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## Regimes of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research: The Rigors of Reciprocity

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*In this article, the authors explore the relationships between trustworthiness and reciprocity in qualitative research: What new questions about trustworthiness arise when we view qualitative research through the lens of reciprocity? Every stage of the research process relies on our negotiating complex social situations. Participants are active in this process, and reciprocity occurs at many different levels. In this article, the authors problematize the relationship between trustworthiness and reciprocity in relation to the researcher, the research process, and the write-up. The authors consider the possibilities and the demands and obligations of reciprocity as they explore framing questions, access and rapport, insider-outsider status, passionate participation, data production, data analysis, and authorizing accounts. The authors' experiences and interpretations and tales from and of the field shape and are shaped by our understandings of reciprocity.*

Attention to reciprocity is a characteristic of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and of feminist research in particular (DeVault, 1990; Oakley, 1981; Ribbens, 1989). To get good data—thick, rich, description and in-depth, intimate interviews—we are enjoined to attend to reciprocity in our method. Reciprocity, the give and take of social interactions, may be used to gain access to a particular setting. Through judicious use of self-disclosure, interviews become conversations, and richer data are possible. By asking participants to examine field notes and early analyses, researchers can give back something to their participants and engage in member checks as a means of ensuring trustworthiness. Feminist and critical analyses have drawn attention to the politics of these approaches and their exploitative potential. In her discussion of research and praxis, Lather (1991) describes two approaches to reciprocity in feminist and critical research that take us “beyond a concern for more and better data” (p. 57). Lather argues that by attending to reciprocity, research and researchers can work to empower the researched. Reciprocity

Authors' Note: Authors are listed alphabetically.

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may also “be employed to build more useful theory”; through collaborative theorizing with participants, it is possible to “both advance emancipatory theory and empower the researched” (p. 64). Our interest in and commitment to reciprocity goes beyond concern with research method; it is integral to our feminist politics. We elaborate these politics throughout our discussion below.

We work here to problematize the relationship between trustworthiness and reciprocity in relation to the researcher, the research process, and the write-up. The trustworthiness of our research practices is inherent in the politics of what we do at any and every stage of the research process. We consider the possibilities, demands, and obligations of reciprocity as we explore framing research questions, access and rapport, insider-outsider status, passionate participation, data production, data analysis, and authorizing accounts. Our experiences and interpretations and our tales from and of the field shape and are shaped by our understandings of reciprocity.

In this article, we use *trustworthiness* to mean the ways we work to meet the criteria of validity, credibility, and believability of our research—as assessed by the academy, our communities, and our participants. Traditional objectivist demands of detached researcher documenting the world of the Other are increasingly critiqued—by academics, researchers, and the communities of those researched. Such demands still exist alongside new requirements of research to serve the interests of those who are researched and for the researched to have more of a say at all points of the project. Researchers, in the academy and elsewhere, are increasingly answerable to their communities of origin and to their communities of interest (hooks, 1984). Lincoln (1995) describes these demands as “emerging criteria of quality” that are “relational” (p. 278). In particular, the criteria of reciprocity is a “kind of intense sharing that opens all lives party to the inquiry to examination” (pp. 283-284). Is it possible to meet all these varying demands? We discuss here the tensions created by the decisions we make.

As researchers, we make political decisions, consciously or unconsciously, when deciding whom we want to ask to speak about what and when we figure out how to do the asking, observing, or measuring. We make decisions about whether we, the researcher, or the people the research is about or with will be the final authority on what is said. We make decisions about whether we will appeal to a higher authority in our research and who the higher authority will be. Sometimes we researchers are not self-conscious about these decisions and do not realize that sometimes the decisions have already been made by the adoption of particular research protocols. Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor (1992) draw attention to the importance of researchers’ distinguishing between methods and between paradigms. Failure to make this distinction might result in disgruntled postpositivists who have used qualitative methods but are still trying to fit these methods into a procrustean bed of objectivist standards of reliability and validity.

Conscious recognition of the relationship between values and research presents researchers with exciting possibilities for their research. We think of ourselves as feminists and want to do research that is consistent with our descriptions of ourselves. As feminists, we are drawn to topic areas that are important to women as well as to other groups of people who have been marginalized. We want to participate in research that contributes to and pursues social justice. We are drawn to research approaches that do not dehumanize people—to research approaches that acknowledge the complexity of people's lives, approaches that challenge preconceived notions of what is already known and is established scientific fact. The research we are drawn to is presented to other people without the author(s) claiming to know better than the participants what the participants really thought and meant. More often now, this research is presented in ways that make clear how the researchers' own experiences, values, and positions of privilege in various hierarchies have influenced their research interests, the ways they choose to do their research, and the ways they choose to represent their research findings.

Reciprocity involves give and take. We find that as we think and write about the interrelatedness of reciprocity and trustworthiness, we are concerned with issues that are sometimes difficult to articulate but include rapport, safety, honoring, and obligation. We want to be clear to ourselves and with our participants about our obligations, what it is we hope we have given or still hope to give our participants, and what it is we are taking, that is, how we benefit. We see tensions and dangers; to openly state whose side we are on (if and when we've figured out what the sides are) can close the door on rapport, put ourselves or our participants in danger. In an effort to honor our participants, we may find ourselves refusing to deal with the hard stuff—sentimentalizing and romanticizing some participants and demonizing others. We make a number of research moves, in the name of reciprocity, to get better data with which to construct more trustworthy accounts. We also make these research moves because of our political commitments to engage in critical dialogue with our participants about descriptions and meanings. There are multiple readings possible for every one of our research interactions, some of which are much less flattering, less comfortable, than others.

