics and misrepresenting knowledge in text

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This paper analyzes the ethically important moments that helped build, then break, and then negotiate the relationship between researchers and schools during an ethnographic-type study conducted by the team of researchers from a prominent private university. I posit that the researchers’ unskilled approach culminated in producing written representations of the schools that were ethically problematic. To quote one school: ‘*That is NOT what’s happening at Horizon!*’ Guided by simplistic understandings of procedures, rather than by articulated moral principles, the researchers were unable to scrutinize and interrogate their data in light of the context from which the data were collected. They thus failed to examine reflexively the knowledge they produced in their written representations. My critique uses a framework that counters harm with benefit and authority with respect, drawing on both consequential and non-consequential ethical theories, and emphasizes an ethic of care.

Keywords: ethics; moral principles; representation

On Thursday, 14 August 2008, 1:29 pm, the director of one participating school in a federally funded research and dissemination project on innovative schools sent this email to the executive director of the sponsoring association:

Subject: instr/concl chapters from PPU

Norman, Please do what you need to do to remove our school from the PPU study. We have consensus that we want to pull out. Do what you have to do to ensure that our rights to do so are respected. Please reply as soon as possible as to my request. TC¹

As the external evaluator of the project, I was one of several who were copied in on the email. I had been watching interactions and relationships from a neutral stance: my role was to monitor (i.e., to ensure that the research did what was promised) and evaluate (i.e., to judge the merit and worth – the quality – of) the research according to the project goal to identify and document factors that contributed to these schools’ success. While I read, alarm bells rang in my head – this request from participants signaled to me that some ethical violation had occurred. Even without details on the reasoning behind the school’s desire to withdraw, I guessed the issue went beyond the procedural. Instead, I suspected the request reflected a reaction to one of the ‘ethically important moments’ (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 261) that occur in the everyday

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practice of conducting qualitative research – a moment during which the researchers had acted in some way inappropriately or without sensitivity. Through my evaluator role, I had monitored the researchers' obtaining approval from their university's institutional review board (IRB), so I expected that the researchers were aware of and were following procedural requirements. That the school people knew they had the right to withdraw from the study indicated that they had received – and understood – the informed consent required by the IRB. I reached for my phone to call Alice, the project coordinator at the innovative school association that was sponsoring the study.

In this paper, I use a moral lens to look back on the ethically important moments that helped build, then break, and then negotiate the relationship between researchers and schools during an ethnographic-type study conducted by the team of researchers from a prominent private university (PPU). I argue that the researchers' approach culminated in producing written representations of the schools that were ethically problematic. Guided by simplistic understandings of procedures, rather than by articulated moral principles, the researchers were unable to scrutinize and interrogate their data in light of the context from which the data were collected. They thus failed to examine reflexively the knowledge they produced in their written representations. My critique uses a framework that counters harm with benefit and authority with respect, drawing on both consequential and non-consequential ethical theories, and emphasizes an ethic of care.

The moral lens

Qualitative research begins with questions. Informing these questions results in learning, that is, new knowledge is constructed or extant knowledge is confirmed. I propose that all research should have a goal of improving some social circumstance (Rossman and Rallis 2003), thus establishing a specific moral position. Because in qualitative research, the researcher is the means through which the questions are explored, that person continually and consciously makes decisions about conceptualizing, designing, conducting, interpreting, and writing up findings; ethical researchers draw on their moral principles to guide this decision-making. The knowledge constructed is their interpretation, so researchers systematically document their decisions and reflect on what they are learning, how they are learning it, what role they play in their construction, and what the learning might mean to participants and other audiences. They use complex reasoning that is both multifaceted and iterative, moving back and forth between the specifics and the whole, between themselves (the *knower*) and what they claim to know. They are, in short, reflexive.

