

# The Researcher's Self in Research: Confronting Issues about Knowing and Understanding Others

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This paper engages general debates about the production of knowledge and, within that, more specific debates about the place of the researcher in the research process. There are two main objectives: one is a theoretical interest that involves examining the issue of subjectivity and how intersubjective negotiations take shape in research encounters. A second objective is to speculate from my own data what these understandings of the researcher's subjectivity tell us about the production of knowledge. It is also to understand the part that emotions and unconscious interference play in research.

This paper is about the researcher's self in the research process. It engages general debates about the production of knowledge and, within that, more specific debates about the place of one's subjectivity in research. The theme is not new of course. Putting the researcher into the research is considered a way to move beyond subscribing to a particularly modernist set of assumptions informing conceptions of what it means to know and what it means to know others. This is a set of assumptions to the effect that researchers are able to put themselves in another's (participant's) place and know his or her circumstances and interests in exactly the same way as she or he (participant) would know them. Disavowing those assumptions, some have chosen to write themselves into the research—to make their core researcher self visible and voiced.

Arguably, the new attention to the reflexive researcher makes the complex relation between researcher and researched a lot more transparent, but it signals a mere surface understanding about how subjectivity and intersubjective negotiations are actually produced during the research process. How can we explain the researcher's sense of self with regard to her complex and continually changing relation to her research participants? And, for that matter, how do desires and fantasies map into this sense of self? Questions such as these are about theory. They are also about methodological ways of proceeding with, and writing up research.

In this paper I am attempting to address these questions. In that attempt I have two main objectives. One is a theoretical interest that involves examining the issue of subjectivity and how intersubjective negotiations take shape in relation to data gathering and the construction of research stories. A second objective is to speculate what these understandings of the researcher's subjectivity tell us about the production of knowledge. Using data from my own research on girls in mathematics schooling, I place my 'self' under scrutiny. My purpose in doing this is to understand what it is that structures the research experience and the part that emotions and unconscious interference play in the performance of research.

## Confronting Knowledge Production

Contemporary theorists now recognise the researcher's position of privilege in knowledge construction and have transformed it into "to a more self-conscious approach to authorship and audience" (Coffey, 2003, p. 321). Taking the lead from social science, scholars within mathematics education have suggested that it is not enough to recognise



the connection between the researcher and the questions, methods, and conclusions of any research, but that such a relationship should be avowed and should be made transparent (see Burton, 1995, 2003; Cabral & Baldino, 2004). In writing the reflective self and researcher voice into research texts, contemporary work has emphasised the negotiation, physicality, and crafting of personal relationships within the research encounter. As Coffey (2003) has noted, “the researcher-self has become a source of reflection and re-examination; to be written about, challenged and, in some instances celebrated” (p. 313).

In this line of thinking the tendency is to believe that the addition of a researcher layer to the narrative has the effect of countering the effects of power, privilege, and perspective in the research encounter. The understanding is that writing oneself into the research guards “against over-familiarity and the effects of context on the relationships that are formed in the field” (Coffey, 2003, p. 314). The important point to stress is that the researcher self in these accounts is most often expressed through a self who is a “fixed point of departure or arrival” (de Lauteris, 1984, p. 159). Thus, there is a certain level at which the researcher assumes a core true self.

A number of writers have raised theoretical and methodological issues to do with this concept of the self (e.g., Adkins, 2003; Brown & England, 2004, 2005; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Walkerdine, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2003). Such writers take pains to emphasise that authoring one’s biography into the research account has the effect of romanticising the self. In their view there is no core self. They argue that the reflexive self is based on a foundational conception of the human subject, and hence much too cognitive in nature. Centring the self, they maintain, privileges and inscribes “a hierarchy of speaking positions” (Adkins, 2003, p. 332), with the effect that the core self tends to “move uncomfortably between the individual and the social or cultural without resolving, or satisfactorily exploring, the tensions inherent in this tussle” (Bibby, 2008, p. 39). In understanding this tussle, a number of factors become crucially important. The place of emotions is a case in point.