Lather (1991) claims that feminist research has from its beginnings been preoccupied with the politics of knowing and being known: "Openly ideological, most feminist research assumes that ways of knowing are inherently culture bound and that researcher values permeate inquiry" (p. 91). To do feminist research is to "use a lens that brings into focus particular questions" (p. 294) that put social construction of gender at the center of one's inquiry. She argues that social science must be premised on the development of research approaches that both empower the researched and contribute to the generation of change enhancing social theory. Feminist research has also had to respond to challenges of racism, classism, disablism, and heterosexism in

the choice of topics, participants or informants, and place and style of presentation (Bulkin, Pratt, and Smith, 1984; Fine & Asch, 1985; hooks, 1984). There is continuing debate among feminist researchers as to whether a specific feminist research method exists. However, at the epistemological and methodological levels, researchers agree that there are characteristics that distinguish feminist research (see Stanley & Wise, 1993). These characteristics include addressing issues of power, emotion, notions of objectivity/subjectivity, researcher reflexivity, and power and authority in re/presentation.

Examining reciprocity means we are concerned with addressing issues of power in the researcher-researched relationship (Bloom, 1997; Coffey, 1996; Cotterill, 1992; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1988; Limerick, Burgess-Limerick, & Grace, 1996; Reinharz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1993; St Pierre, 1997). Feminist researchers employ strategies to decrease the power imbalance between researcher and researched while acknowledging this imbalance and fostering the research process as one of mutual give and take. Bloom (1998) wrote about the pain of unmet expectations of intimacy in feminist interviews. Kirsch (1999) warned of the dangers of such expectations:

I argue that learning about personal aspects of participants' lives during interviews is quite different from learning about them in other settings. Unlike friendships which are built on reciprocal trust and sharing of personal information, interviews only simulate this context. Relationships between interviewer and interviewee often end abruptly once the researchers have finished collecting the information that interests them. (p. 30)

Each of us has struggled with questions of who might owe what to whom and who might hold whom accountable. Our relationships with our participants are not always as neatly defined as Kirsch suggests; intimacy can be quite unexpected.

Incorporating the emotional aspects of the research relationship is also critical to a feminist rigor (Cotterill, 1992; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; St Pierre, 1997). When St Pierre questions what constitutes data, she identifies transgressive data, which include emotional data. What differences might it make that we are drawn to or repulsed by our participants and by their lifestyles? How are our senses of obligation affected when we feel our participants' anger or their affection? With Stanley and Wise (1993), we would claim that emotion is an aspect of the research process, which, like any other aspect, can be analytically interrogated. It is a criterion of trustworthiness in feminist qualitative research that attention is paid to the emotional aspects of the research. The re/presentation of participants in feminist qualitative research is recognized as one of the principal areas of power imbalance in the research relationship. Feminist researchers often claim to give voice to marginalized or otherwise voiceless groups in our society. (Cotterill, 1992; Reinharz, 1992). In feminist research, Coffey (1996) argues that authorship and ownership are conceived differently by those being

researched and the researcher in an attempt to negotiate space, voice, and authority in the research enterprise. This may lead to alternative models of practice that include collaborative authorship or shared ownership.

In this article, we are particularly interested in the notions of reciprocity embedded in the above criteria. Using the lens of reciprocity, we might question the trustworthiness of a qualitative account at multiple points in the research process. These include the construction of the research questions, gaining access, data production, interpretation and analysis, and re/presentation of the research.

How does reciprocity shape our approaches to research? How is reciprocity shaped by our approaches? Although we are all completing our projects and doctoral dissertations in very different topics, we all have a commitment to feminist notions of reciprocity. We have not found these unproblematic, and in our stories of fieldwork, analysis, and writing, we attempt to “reflect back to the reader the problem in inquiry at the same time as the inquiry is conducted” (Lather 1997, p. 286). Through our research stories, we explore reciprocity and trustworthiness at various phases in the research process. Although these phases are always overlapping, for the purposes of discussion we treat them here as distinct. Lesley looks at access and early data production, Jane looks at ongoing data production and analysis, and Missy focuses on re/presentation.

From its inception, Lesley’s project with volunteers at a women’s refuge has been framed by notions of reciprocity. She wanted her involvement in the research process to directly benefit not only herself (gaining a Ph.D.) but the individuals and the organization involved. She discovered that as the instrument of her research, she was not only positioning herself but was being positioned by her participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Ely et al. 1991; Kondo, 1990), and fieldwork required constant processes of negotiation. In this article, she problematizes the relationship between trustworthiness and reciprocity with tales from the field about negotiating access and being a passionate participant.

In her study of young mothers and the media, Jane employed a number of strategies advocated by feminist researchers aimed at making the process by which she obtained her data transparent to her participants, and she searched for ways of incorporating reciprocity into her relationship with her participants. However, this notion of reciprocity became problematic for her as she began a period of in-depth analysis not only of the interview data but also of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of her research. As she explored the relationships between Self and Other in the research process, she came to realize that her own changing life circumstances and a commitment to reciprocity further complicated these relationships in ways she had not anticipated when she chose certain methodological approaches.

In writing about her experiences of adopting feminist participatory and action research methodologies and building alliances with people with dis-

abilities, Missy has worked to disrupt the expert role. Her goal has been to identify and disrupt some of the taken-for-granted readings of disabled women and their lives (Morton & Munford, 1998). She draws on feminist and other poststructuralist analyses (Davies, 1994; Fine, 1992; Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1987) to name and explicate the discursive practices that continue to constitute women with disabilities as marginal. What differences might considerations of reciprocity make to our assessments of re/presentations of disability?