As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) point out, reflexivity is essential for trustworthiness in research. Reflexivity is 'looking at yourself making sense of how someone else makes sense of their world' (Rossman and Rallis 2003, 49). Reflexivity demands the on-going interrogation of: *What do I see? How and why do I see this? How might others see it? What does it mean to me? To others?* Reflexivity recognizes that the researcher and the participants are involved in continual and changing interaction. The researcher asks: What might be possible consequences of my relationship with participants? Of my interpretations? What rights of participants might I violate or potential harms might result? Are the participants likely to benefit in any way – and are they likely to agree on the benefit? To be trustworthy, the relationship must be ethical, that is, consciously guided by explicit moral principles. Ultimately, to produce knowledge that can be used for improvement, the reflexive process invites a researcher to identify

their ethical perspective: What are my values? What rules or standards apply? What moral principles guide my decisions? Equally critical is that the researchers question their actions: Do I act according to my principles?

So, as qualitative researchers, we start with the relationship. Social life is dialogic, so must research be also. The researchers seek out and listen carefully to the voices embedded in their social context (Taylor 1994). I won't pretend that building an ethical relationship with participants is easy or happens immediately, but I do believe that it becomes easier when we articulate (at least explicitly to ourselves) the moral principles we intend to use. Not all moral principles are compatible, and contradictions even lie within some. Moreover, the researchers are challenged not to simply follow procedures but to translate abstract principles into practical actions.

One set of moral principles form consequentialist ethical theories that focus on outcomes, on results of actions: any particular action is neither intrinsically good nor bad; rather, it is good or bad *because of its results in a particular context* – its consequences. If the end has value, the means are less important. *Utilitarianism*, for example, advocates that behavior should result in the greatest good for the greatest number. *Non-consequentialist* ethical theories, on the other hand, recognize universal standards to guide all behavior, regardless of the consequences in a specific context. Two non-consequentialist theories are the *ethic of individual rights and responsibilities* and the *ethic of justice*. The first upholds the unconditional worth of all human beings and the equal respect to which they are entitled. This ethic judges actions by the degree to which they respect a person's rights, not by its outcomes or consequences. Each person is treated, and must be treated, as an end in themselves and not as a means to an end. The protection of these rights may not be denied, even for the greatest good for the greatest number. *Ethics of justice* go beyond individual rights and responsibilities to espouse the redistribution of resources and opportunities to achieve equity above equality. Principles of fairness and equity are used to judge which actions are right and wrong. Its goal is to ensure that everyone is better-off, even though the allocation of some benefit may differ. Such apparently unequal treatment is justified because not attending to the least is to hurt the whole.

Principles of justice and individual rights consider questions of power and representation: Who defines what is right in a given situation? Whose values are used in rating on criteria? Are all voices given opportunity to be heard? According to Rawls (1971), the benefit or welfare of the least advantaged, not that of the majority or average, must drive any action. His view maintains that improving the welfare of the least advantaged ultimately benefits everyone because the communal resources of society and future generations will grow.

While these two major categories offer grounding rules for the researcher-participant relationship, they do not neatly concur, and the principles are generated externally and applied to the setting or context. Other perspectives situate morality within the context and relationship. *Communitarianism* (MacIntyre 1981) acknowledges that communities differ on what is morally good or right. Researchers may find that not all within their research setting share fundamental values, and that those values may conflict with the researchers' own values. So whose values define the research, guide decisions, and shape interpretations? A *postmodern* response would posit that power and dominant versions of 'truth' shape the relationships and thus the research (Foucault 1970).

Still, none of these above theories or perspectives may be practically helpful to get qualitative researchers through *ethically important moments* as these theories are

necessarily abstract. An alternative and potentially quite powerful way to conceptualize the moral and ethical aspects of qualitative research is to spotlight the relationship itself, through the *ethics of care*. This perspective emphasizes concrete circumstances over abstract principles: What does *this* person need in *this* moment? Care theory emphasizes the moral interdependence of people: 'Our goodness and our growth are inextricably bound to that of others we encounter. As researchers, we are as dependent on our [participants] as they are on us' (Noddings 1995, 196).