## Understanding Subjectivity

Within recent scholarship, subjectivity is understood as historically and situationally produced in relation to a range of constantly changing processes. For scholars who draw upon this understanding (e.g., Keith & Pile, 1993; Pink, 2001), the notion of a ‘real’ identity or ‘true self’ is an illusion. Some have gone so far as arguing that the “self, like those of the research participants, is created as both fiction (in the Foucauldian sense) and fantasy” (Walkerdine et al., 2003, p. 180). It is an effect of the experience of interacting with social groups, cultures and institutions. Pink (2001) elaborates that the “self is never fully defined in any absolute way,...it is only in specific social interactions that the...identity of any individual comes in to being *in relation to* the negotiations that it undertakes with other individuals” (p. 21). As de Lauretis (1984) tells us, subjectivity:

is an ongoing construction...[T]hus it is produced not by external ideas, values or material causes, but by one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, affect) to the events of the world. (p. 159)

Explaining how this process operates for the researcher and researcher participants requires conceptualising how they live their subjectivity at the crossroads of a range of often competing discourses. In searching for a way of theorising this process, a number of scholars (e.g., Britzman, 1998; Ellsworth, 1997; Evans, 2000; Felman, 1987; Walkerdine, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2003) have found that psychoanalytic theory, as

developed by theorists such as Lacan and Žižek, offers tools for understanding the self in relation to social, cultural and psychic processes.

Subjectivity, for Lacan, is not constituted by consciousness. Rather, conscious subjectivity is fraught and precarious. In the Lacanian assessment the researcher is one whose ontological status is constantly under threat precisely because consciousness is continually subverted by unconsciousness processes. In this view, subjectivity is not a simple given presumed essence that naturally unfolds, but, rather, is produced in an ongoing process and through a range of influences, practices, experiences and relations that include social, schooling and psychodynamic factors.

Methodologically, however, the Lacanian understanding of the self highlights the difficulty in producing a research account that tries to avoid problems concerning speaking for others, even when the researcher exercises reflexivity about her relation to the research participants. If, as Lacan suggests, the unconscious is the place where our sense of self is developed and the place where we find out the kinds of interpretations that we can make (Lacan, 1977a, 1977b), what does that mean for the subjectivity of the researcher and, for that matter, the truthfulness of her research report? Is it possible to tap into unconscious levels of awareness? How can we deal with these issues systematically?

### Contextualising the Exploration

The discussion that follows provides a short analysis of an episode involving one student (Rachel) that arose in a project exploring the subjectivity of girls enrolled in a senior secondary school mathematics class (Walshaw, 1999). The girls in the project were students within a middle class co-educational grouping, all studying calculus for the first time. The student at the centre of this exploration was an accelerated student working with Year 12 students (16/17 years of age). Her class conversations were audiotaped, as were those of the teacher. I observed and took notes of the class for the duration of the calculus topic over a three week period. I also interviewed the student individually out of class time (see Walshaw, 2005). The dataset allowed me as researcher to capture the dynamic between gendered subjectivity and schooling, and to grasp a sense of the complexity surrounding gendered subjectivity in mathematics.

My objective in this paper is to capture my relationship with the data. In that attempt I have endeavoured to attend to her narrative of classroom experiences and affiliations, while paying attention to her constantly changing mathematical identity that moved forward, even as it folded back onto itself. The purpose is also to conduct research in a more interactive way, and to be accountable to a student's struggles to identify with mathematics. In doing that, I want to acknowledge Valero's (2004) argument that the practices of our research participants "intermesh with the practices of 'researchers' and the role of the researcher evidences their mutual constitutive character" (p. 50). In drawing attention to the epistemic implications of researching others, I considered my own emotional response to what I heard and saw. What fantasies and dreams do I conjure up about the work I do as researcher at this school with this student? How do I imagine the student in this research views me? In what ways do my feelings and reactions to her story influence my understanding of the data? Responding to those questions by highlighting the centrality of emotion in the research process will provide a counterpoint to current thinking about researcher reflexivity.