## STORIES AND STORIES

### Reciprocity and Access: Lesley's Story

My research, a case study of volunteers working in a Women's Refuge, examines Refuge as a site of feminist pedagogy. What happens in Refuge with respect to feminist theory, feminist teaching, feminist learning, and feminist practice? The process of gaining access to the organization involved negotiations of reciprocity, which have been central to my research project.

I had been a member of this organization 15 years ago, and during the past 5 years I have occasionally been called into the group as part of my community development consultancy to assist when the group needed outside help. Within this organization, there is a very strong differentiation between insider and outsider. The Refuge operates from a secret location, and only active members of the organization (insiders) may visit the Refuge house.

In August 1997, I wrote to the Governance (management committee) of the local Refuge asking permission to complete a research project in their organization. At that time, I was unaware that there was internal conflict that threatened to tear the organization apart. I was approached as an outsider to mediate this conflict. I agreed to do this and worked with the group to resolve the situation. My motives for working with the group were that a group that was functioning well was more likely to agree to be the focus of a research project. I also saw this as an opportunity to establish my trustworthiness with members of the group.

My proposal was accepted in February 1998, largely, I think, because of the relationship I had built up with the group during this work. I am sure that this relationship between trustworthiness of me as a person (rather than a researcher) was based largely on the notion of reciprocity, but it was also contingent on the Refuge construction of me as someone who would bring something useful to the Refuge organization.

As I struggled with the complexity of shifting and permeable locations of both researchers and participants, I found that Reinharz (1997) offered a useful framework to explore the complexity of researchers as "the key fieldwork tool." She argues that

we both *bring* the self to the field and *create* the self in the field. The self we create in the field is a product of the norms of the social setting and the ways in which the "research subjects" interact with the selves the researcher *brings to the field*. (p. 3)

Reinharz argues that being a researcher is only one aspect of the researcher's self in the field, and although one may consider being a researcher one's most salient self, community members may not agree. When Reinharz analyzed her field notes, she identified approximately 20 different selves that she categorized into three major groups: researcher-based selves, brought selves, and situationally created selves. I will use this framework to discuss how my constructions and my participants' constructions of my brought selves not only provided a forum for reciprocity but became integral to the design of the research itself.

Like Reinharz, I can identify a number of researcher selves, which include being an academic, being a good listener, being an interviewer, being a participant observer, being a giver of feedback, and being a temporary member.

My brought selves I identify in two overlapping categories: personal and professional selves. Personal selves include being a feminist, being a Refugee "fore-mother," and being a person who can be trusted. In terms of my skills and previous experience of 20 years working in the area of community development, I also brought a number of professional selves into the field. From my field notes, I have identified these as mediator, facilitator, strategic planner, evaluator, adult educator, and a person with access to resources.

It is in the situationally created selves in the field where the participant construction of my brought selves as a resource for Refuge and my construction of myself as a researcher intersect in a particularly rich, productive, and potentially problematic way. It required constant negotiation throughout my year of fieldwork because the organization that is struggling to meet the needs of battered women and children operates in an environment of scarcity—not enough time, money, paid staff, or volunteers. The organization is constantly trying to find resources to enable it to work more effectively, including using the resources brought to the organization by the researcher.

For example, when I was a participant observer at a regular monthly volunteer meeting, it was identified that the organization was short of money and a subcommittee needed to be set up to write funding applications. The volunteer who had done this in the past had left, and no grant applications had been made for several months. Because none of the women at the meeting offered to pick up this task, the facilitator suggested that a request for people to do this be put in the monthly newsletter. At this point, I said that if at some future time a committee did form, I would be interested in talking with them.

Lesley: If there are people here tonight who want to form a funding committee, I would be interested in meeting with them to set up a grant-writing system. I used to do that sort of stuff when I worked for [Government Department].

Lucy: Oh, that changes it for me, because under those conditions, I would like to be a member of that subcommittee.

Aliesha: Yes, I would as well; you can put my name down.

Lesley: Lucy, you said that changes things for you. What do you mean?

Lucy: I would like to learn how to do funding applications, and if you are part of the group, I think that I can learn a lot from you.

Vicki: I don't know how much I would have to contribute to the group at this stage, but I would like to join it too and learn about funding.

Aliesha: That's great. Looks like we have a subcommittee after all.

At the end of the meeting we had a committee with four members including myself.

The members of the new funding committee constructed my brought selves as a person with knowledge and resources about funding and also as a potential teacher in this area. As a group, we started meeting independently of the volunteers forum and, over the next 6 months, completed a number of funding applications together.

What started as an example of reciprocity on my part, the offer of knowledge on funding applications, became an exemplar of the way in which members of the group use available resources as learning opportunities. It also moved me into my research as a subject. At one of our meetings, a deadline loomed: It turned out that I was the only member of our funding group with immediate access to a computer.

As researcher, I viewed the funding subcommittee as a site to examine the teaching and learning, which included myself as both teacher and learner. This gave me direct access to a greater understanding of the realities and constraints on teaching and learning in this forum. I learned as an insider some of the difficulties faced in establishing a teaching and learning environment in the face of competing demands. I wanted to model an emancipatory and empowering way of learning within the subcommittee, but the imperative to get funding applications in by certain dates compromised those ideals. Rather than enabling the group to complete the applications themselves, I found that because I was the only member with access to a computer, I was the one who typed out the final application, editing and rewording the information from the group in a way that I knew would be acceptable to the funders. An unintended consequence of my attempt at reciprocity was that initially, rather than demystifying the process, my actions did little to enhance the understanding of the process for the members of the committee. But for me as researcher, this provided an insight into the difficulties faced by an organization that wants to empower its members but for which teaching and learning are not primary objectives.