Ethical decisions must be made in caring interactions with those affected by the discussion. Indeed, it is exactly in the most difficult situations that principles fail us. Thus, instead of turning to a principle for guidance, a carer returns to the cared-for. What does he or she need? Will filling this need harm others in the network of care? Am I competent to fill this need? Will I sacrifice too much of myself? Is the expressed need really in the best interest of the cared-for? (Noddings 1995, 187)

The aim is to build the mutual respect necessary for the caring relationship to be possible; reciprocity is key. 'One must meet the other in caring. From this requirement, there is no escape for one who would be moral' (Noddings 1984, 201). Mutual care and respect can bridge the gap between the purposes and the needs of both members in the relationship:

Research involving human participants starts from a position of ethical tension. In the great majority of cases, research involving humans is a process of asking people to take part in, or undergo, procedures that they have not actively sought out or requested, and that are not intended solely or even primarily for their direct benefit, although participants may indirectly benefit from the process ... [note violation of Kantian maxim that people should never be used as a means to someone else's end] this tension can be resolved, however, if the subjects of the research take up the goals of the research as their own; they are not then being used as a mere means or tools by the researchers. (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 271)

Within the research relationship, then, practical tensions are present: harm and burden versus respect and benefit. Avoiding harm (physical, emotional, or social) is basic (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), and bearing undue burden may be harmful (see Hemmings 2006). However, in qualitative research, potentials for harm 'are often quite subtle and stem from the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 272). Conscious reflexivity driven by one's ethical stance offers the antidote to harm. This reflection on and into action serves:

partly to check that the researcher's practice is actually embodying his or her principles; in addition, this allows the researcher to become aware of situations where following the theoretical position may not be the best course and may not best uphold the interests of his or her participants. (276)

Reflexivity then recognizes the import of both principles and the unique context of the relationship. I suggest that care theory, with its emphasis on relationships, can connect principles and context, providing a practical framework for making moral decisions in the ethically important moments a qualitative researcher will experience. Ethical research demands *caring reflexivity*.

One of the most common subtle traps for harm and burden lies in the moments surrounding the representations of the participants' voices and actions in the constructed text. Since western academic culture recognizes written text as the currency of knowledge, the text itself can become a source of power. As well, it can be used as

a force for social improvement. Caring reflexive researchers scrutinize their written representations to ensure respect and mutual benefit. They ask:

Are my descriptions thick enough to support my interpretations? Am I describing or prescribing? Are biases recognized and used? Whose voice dominates? What is my purpose – to convey my own views or to discover anew? Do discoveries emerge from dialogic interaction with participants? How are discoveries likely to be used? How much does my need to publish something ‘important’ influence what I write?

Each question poses potential for an ethically important moment. As the evaluator of the innovative schools study, I saw several such moments in the journey of the research team toward a published book. This paper tells the story of that journey. I argue that a caring reflexive research team would have produced different, more ethically grounded and thus more powerful, knowledge.

Before I continue with the story, I consider how I was caringly reflexive in bringing together the pieces of this story by asking myself the very questions I pose above. Such iterative reflexivity is essential to differentiate my decisions related to telling this story from those of the researchers in producing their textual representations of the schools. Am I guilty of misrepresenting the researchers as they were seen to misrepresent the schools? To support my interpretations of events, I offer thick descriptions (not prescriptions) built on data drawn directly from public documents, public expressions in the participants’ own words, or from meeting notes shared across all groups, or from my own research log. Through these data, I have presented various voices. I relate my decisions and methods and have articulated my understanding of the moral principles which I believe guided my own choices and actions; thus, I believe my transparency allows readers to judge the credibility of my interpretations. I am sure I did not enter the evaluation with an extant personal agenda (I certainly never intended to write about the process). Indeed, the relationship I built with all participants (the Association, the research team, and the school leaders) was as ‘critical friend’ (the project coordinator introduced us with this term at a fall 2009 meeting of Innovative School Projects in Washington, DC). To forestall harm to any of the participants, I have taken steps to disguise the identities of the project, the schools, and the research team. The project coordinator even encouraged me to write what she hoped could serve as a caution to academic researchers. Reflecting on my reasons for writing this paper, I recognize that my motivation may rest on a consequentialist moral principle; I was so troubled by the research process that I felt compelled to tell the story as a lesson of how participants may be harmed.

The moments

Purposes and promises

The research originated with the State Association of Innovative Schools (henceforth to be called the Association). In response to a federal call for proposals regarding research for replication and dissemination of innovative schools, the Association proposed to identify high-quality innovative schools in high-need communities serving students at risk of educational failure. They proposed to contract an educational researcher at a PPU to research and document the elements of success common across these schools. The knowledge produced through the research was to be disseminated in a book that described these elements of success.