## Working with Subjectivity

### *Understanding the Self-in-Conflict*

Rachel is talking to me about what it is like to learn calculus for the first time in Mrs Southee's classroom. She had expressed an immediate, enthusiastic interest in participating in the research. Her liveliness contrasted with the 'sophistication' and 'poise' of the other girls in this class. She has an infectious laugh. "Giggly", is how Mrs Southee put it. Every mathematics lesson, she sat herself at the same desk in the middle bank of paired seating arrangements at the front of the classroom, alongside her friend Kate. As Year 10 students, the two of them were the only two 'extension' girls in this Year 12 class. I could not find myself completely in her giggly disposition, yet, as observer in this class, I could identify with being an 'exotic other' in her mathematics classroom. It is with regard to 'being different' in the mathematics classroom, in my role as observer, that I felt a powerful empathy with her story.

Rachel has just told me about her previous year's success with mathematics and how her achievements promoted her to this class. She explained:

I just seem to be good at doing exams. I've got a lot of friends—they know the stuff in class and I could sit there and it goes right over my head. But I get into an exam and I'm surprisingly clear-headed and a lot of people just get stressed out about it and I don't. It doesn't worry me because I think if I go in there and I don't know it then I don't know it. There's nothing I can do about it so there's no point in worrying. But I did, I worked quite hard last year. I spent ages going through the pink Mathematics Workbook and I was going over and over and over it. Trig [Trigonometry] was the worst bit. I couldn't do trig last year, and then like two days before the exam I was looking at it and it finally clicked. I spent about six hours just on trig that day and right at the end I just got it, and my parents were trying to make me go to bed and, no, I'm really understanding this. I'm not giving up now. I just did a lot of study. Always read and do examples. Working out answers, checking them and making sure, and if I don't get it I go back and try and figure it out and if I still don't get it I get my brother to have a look at it or I ask someone at school the next day.

As researcher listening to her story, I have an understanding of Rachel's mathematical 'experience' as fixed and immutable. She is able and she is motivated to learn. I have in Grosz's (1990) words, "branded" her, with "the marks of a particular social law and organization, and through a particular constellation of desires and pleasures" (p. 65). I wanted to hear about her good fortune, and her achievements. I had deliberately chosen her as my 'case' in order to question the assumptions typically held about girls in mathematics. I wanted to provide evidence that research founded on those assumptions, while it claimed to tell the truth about girls, in fact regulated them and overlooked other important aspects of subjectification, which cannot be contained within that discourse. An 'extension' student's story, I believed, would problematise normalised gender patterns in mathematics. Through her accomplishments she would reveal how it is possible to subvert the status quo and how to 'do gender in mathematics' differently.

As she began to tell me what mathematics is like for her this year, there was a sense that Rachel's self was a fabrication—changing moment by moment within the structures of the discursive situation in which she is located. I found it difficult to understand that the self that she was telling me about mathematics this year was the same self in the narrative a few moments previously.

...Mrs S, she tends to go right over my head and I don't tend to ask questions from her because last time I did that she tried to explain and it just went, well, I sort of understood half when I asked the question and by the time she'd finished I understood none of it! I don't know. But I don't have a very good relationship with her, because we've had a few arguments in the past. My auntie works in

the music block and she really likes Mrs S but, the guys, they know that I laugh really easily and they keep making me laugh in class and she just gets really frustrated with me because when I start laughing I can't stop and so she starts to get really angry at me. And apparently no one has ever heard her raise her voice before she met me. So it's a bit stressed there. I'm just trying very hard not to let the guys get to me now. Then I don't have to laugh.

Listening to her story I felt deeply dismayed. In my understanding, Rachel was a bright and capable student, caught up in practices and discourses that prevented her from succeeding in mathematics. I felt upset that she was the victim of surreptitious classroom practices that appeared to create a detrimental effect on her achievements and on her sense of self as a mathematical learner. I imagined in broaching the issue, she wanted me to know her pain; that she also wanted me to continue this line of conversation. But would pursuing this issue mean that I became caught up in situation that was beyond my powers or role to address? Who am I listening to her story? Who does she see me? I attempt to put my identity outside of myself into the image of myself. Yet I cannot determine that image. Feeling torn between a so-called 'impartial non-involved' researcher, on the one hand, and caring about her wellbeing in mathematics, on the other—I opted for further clarification as a way of dealing with an uncomfortable experience.