In the space where we negotiated my reciprocity to the organization, I was always conscious of the potential conflicts with my researcher selves. My actions of reciprocity established my trustworthiness and provided me with access to the members of the organization. As I move from the field and begin

in-depth analysis and writing, I am examining ways in which my notions of reciprocity framed my research. What possibilities did reciprocity open up for me in the research, and what did it close down? How is my particular involvement in the organization shaping my construction of the data? How does being reflexive about the negotiations between the researcher and researched selves contribute to the trustworthiness of my research?

### **Relationships With and in the Field: Jane's Story**

My study involved regular interviews with a group of four women around issues of motherhood and family life, focusing on representations of these in popular culture. I wanted to explore the dense entanglement of media and lived experience as well as the media silences—the aspects of women's lives that are conspicuous by their absence in popular cultural representations of motherhood and family life. I felt it was important to do this with a group of women in order to explore the social formation of meanings and the generation of narratives of identity in the context of other women's lives. I believe that it is in the discussion of shared experiences and the exposure of our differences that women come to better understand and theorize our own lives as well as the representations of woman we encounter along the way.

The four women involved in the study—Hannah, Penny, Bridget, and Sarah—were recruited from a university child care center and a local community group that works with single mothers. As the study evolved, the richness of the data greatly increased as the relationships between the women developed and conversations became more intimate and covered areas of conflict that were avoided during earlier discussions. I spent the next 11 months interviewing this group of women to fully exploit the growing intimacy between them for my study.

During this time, my commitment to reciprocity meant that I spent considerable time with Hannah, Penny, Sarah, and Bridget. Our interactions involved phone calls, talking about our university work, and meeting regularly for coffee. I arranged to take the group out for lunch several times and took my son along to two of their children's birthday parties. What originally began as my attempt to offer something back became mutually supportive, complex social relationships between me and these four women; friendships developed. I valued these friendships a great deal as I struggled with juggling my studies, part-time work, and motherhood. The opportunity to spend time with other women undertaking similar commitments was important to me, and I believe we all enjoyed our time together during that year. The relationship I developed with each woman varied in its intensity and intimacy, but all four shared some very personal experiences with me as I did with them.

This stood in stark contrast to my positioning of them in relation to myself during the interviews. In this setting, I worked hard to leave the talking to the

participants, often despite a strong urge to join in the conversation. At the time, I was relatively satisfied that I was pursuing a research agenda that privileged participants' voices over those of the researcher. As I transcribed the interviews, my silence, punctuated only by carefully worded questions aimed at producing elaboration and explanation, indicated to me the success of this agenda. When I heard myself occasionally interrupt the discussions with a story of my own, I would cringe at how easily I could lead the others to pursue a new topic of conversation. What I was not recognizing was that this was how the discussions progressed throughout all of the interviews. As the women moved from one story to another, they would build on a point, digress to a different topic, and relate something back to an earlier conversation. The discussion would wind its way through stories, memories, explanations, exasperations, and disagreements. It was this wonderfully dynamic, explorative type of discussion that was the reason I had decided on group interviews in the first place, and although I celebrated the way these women influenced each others' thoughts, I remained convinced that my influence was not only unnecessary but actually detrimental to the research process.

Recently, feminists committed to qualitative research methods (Bloom, 1997; Busier et al., 1997; Cotterill, 1992; Ellingson, 1998; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Fine, 1994; Larson, 1997) have highlighted the importance of intimacy and friendship in research relationships and of engaging in dialogues with participants—"vital experiences which move us into learning and understanding more about others, ourselves and our world" (Busier et al., 1997, p. 165). This work has motivated researchers to examine more closely the dynamics of the interview and the influence of the researcher in the mutual construction of research stories (Court & Court, 1998). Michelle Fine (1994) describes attending to relations between researcher and researched as "working the hyphen" between Self and Other to

unravel, critically, the blurred boundaries in our relation, and in our texts; to understand the political work of our narratives; to decipher how the traditions of social science serve to inscribe; and to imagine how our practice can be transformed to resist, self-consciously, acts of othering. (p. 75)

Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997) employs Deleuze's notion of working within a fold to describe her experiences as "both identity and difference, self and other, knower and known, researcher and researched" (p. 178) as she interviewed older women in the town in which she had grown up. Her research caused her to theorize her own life as she theorized those of her participants, and in doing so, she found herself "working much harder to understand [her] participants, to respect their lives, to examine [her] relationships with them, and to question [her] interpretations" (p. 181). For St. Pierre, "the examination of one's own frailty surely makes one more careful about the inscription of others" (p. 181).