Schools were selected on the basis of the state's high-stakes test scores and graduation rates, and the Association invited five schools to participate. At the first gathering of all players – Association project personnel, school leaders and some staff, the research team from PPU (consisting of a faculty member and several graduate students), and the project evaluators (I was one), questions of power, authority, and representation surfaced. The schools expressed reasons why they were willing to participate: recognition; promised resources; embedded professional development; opportunity to 'tell our story' (orientation meeting notes, January 2007). They also intimated the kinds of knowledge they hoped the research would produce: their strengths, their struggles (long hours, burn-out), their successes. This general meeting was held at PPU, and the schools appeared impressed to be part of the 'research agenda' of a professor at this prestigious institution. They were excited about the expectation that they would serve as what the proposal described as 'laboratories for innovative developments' and models for 'district schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring'. However, school leaders expressed concerns about the time that might be required of them and their staff and students. While the Association made clear that involvement would entail additional time, the Association project coordinator promised that the schools' needs and integrity would be respected. She reiterated that the scope of the project was limited to identifying and documenting what made these schools so successful in graduating so many high-risk students. The research team introduced themselves and scheduled initial visits to begin what they were calling their 'ethnographic case studies'. The faculty member, Dr Howell, introduced as the *principal investigator*, told the participating school people that a book with a prestigious imprimatur would result. The five schools opened their doors to the research team.

What struck me at this stage was the lack of any noticeable moments of interaction; no explicit negotiations occurred directly between the principal investigator and the school participants. Any promises put on the table were from the Association. All parties seemed to assume fairness and respect, but precisely what those terms meant to each was not discussed. The schools assumed a position of trust: the project scope had been clearly explained; the researchers were from a highly regarded research institution; letters of informed consent seemed acceptable and were signed; and PPU's IRB granted approval. In short, the schools appeared to 'take up the goals of the research as their own' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, 271), but never considered if they shared a common understanding of the goals with the researchers. Since the research team asserted that they were conducting ethnography, I assumed that they would dialog with school participants about purpose and promises with each school in those initial visits.

Confidence, competence, and construction

My assumptions were challenged early on, however, when Howell (with whom I was professionally acquainted) commented to me at a January planning meeting in the first year: 'I'm really glad you are the evaluator because I'm not really a researcher – don't know a lot about doing this' (noted in my study log, January 2007). He asked me to come to PPU to review the basics of qualitative/ethnographic research with his graduate students. Each of the students had taken a research methods overview course, and two had taken an introduction to qualitative research. Only one had experience doing qualitative research. Another had previously worked in one of the schools. Howell and the graduate students all appeared to be European-American.

During the requested training session,² I speculated about what rigor and ethics might mean in this study and talked about establishing a trustworthy and caring relationship with the school people, especially since the schools were generous to open their doors and give their time to the researchers. Their reaction to my question about which moral principles were to guide their interactions was a gloss: 'Our methods will reflect the IRB principles and the criteria the NRC [National Research Council] states as components of scientific research.' No one elaborated. They all expressed confidence in their ability to build the relationships necessary to conduct the research, so off they went to collect data.

Their confidence was further apparent in January of the second year at a review panel held to obtain feedback on preliminary findings from potential audiences for the research knowledge (e.g., leaders of other innovative schools). The transcript of the panel session documents the interactions. A panelist requested concrete descriptions with how-do details: 'I want to know what *exactly* is Citizen School doing around their Saturday School model. Connect the conceptual and operational.' Howell responded: 'But that is not doing research.' Other panelists wondered how any conclusions could be drawn after 'only 22 days spent across all [five] schools?' Others were concerned that students' input was minimal. Another panelist admonished: 'Don't try to talk about what you don't know. If you don't have it, you don't have it.' However, Howell reminded the panel that, while panelists were experts on practice, he and his team were the experts on research. A few panelists noted that, since the team was from PPU, Howell could have the last word on what constituted research. In my notes, I comment on Howell's rapid acquisition of research expertise.