[MW: The boys who sit behind you?] Yea. Mostly, Blair and Richard, he's one of the bad ones as well.

[MW: The girls in the class don't stir you up?] No. Because the only one I really talk to is Kate. Blair—he just likes really to get me in trouble and he has done for the last three years and he'll just keep on doing it and there's nothing I can do so I just try not to sit in front of him. And hope that he doesn't sit in the row behind me ...

Rachel's story is full of contradictory mathematical experiences. It is told within the space that both of us share in interview and hence cannot escape the effects of her own desire to relate a coherent and compelling account that allows me, the listener, to attempt to understand. Thus at one level the story is a construction of a personal mathematical biography that develops, through a set of thematic clusters to do with success and peer and teacher-student conflict. And, at another level, the account registers disruptions and tensions that have the effect of undermining the coherent and cohesive story. In looking beyond the literal reading of what she said, her story evokes traces of other events and interpersonal relations that create a counter story to the one related to me at this moment in time. Together these two 'stories' open up important aspects of her subjectification as it relates to being a female mathematics student in this class.

Rachel sees herself as simultaneously able and struggling in mathematics. At another level, I see her as victimised. What needs to be emphasised here is that, as Lacan (1977b) and Žižek (1998) remind us, between the identifications she, and others, like me, have of her, there will always be a divide. There is always a trace of mis-recognition that arises from the difference between how one party perceives itself and how the other party perceives it. As a consequence, Lacan maintains, the very existence of the subject consists of closing the gap between images received within the Symbolic and Imaginary realms. Both Rachel and I, during the course of the interview, worked independently at closing the gap. As Žižek (1989) has put it: The subject "put(s) his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double" (p. 104).

## Conclusion

Research is a 'performance'. It has a lot more to do with fictions and fantasies than we might suspect. In working towards a theoretical understanding of the researcher's self,

issues of emotion and unconscious interference have come under scrutiny for the part they play in the subjectivity of the researcher, the researched and in the space they both share. It has been argued that the performance of self as researcher is about a discursive positioning that is constantly changing, in relation to the discourses and practices researchers find themselves within, and in relation to their intersubjective relations with the researched. 'Intersubjective relations' are not meant to convey simply those relations operating at the conscious and accessible level of awareness. They are intended to include the emotions and unconscious processes. In my formulation of researcher self, fictions and fantasies play a central part.

If it is axiomatic that non-rational connections get caught up in the research account, then where does this leave current accounts of reflexivity or the authorial self? I would suggest that accounts that write the researcher into the process or that practice reflexively speaking for others, promise more than they can deliver. An alternative that significantly enhances the practice of reflexivity and the practice of writing oneself into the research is to begin with tools taken from psychoanalysis and to acknowledge the intrusion of the self in every aspect of our research endeavours. In describing an episode taken from a specific research encounter, I have provided a first steps approach at what this understanding might mean for methodology—how we might begin to confront, rather than slide over, the delicate issue of emotion within the research process. The approach offers a way to understand processes within the research encounter that give form to difficult, contradictory or conflicting experiences from the past, the present and even those anticipated in the future.

Subjectivity is the cornerstone of the research encounter. Centralising subjectivity in the research process means just that. It means that the researcher can never hope to be detached. Talking about researcher bias is not a particularly fruitful exercise; neither is the practice of asserting one's own subjectivity through a narrative layer. Writing oneself into the research has the effect of masking the way in which one's subjectivity and one's voice is produced (Adkins, 2003; Skeggs, 2003). The reality is that the subjectivity of the researcher is always implicated in the complex research encounter precisely because the researcher self is always performed in and for others. Methodologically, the researcher can never truly know what she is seeking and why, because "the fictions of subject positions are not linked by rational connections, but by fantasies, by defences which prevent one position from spilling into another" (Walkerline, Lucey, & Melody, 2003, p. 180). Our research accounts need to acknowledge that research is more than the elements of trust, doubt, humility, and power. It is about fictions and fantasies and the complicity and fragility of these in relation to others.

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