Both Fine and St. Pierre's words spoke to me as I began to examine the production of knowledge within my study: how I had come to know what I know, the methods I had employed, and the data that informed my analysis. By remaining silent, by privileging researcher distance in the name of reducing the researcher-researched power imbalance, I had missed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the women in my study despite my increasing intimacy with all of them outside the interview setting. Interviewing a group of women meant that there was plenty of dialogue between the research participants, so the study was never lacking dialogical engagement. It was, however, lacking any explicit acknowledgment of my own positioning in relation to the participants—by this, I mean the ongoing construction and negotiation of my own subjectivities in relation to the discussions taking place in the interviews. Colleen Larson (1997) writes of the importance of researchers' engaging in dialogue with those whose lives they are studying:

Dialogue makes understanding the life world and lived realities of others possible. When researchers share their ways of seeing, understanding, and interpreting life events with story-givers, they surface the fissures between their own life worlds and those of the people they portray. Disparities between the meaning that researchers make of the lives of others and the meaning that story-givers make of their own lives become points of entry into understanding human experience. . . . By failing to engage in deliberative dialogue and inquiry, researchers put themselves at greater risk of not seeing, not understanding, and misinterpreting people whose lives and life experiences differ from their own. (p. 459)

My hesitance to engage in dialogue with the women I interviewed affected our research relations in two interrelated ways. First, it increased my "othering" of the participants as I remained silent about my own personal and emotional life while collecting and analyzing intensely personal details of theirs. Second, it ignored the relationships I had with these women outside of the research setting, which were relationships that continually informed my analysis and my understandings of each of the participants' lives. Although the multiplicity of sites of analysis afforded by my friendships with these women greatly enhanced my capacity to produce interpretations that I believed would resonate with the participants' lives, it also provided me with numerous opportunities to exploit these growing friendships in the name of such analysis.

An event that illustrates the contradictions of my position in the research process is the breakup of my marriage shortly after I had completed the interviews. Over the following weeks as I came into contact with each of the women involved in the research, I was struck by their expressions of surprise at the breakup. As far as I was concerned, it had been in the cards for some time, and most of my friends and family were not particularly surprised at the turn of events. As I contemplated what it was that I had withheld from these women or how I had presented myself as somehow removed from the kinds of relation-

ship difficulties that they had discussed many times during the 10 months of interviewing, I began to realize that although I had felt deeply connected with my research participants as they talked about the difficulties of coming to terms with relationship problems, this was not necessarily a mutual feeling. This lack of connection was precisely because I was an impassive observer, not a participant in the discussions.

And what of our many discussions outside of the research context? How were the women in these conversations positioning me? I know that I participated actively, so how was it that they hadn't recognized the distress I was feeling over my relationship? Or was it that talking with me had become a kind of release valve, a site for purging the weeks' arguments and hassles, a way of getting it out of one's system in order to carry on, so that my complaints were being read as part of the same agenda? These women knew a lot less about me than I did about them, and my primary role was as a sympathetic ear, someone who may share many of their views and experiences and who was genuinely interested, albeit with her own goals in mind, in the mundane details of their daily existence. As a friend outside of the research setting, I gave a lot more of myself and expected a depth of understanding that I shared with other friends. I had not anticipated that how we positioned each other during the interviews would determine, to some extent at least, how we positioned each other in other contexts.

A few days before I made the final decision to leave my marriage, I was reading some interview transcripts, attempting to get some work done in the midst of emotional upheaval. I came across the following discussion:

Penny: My first husband didn't give me food money either, so I had to get inventive.

I became very good with potato dishes. He treated me terribly; he wouldn't give me regular food money. I couldn't buy clothes or anything like that. That was just destitute poverty. . . . That really inspired me to get out of that relationship; this guy was just trying to crush my spirit.

Hannah: Power and control.

Penny: It was a power thing, you know? But funnily enough, when you are in that situation, you find that your resources are called upon, and if your spirit's intact and good, it won't die, it will fight back. I won in the end. I mean, he lost his family.

Sarah: Towards the end of my relationship with Ricky, I was thinking how am I going to cope with it, all the bills and everything like that. I thought I could never cope, but it was just so easy in comparison with having all that emotional blackmail and stress every moment he was in the house. You could cope with anything. It just motivates you to cope.

The words of Penny and Sarah both moved and inspired me to act on my desire to end my relationship.

A few days later, I met Penny at the local shopping mall. She asked how I was, and I told her what had been happening. We sat down together, and she offered support and advice and shared some of her experiences with me. Now, as I analyze and write my representations of these women's stories about their relationships, I know that I am greatly influenced by my own experiences, my conversations with Penny and the other women in the study outside of the research setting, and by the interview data found in the transcripts. I believe that this multiplicity of sites of analysis enhances my understandings and intensifies my resolve to rigorously interrogate both my analysis and my methodology and will no doubt improve the quality of my scholarship.

I am left wondering, however, if Penny had any idea that we were constructing data for my study when she comforted me on the steps of the fountain at the local mall. When she reached out to me in friendship, she probably had no idea I would take her words into my analysis, which I inevitably do. Although I may not put her words from our private conversations into the pages of my thesis, I carry a sense of the meanings she attaches to her marriage breakup and the emotionality we explored in our conversation with me when I write about these things. Notions such as reciprocity are necessarily complicated by the ongoing intricacies of research that is social and dynamic in nature. Where power effects may be reduced in some areas, the potential for exploitation of more intimate relationships remains wherever reciprocity and friendship are implicated in feminist research processes. Acknowledging this is part of a feminist practice that realizes the complexity of all human relationships, research included, and constantly interrogates any attempt at inscribing method as an antidote to power.

Power exists everywhere and is constantly negotiated between researchers and researched, the latter being active participants in the construction of knowledge during interviews (Limerick et al., 1996). We cannot rid our research of power or hope to create a static balance of power during interviews. I believe the aim of my research is greater understanding of these women's lives and the meanings they give to them. What I do with these understandings, how I interpret and represent them, and what audiences I present them to are all sites where the trustworthiness of my research comes under scrutiny. I have learned a lot about the importance of exploring my relationships with the women I interviewed, and this would not have been possible without paying attention to notions of reciprocity. However, the trustworthiness of my research does not end with the methods I employed. I must continue to strive to represent Hannah, Penny, Sarah, and Bridget's conversations in ways that I believe honor their commitment to my study and my commitment to their desire to contribute to a project that will be used to enhance our understandings of women's lives.