To me, the panel provided several important insights. I emailed Alice, the project coordinator at the Association³:

My thinking in response to the direction Howell seems to be taking with the book is: Whose book is this? The review panel clearly called for a practitioner-oriented book. Howell appears to be heading in a somewhat different direction (for example, it raises issues that are not illuminated by the data collected or necessarily integral to the original conceptual framework for the book). You have a lot of good material in the team's work – now the challenge is to get it out in a form that will be useful for practitioners. (Sharon, 1 February 2008)

Alice emailed Howell:

This project has a central focus on producing practical products. At the vetting, we consistently heard 'let the reader see a practice', 'how is this operationalized?' etc. Your reaction at one point ('that isn't research') worried me. I think the feedback at the vetting was fairly consistent. Now, how is that feedback being incorporated into the next steps, into the production of the book? (Alice, 5 February 2008)

Howell assured us that: 'We will produce a book that you are proud of' (5 February 2008), but the research team appeared to be ignoring the practitioner and participant input in their construction of knowledge. With no explicitly articulated operating principles and a limited understanding of ethnography in general, I doubted both their competence and ethics. As well, I saw dissimilar worlds intersecting: academic – practitioner; privileged – at risk; white – color. Each was likely to interpret actions and events differently. I waited to see how they would represent the knowledge they had set out to discover. Whose views of the common elements of success would they present?

Whose truth?

We anticipated the book draft, which, according to the original agreement, was to be reviewed by the Association and the evaluators. The evaluator review was guided by the project goals and scope (to identify and document – so as to be useful to practitioners – factors that contributed to the schools' success). Based on my principles of ethical qualitative research, I assumed that designated individuals at the schools would also be privy to the drafts. In March, before the drafts could be vetted by any parties internal to the project, the graduate students uploaded papers that were versions of their draft case studies on a website for an annual conference of their national professional association. One of the schools discovered that the papers had 'gone public' and was very upset. Alice asked Howell to have the papers removed, which was done.

The damage, however, had begun. School people had read the material and were troubled by what they read. Then full drafts of the case studies were sent out and, due to earlier concerns, the Association's director forwarded each on to its school. The director of one participant school emailed her reaction:

The proposal to DOE describes the process of selecting schools in urban areas who are successful in standardized testing, that success being the basis of selection for the project. We were told to look at the challenges faced by our students and at methods we employed to meet those challenges in order to close the achievement gap. Other schools, we were told, would do the same and researchers would be selected to 'identify common elements in the five schools that could be described for the benefit of others wishing to learn from our experience'. Based on this understanding, then, we instructed our staff and faculty to speak with researchers about how we addressed the goal of academic success for each student. We asked them to focus on how we diagnosed learning needs and then developed methods to address those needs in an effort to close the gap. This is what was expected by the Association and the DOE.

So what happened? [In the case study] we are described as focusing on children's deficits and somehow not respecting their cultural heritages. Our entire community, especially our parents, is most concerned about the conclusions drawn by the researchers. We do not agree with the opinions related to our respect for the whole child. I hope you understand our concerns. (TC, 8 April 2008)

What followed was a spring and summer of often vitriolic exchanges regarding the tone and content of the case studies and the cross-case analyses that came after. Two cultures at odds had faced off. As the *communitarian* perspective predicts, the researchers' values did not agree with those held by people at the schools. The question was, which culture and values would prevail in the book – what message would be sent about the schools? How would they be represented in the images and words presented in the text? The situation reminded me of Ellis's (1986) judgments of the *Fisher Folk* that were based on her world view, which represented their culture as deficit, that is, lacking social mechanisms she saw as requisite to prosper according to western modern criteria; similarly, the judgments of the university researchers critiqued aspects of the innovative schools based on their own academic values, not the values that drove the schools' operations. What fed the conflict was the school people's perception that the researchers had jumped to conclusions in the texts with judgments that were both unbalanced and over-interpretations of the data.