### Rigor, Reciprocity, Re/Presentation: Missy Writes

I first met Louise in New York in 1991. She was part of the Women's Support Group of seven women who were labeled *intellectually disabled*<sup>1</sup> and had been in violent relationships; I was initially invited along by the two facilitators—women with experience in supporting abuse victims. I had met the facilitators through our common interests in gender and disability. We had all worked, as volunteers or as paid staff, in agencies such as Rape Crisis or Battered Women's Shelters. The Women's Support Group, of which Louise was a member, met specifically for the purpose of allowing the women to tell their stories, to consider their own and each other's experiences of violence, and to look at some of the ways society generally considered violence in women's lives. A constant source of debate was the idea that any of us had ever "asked for it." Everyone struggled with feeling responsible for terrible things that had happened to them. I had asked permission to write up notes from these meetings; later, I interviewed most of the women. At our second meeting of the women's group, Louise gave me my instructions: "Make sure you tell them what it's fucking like."

There have been many tellings since those meetings of the Women's Support Group: to local Battered Women's Shelters and to Rape Crisis centers, to forums on domestic violence, conferences on sexual abuse, on disability and gender, lectures to postgraduate classes, chapters in edited books. Each telling is, has been, or will be different.

I can tell you, it's sure as hell not like this—sometimes a well-appointed graduate student center auditorium—or a conference venue in an international cityscape—everybody's eaten today, had a wash. When I leave Louise's apartment, the smell of the building has penetrated my clothing and hair.

There were many tellings before mine, before this telling: "It's like I said Missy, I'm an open book. I've been talking to Harry [a Disability Services psychologist]. I've been talking to my other worker Suzanne [also at Disability Services], to Lori Stone [a tutor at the center where Louise goes for parenting classes]. You name it. They know all about me."

I wonder what these professionals make of what they know. Louise has to move again to another apartment building that she thinks is unsuitable; she is enrolled for another parenting class—one she has done before I think. The new apartment building is miles away, at least two bus transfers, to where she has to go for classes and her myriad appointments with disability and welfare workers. She is suing for custody of her 7-year-old daughter; she has supervised access only at present. I drive home from her place—in my warm car to a single family home that is well heated, well stocked with food—to my partner and 5-month-old baby. I'm amazed at Louise's resilience and optimism even as I'm pissed off at her complaining about many of the same things (I'm sleep deprived I think). I'm astounded that despite the incredible intrusion into her life, and prying constant scrutiny of all of these professionals throughout her life, she can still have expe-

rienced, still endures, so much abuse and such terrible poverty. I think I would die if someone took my baby away.

Louise has “told them”—repeatedly —“what it’s fucking like” seemingly to no great effect, except to have her daughter removed. Who on earth do I imagine I am that anything I say or write could make a difference? Who on earth do I imagine they are that anything I say or write could make a difference? What kind of difference? To whom?

My thinking about my responsibility, as author and narrator, to Louise and to my / our audience(s) has me working against my urge to create a single unified coherent text, easy to read, in many instances easier to write. It’s hard to not do the time-honored academic thing. I might slip into it, even do it on purpose, from time to time. Nespore and Barber (1995, p. 61) wrote of the constructions of texts:

In short, texts, authors, and audiences are linked through varying spatial and temporal relationships. To engage politically with all of our relevant audiences, we need to see texts as multiples, not *monographs*, but clusters of many texts. Such texts would be written at different tempos with different participants, some resolving, some contingent, circulating through different networks to different audiences.

In *this* text, then, I am weaving my stories of Louise’s stories, of my feelings and thoughts about mine and Louise’s circumstances then and now, wanting to be taken seriously so that Louise is taken seriously, and citing the credible, the published, and the read so as to lend credibility to this reading.

How can I attend to my desires to put out there the stories I want to tell, to have them and me taken seriously, and simultaneously to want to trouble the expert discourse? I am intrigued with an article by Becky Ropers-Huilman (1999) where she explored her own sense(s) of researcher obligations and responsibilities. Ropers-Huilman considered the metaphor of witnessing in her work and described six obligations of serving as witnesses:

*to recognize our engagement in active, yet partial meaning-making; to recognize that we will change others; to be open to change; to tell others about our experiences and perspectives; to listen to the interpretations of other witnesses; to explore multiple meanings of equity and care and to act to promote our understandings of those concepts.* (pp. 24-31)

The obligations of witnessing, then, extend beyond access and data production, beyond analysis and writing, beyond the end of a study:

Both witnessing and renewal are ongoing, continuous processes that turn themselves over, seemingly as often as the tides. . . . One does not stop being a witness once a study has officially concluded, once one has left the field, or once a book has been published. We carry our fields with us and we have a responsibility to consider both what we learn from and what we have to offer in those fields. . . . to take an active part in the discourses that frame our lives and our work. (p. 34)

Have I met any of these obligations of witnessing? Powerful discourses of disability and of professionalism have informed my understandings of the field of disability studies, of my place in it, working, I hope, to help make a difference. Within the disciplines of education and of disability, I enjoy privilege and expert status—earned through qualifications premised on technologies and knowledges gleaned from the same segregated and vulnerable groups of people I purport to work for. My dissatisfaction, my unease, found me seeking out research approaches, ways of thinking about thinking and knowing, to trouble this expert status, even as I draw on it to shore up claims to listen well to this new approach. Now I attend to the troublings of expert writers writing expertly, here, too.