We welcomed the study because we thought they were going to look at what we do well – 'best practices'. Instead they fixated on instruction and how bad they think it is. But they didn't even spend a lot of time in our classrooms. (PS, 10 May 2008)

On one side, the PPU researchers laid a claim for scientific rigor (National Research Council) that can discover the ‘truth’ of a situation. The research team posited that their perspective was ‘objective’ and thus, provided the true, accurate representation. On the other side were the schools and the Association that claimed that the researchers had exceeded the scope of the project as defined in both the proposal and the contract – and as had been explained to the schools when they gave their consent (IRB). The schools also complained that the researchers’ written critique did not consider contextual factors over which they had no control (e.g., Howell criticized one school’s emphasis on the state high-stakes test, disregarding both that the tests are required by law for graduation and that scores were a criterion for school selection). I read these texts as reflections of the research team’s imposition of their academic agenda, lacking any sensitivity to what the schools explicitly stood for.

The schools suggested alternative truths – as they also questioned the basis for the judgments of the researchers, casting doubt on the researchers’ claim of scientific rigor:

These assumptions [about our schools] are presented as based on many weeks of research in these schools. We don’t agree with that. We know they were not in schools that much. We need to have a clear statement of how many classes were seen, how many hours, and over what period of time. The researchers need to make it clear that they just saw a snapshot. (LT, 15 August 2008)

The researchers’ representation of language use illustrates this conflict of perspectives. The following paragraph concluded a section of one case study:

It is important to note that these administrators’ framing of their students’ backgrounds causes them to focus on deficits, rather than assets. While such an intense focus on student weakness may be, to some degree, inevitable in the standards and accountability era – and while this orientation does allow for instructional goal-setting, concentrating on a child’s perceived deficits could inhibit a full understanding of a whole child – an understanding that honors the many facets of a child’s identity and worth, and not just those skills that are easily measured and valued by the current testing educational system. Indeed, New Community [the school] navigates what can appear to be a cultural trade-off for some students: standard English skills for the language spoken at home or within the home country. While the school does have cultural nights and students do receive some Spanish lessons, English instruction is, without a doubt, the focus of the staff’s instructional energies, especially for students within the lower grades. Such a trade-off raises questions, questions confronting any school drawing upon a diverse student body: What are the costs of replacing the language of home with the language of school? Does the notion of ‘compensatory education’ suggest that students must give up something worthy and valuable about their own backgrounds? (draft of New Community chapter, April 2008)

Teachers and leaders at New Community were deeply offended. They protested that the chapter did not present the whole picture: after all, the state had an English-first policy – and that parents had chosen the school because of its emphasis on English. In an email exchange, they remarked that this section read like a ‘typical academic treatise’.

Another illustration of conflicting values appeared in the representation of cognitive demand that appeared in the chapter with the cross-case analyses. One section decried the apparent low-cognitive demand of the instruction and the schools’ focus on the state’s high-stakes test (passing required for graduation). A leader in one school reacted as follows:

Wow – This is TERRIBLE. It reads like an indictment – it seems very one-sided, meaning only negative and not balanced at all. I'm not just over sensitive here – increasing the rigor of our instruction is a constant goal and conversation for us – but the examples and analysis in this chapter doesn't accurately represent the work that goes on at Horizon. It's also completely inaccurate that we are solely focused on the [state tests] and use that as our main reference point in classrooms or at the leadership level ... The tone of the chapter is also condescending particularly with regard to the SAT, as if we train our kids like dogs for the state test and can't do that for the SAT because it requires too much higher-order thinking for us (perhaps he should compare SAT data disaggregated by race or first-generation college as a more accurate comparison ... there's a lot more going on in our kids' scores than [what he describes] as 'low level' instruction). The conclusion over-reaches and seems biased. Seems to essentially say that the SCAS [state comprehensive exam] is pathetic and it's the only measure by which any of our schools have had success (not true). (PJ, 14 August 2008)

As Howell saw me as neutral, he sent me this interpretation of the researchers' representation:

Sharon, this brings into question the integrity of our work. I can't agree to withhold information that is part of why these schools are successful (even if it is not complementary [*sic*]). (15 August 2008)

In reaction to the cross-case analysis chapter, one of the schools asked to withdraw from the study, a move that would remove their data from the book. Howell contacted PPU's lawyers, claiming 'breach of confidentiality' on the part of the association in sharing the case studies with the schools, although the researchers themselves had been the first to make the papers public on the aforementioned website. Again, Howell emailed me:

Sharing our drafts with the schools was unauthorized and completely compromises my commitment to my IRB to only share documents about the project where I said I would. Furthermore he has, by sharing these DRAFTS essentially, trashed my reputation with these schools and with others in the metropolitan area. Can you imagine someone taking your first draft and sending it to your subjects without permission?? Imagine how you would feel, what it would do to your ability to work with those people in the future and your reputation. Does it make you shudder?? If not, it should in my humble opinion. I intend to make sure the Program Officer knows full well of this terrible indiscretion.

Good luck on reporting about this mess created by the Association in your overall evaluation. I have every intention of making it well known in Washington funding circles including the DOE, as well as with [others in the innovative school community] and all of the other grantees supported by this initiative from the DOE. It will already have been heard of in DC and in innovative school circles by the time your report arrives. (16 August 2008)

I was surprised by Howell's stance. After careful consideration, I sent him this email on the following day:

H,
Let me start by repeating that the work of you and your team is quite well done. But that is why I am so surprised and concerned with your reaction – concerned because it runs counter to procedures and ethics of conducting solid qualitative research that honors the idiosyncratic and contextual nature of human experience and allows complex and dynamic interpretations of that experience. The issue is not about

academic freedom – it is about rigorous and systematically conducted research and producing valid results.

You ask me to imagine how I would feel were someone to share my drafts with my ‘subjects’. My response is that I do not have to imagine – I always share my drafts with my participants (qualitative researchers generally do not call the people in their studies subjects) as a validity check. The process is referred to as member checks – not so that members can change the results but so that the researcher can ensure that her interpretations are ones others share. While qualitative research embraces subjectivity (individual perspectives and interpretations), Michael Scriven (in his classic *Philosophical Inquiry Methods in Education* for AERA 1988, and his *Thesaurus* 1991) acknowledges a form of objectivity can be approached when multiple perspectives are integrated to fully describe the phenomena – thus the need for member checks to ensure validity and a trustworthy study (see the classic text by Lincoln and Guba 1985 or Rossman and Rallis 2003). Without integrating the schools’ perspectives, your interpretation is as subjective as theirs.

The issue is also ethical. The IRB exists to protect the participants/subjects, not the researcher. Qualitative researchers deeply respect the voices of their participants and acknowledge that the process is as important as the outcome (re: John Rawls means must equal ends). Ethically conducted research is transparent – that is, everyone sees clearly how you arrived at your conclusions and accepts your process – not necessarily your conclusions but the process must be transparent. Thus, sharing drafts with participants is de rigueur.

Yes, this takes time. Often unbelievable amounts of time. In fact, I recently finished a chapter for *The Sage International Handbook of Educational Evaluation* – the chapter is based on the work of the Superintendents Network and I must have run 5 or 6 different drafts by them, making many changes – both minor and major – never changing the findings but the way in which I represented them. The final result is one that they and I are deeply pleased with. And we did have a deadline but the publishers felt it was critical that the chapter offer a trustworthy representation of that actually happened in the network.

I repeat that in general you and the team have used systematic and ethical inquiry appropriate for the purposes of this study. Sharing drafts with participants should be a part of that systematic inquiry. (Sharon, 17 August 2008)

What followed were a series of interactions to negotiate the representation to be put forward in the book. The publisher entered the fray by insisting on a chapter about instruction despite the schools’ concerns that the researchers had not collected adequate data to support the conclusions they drew. The publisher’s agenda, the book’s marketability, appeared to conflict with understood purposes – and even with the content – of the research. As evaluators, our efforts aimed to ensure that the book represented what the data showed was happening in the schools, not personal judgments of the researchers or what a publisher thought would be marketable. The project coordinator and the two evaluators worked closely with Howell and the graduate students to modify the offending sections. After some back and forth between the school participants and the researchers, mediated by the evaluator, all came to agree on modifications that did not compromise the integrity either of the school or of the research.

Throughout the process, some positive interactions occurred where the graduate student and the school staff clicked. As Alice wrote in the spring:

I’m glad the other two papers are in very good shape – COL and Citizen School. As James, at Citizen School put it, they and their researcher were a good match; that probably goes a long way toward making this chapter business work.