Using qualitative methodology and actively seeking the perspectives of a devalued group of people is no guarantee that a researcher might not still succumb to the authority of an official view. Edgerton (1967) is generally recognized among qualitative researchers (Yes, a standard academic move to author/ize my claim) as the first person to seek the views of people labeled mentally retarded about their own lives and circumstances. The relative scarcity of accounts from the perspectives of people labeled retarded is due, according to Bogdan and Taylor (1982), to

the perspective most researchers, scholars and professionals bring to the study of mental retardation. The predominant mode of research in the field of mental retardation is characterized by the "official" view. That is, researchers have taken for granted the reality of the concept of mental retardation. (p. 205)

An important critique of Edgerton's (1967) work challenges the way he privileged official's perspectives over the views of the people with labels:

In drawing composite pictures, Edgerton treated what is in the records as facts, while treating what the residents had to say as fabrications, excuses and/or rationalizations. It is possible to view the records as fabrications, excuses and/or rationalizations, and the residents' point of view as fact of truth. (Bogdan, 1980, p. 75)

Edgerton's (1967) choice of who to give more authority to provides an example of the impact of the way the researcher chooses to write up results. Bogdan (1986) comments that choosing between competing perspectives is a political choice. Becker (1967) notes that it is choosing to represent the view of the underdog that is likely to result in the accusation of bias—in the case of Edgerton (1967), it is his failure to represent the view of the underdog that has brought this criticism of his work. There are lengthy quotes from interviewees in this work; it's his inclusion of these quotes that makes it possible to question his reading and retelling of their stories. In spite of (or because of?) the rich description and attention to detail, a sense of lack of obligation to, of caring about his participants, becomes overwhelming and his interpretation questionable.

Writing up data and presenting research results involve choices based on social and political values. One impact of postmodernism on qualitative texts has been to encourage writers to pay better attention to their construction of texts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). There can be no easy claims to be simply telling it like it is whatever the research method or paradigm and in spite of Louise's instructions. In fact, Ferguson et al. (1992) view attending to the constructions of our texts as an opportunity to "drop the pretense of the invisible author voice and replace it with a more active and flexible narrative voice." Rather than viewing the researcher's values as something messy and untidy, to be taken care of by tight method, or even by attempts to bracket assumptions, conscious acknowledgment of our values offers what Ferguson et al. consider to be the third promise of qualitative, interpretivist research:

As soon as we, as researchers, become involved in telling *our* stories of *their* stories, we present our interpretations of their interpretations. Not only are there multiple perspectives, then, but there are multiple *layers* of perspective as soon as one enters the reflective process of research. (p. 299)

Having recognized the possibilities of layered accounts, we still situate ourselves and our research participants within our accounts. Fine (1992) discusses feminists' choices with respect to how they situate themselves within the texts they produce. She describes three possibilities: ventriloquy, voices, and activism. "Ventriloquy relies upon Haraway's God trick. The author tells Truth, has no gender, race, class, or stance. A condition of truth telling is anonymity, and so ventriloquy" (p. 212).

I'm enjoying writing myself into this account; thinking about the possibilities for change that might arise from it; not having to torture my prose to hide my presence. "Voices can be used to accomplish a subtler form of ventriloquism. Within such texts, while researchers appear to let the Other speak, just under the covers of those marginal—if now "liberated" voices—we hide, unproblematical" (Fine, 1992, p. 215).

Voices can be a decoy for the researcher/writer. Louise's voice has provided me with a means to take on expert discourses. I feel obligated to follow her injunction; but it also my desire to do so that drives this piece of writing.

A third choice

constitutes activist, feminist research, committed to positioning researchers as self-conscious, critical, and participatory analysts, engaged but still distinct from our informants. Such research commits to the study of change, the move toward change, and/or is provocative of change. (p. 220)

My efforts here are to work as activist. My sense of whose side I am on and of what constitutes reciprocity means that I have to do more than Louise suggests/demands/requires to "tell what it's fucking like." I have to also tell what it could be like. Without romanticizing her life of inexorable poverty, I have to show the transformative possibilities in her commitment to reclaim-

ing her daughter (however unlikely the success of these efforts), her survival, and her uses and understandings of the welfare system, even as this system impales her with its gaze, readied for further inspection, assessment, judgement. Louise's life won't change because of this telling. But in this telling, I feel again her pain and her desire, and with every telling, I am re-committed to telling what it was like, what it is like, what it could be like—for Others, for Us.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three of us have written about where we are at in different stages of the research process. For all of us, a commitment to reciprocity was a requirement of feminist research practice. Whereas Missy works on figuring reciprocity into a trustworthy written account, her agreement with Louise arises from her early days in the field, her ongoing relationships. Lesley and Jane will see their commitments to reciprocity continue to challenge them as they do the work of data production and interpretation, continuing to negotiate their relationships with their participants. We have realized that these relationships do not end with the completion of fieldwork, that these negotiations continue through analysis and writing and later tellings of our research stories. We know we will all ask ourselves many questions, along with our colleagues and thesis supervisors, and do "the [validity] police in different voices" (Lather, 1993, p. 674), interrogating the relations between Self and Other and striving to produce trustworthy accounts.

Lesley's offer to help with funding applications moved her into her research as a subject. The funding subcommittee became a site to examine teaching and learning, which included herself as both teacher and learner. At the same time, it illustrated the difficulties faced by an organization working to empower its members but constrained by the limited resources available. Lesley's concern that her involvement in the subcommittee did little to demystify the process of applying for funding highlighted the contradictory nature of many attempts at reciprocity. Her experiences raised questions for Lesley about the impact of her involvement in the organization on her relationships with her research participants and the construction of data within these relationships. She is left contemplating how her commitment to reflexivity and reciprocity has contributed to the trustworthiness of her research.

Jane found that the changes occurring in her own life changed her relations to her research and her participants. This altered how she thought about how she came to know what she knows. As she came to recognize how her personal experiences of some of the things her participants talked about—actually living aspects of her research—greatly enhanced her understandings in some areas, she realized how difficult it could be to interpret stories about the things she had not experienced. Having the opportunity to reflect on the

impact of her personal struggles on her analysis alerted her to the importance of fully exploring the relations between Self and Other in the research process.

Jane's commitment to reciprocity produced moments where she was able to offer something back to her research participants as well as moments when they provided her with comfort and support. There were moments of intimacy and the shared enjoyment of relaxing in each other's company. It also produced moments when the blurring of boundaries between Self and Other and the contradictions that continue to trouble our work as feminist researchers caused her to question any notion of a feminist method free of exploitative potential. Jane believes that the multiplicity of sites for analysis enabled by her friendships with her research participants enhanced and intensified her understandings and her resolve to rigorously interrogate both her analysis and methodology. However, she is left considering the implications of research relationships that, although reducing power effects in some areas, retain the potential for the exploitation of these more intimate relationships.

Missy has been writing elsewhere about Louise's stories recently (Morton, 2000). Her strong sense of feeling compelled to tell the stories raises for her the questions of why and to whom. She wonders, What obligations has she met by telling it this way at this time? She is happy with her determination to take Louise's side. She likes it that Louise gets to have a say early on, that Louise's struggles are also signs of daring and hope and competence.

In this telling, she has used Louise's story as a way into thinking some more about writing and research and re/presentation. She hopes Fine's (1992) descriptions of voice, ventriloquy, and activism are not mutually exclusive categories. Missy suspects that Louise's story has to some extent been a decoy for her own authorial voice, working the writings of disability, and that she will have to live with that. She hopes that a legitimate trade-off has been her effort at troubling, some more, the ideas of what mentally retarded means and to write about it, to read about it, for this audience.

The potential for researchers to exploit and objectify—to Other—has been clearly articulated within the discourses of postpositivism. New formulas for getting it right have constructed new regimes of truth within feminist qualitative methodologies. These regimes acknowledge the dynamic nature of research relationships while alerting us to the vulnerability of those whose lives we choose to write about. However, the stories we have told in this article provide examples of the inherently contradictory nature of our work. As feminist researchers, we strive to avoid Othering yet are compelled by the nature of our work, the constraints of the institutions we inhabit, and the requirements of academic publishing to construct research projects in certain ways and produce certain types of texts as we talk among ourselves about other people's lives.

We believe our task in writing about methodology is not to construct new regimes of rigor and new formulas for inscribing validity but to use feminist postpositivist debates about research methods to explore the political conse-

quences of our interpretations and the possibilities for greater understanding through more intimate relationships with our participants. As Busier et al. (1997) claim, "intimate relationships, the process of 'being in relation,' are vital experiences which move us into learning and understanding more about others, ourselves, and our world" (p. 165). We believe that notions of reciprocity are central to the trustworthiness of our accounts. However, we are wary of preoccupations with validity—with the goal of a tight fit between method and validity—that divert us from the wider political implications of our work.

What new questions about trustworthiness arise when we view qualitative research through the lens of reciprocity? We've struggled here to figure out what each of our sets of obligations might be. To judge how we may or may not have met our various obligations, we've had to unpack our previously implicit criteria for such judgements. We've also asked how we might have benefited from our relationships with our participants at each stage of the process—hoping to move beyond an aim of getting better data. The benefits and obligations of research—the give and take of a reciprocal relationship—are different at each stage as well as for different projects. What we suggest now is that researchers do consider and show how they consider the benefits and obligations they have while in relationship with their research participants. This move makes explicit the intimate connections between ethics and rigor (Lincoln, 1995).

Again, what new questions about trustworthiness arise when we view qualitative research through the lens of reciprocity? The list here is only a beginning: questions we've asked about our own work, questions that have been put to us, questions we're now asking about others' works.

What relationship(s) do we wish to have with our participants? What strategies are we using to establish, maintain, alter, or end a relationship? Why?

When we claim a collaborative relationship with research participants, who says it's a collaborative relationship? Why is the claim being made? Who benefits, and how, from this claim?

Who benefits and how from claims about "voice"? Whose stories are we telling? Why have we chosen to tell particular stories, at a particular time, in a particular place?

Feminist ideals of reciprocity have produced greater explorations of and, we hope, have enhanced our understandings of the relationship between Self and Other, researcher and researched, at all stages of the research process. We've asked ourselves about how trustworthy we were: When did we ask too much? When did we give too little—or patronize the women who talked and listened with us? We care about these people; we think this is at least some of what trustworthiness is about. We all want to honor our participants and to finish our theses and to publish. We also all have a commitment to social justice and a feminist politics that requires us to explore new ways of conceptualizing our research relations and new ways of producing knowledge to

make strong the connections between our work as academics and activists, and the lives of the women we encounter in our research. We're still sure that it will be possible to do most of this at least some of the time, that there will be some uneasy moments, some times of intense disquiet and self-doubt, and that we will keep learning.

## NOTE

1. *Intellectual disability* is a label used in New Zealand and Australia. In the United States, the equivalent label is *mental retardation*; in the United Kingdom, the label is *learning disability*.

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