The book was published, and nearly all stakeholders agreed that the case studies told important stories of successful innovative schools. An acceptable understanding between researchers and the program negotiated and brokered: data were revisited and some changes were made, but the final cross-case analyses chapters still represented interpretations from the particular perspective and values of the researchers and were based on what can be regarded as ‘thin’ data. Many in the schools still felt that the book exceeded the scope of their contract with the Association and their agreements with the schools. The Association in agreement with the schools wrote a widely disseminated review that highlighted what they viewed as positive aspects of the book and raised questions and offered counter arguments to perceived negative aspects:

It is, however, the final chapter with which we, and the five schools studied, take most issue. Again, it begins well, with useful summary material. But the focus changes to a consideration and critique of standardized testing, which we feel is outside the scope of the book and might have more to say about the researcher’s perspective than about the schools themselves. In addition, the author asks whether government should support schools that focus on college success, a question we find startling, given the realities of the global economy and the high level of skills and education it requires. Finally, the last few pages of the text move into a philosophical consideration of ‘what should matter’ in education. The implication here is that the schools are too narrowly focused on tests and standards, rather than the more ‘profound’ goals of education. We’d argue that preparing low-income, urban students for college is profound, in fact critical, and each school’s unwavering commitment to continuous improvement helps them determine and regularly evaluate ‘what matters’.

With these caveats, the book is a very useful piece of research and writing. It gives us a window into five high-performing urban innovative schools, describes how they operate, and demystifies the process of closing the achievement gap. The results these schools have achieved – first generation college attendance, entrance into highly competitive high schools, laudable performance on assessments, safe and productive school environments – are impressive, and they offer hope to anyone concerned about improving education for our neediest students. (Association, 21 June 2009)

Harm and burden versus care and benefit

Evidence I have presented indicates that the research process did indeed burden the school participants and threatened to harm their daily work. The representations were seen as unbalanced, and the logic of inferences was unwarranted. The research team was inexperienced and untrained (note their thin descriptions and their references to ‘subjects’). Their lack of qualifications to conduct an ethnographic study undoubtedly limited their skills to respond ethically to moments where the differing cultures and values were obvious. Not understanding the principles underlying qualitative interpretive research practices, the team reverted to and applied what they did know, that is, procedures and reasoning corresponding with quantitative, more positivist research. Any researcher (but especially one using qualitative methods because of the close, face-to-face interactions with participants) *will* encounter ethical issues; the relationship and the trustworthiness of the knowledge constructed depend on adhering to agreed-on moral principles. The team from PPU never dialoged with the participants in order to establish common purposes; they never made explicit their principles, which seemed to be driven by consequentialist ethical theories. Had they done so, the schools might never have opened their doors to the PPU team – or new agreements might have been negotiated. At the end, because neither shared principles nor care

prevailed, the schools felt the weight of the research burden – they discovered that the researchers' goals differed from their own, so the benefit they experienced was limited.

Moreover, the team appeared not to practice any degree of reflexivity; they did not interrogate their biases and assumptions; they made judgments on their limited data without questioning the foundation of these judgments. Using the power embedded in the structure of the research situation, they defined themselves as the authority, the experts; thus, they did not explore alternative interpretations. They saw what they expected to see. They did not ask the reflexive questions: *What do I know? How do I know it? How am I representing it? Whose knowledge is this?* As a result, the interactions between the schools and the research team were not reciprocal but were characterized by distrust, disrespect, and difference. The participants and the researchers did not meet each other in caring, as Noddings (1984) argues is necessary.

Without *caring reflexivity*, the research team produced a book that the schools felt represented the researchers' views, not the realities of their schools. Much of the knowledge presented in the text was not seen as useful for replication and dissemination, so as evaluators, we raised to the Association the question of whether the project had fulfilled its goals and purposes. In short, the final textual representations in the form of the published book did not hold true. As a leader at one of the schools declared upon reading the chapter on her school: 'That is NOT what's happening at Horizon!'

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Notes

1. All names of persons and schools (other than my own) have been changed.
2. I agreed to hold this session, although it was not specified in my evaluation contract.
3. All emails reproduced here, whether directed to a specific individual or a group, were copied to at least one other person. None was a private communication.

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