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Dangerously important moment(s) in reflexive research practices with immigrant youth

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As a white, working middle-class adult queer from the Southwest USA, my subjective relation to the Mexican (im)migrant, poor, working, straight adolescent boys in California participating in my study was tentative, politicized, controversial, and surveilled from both social and individual lenses. Our relationships were also mutually caring, loving, supportive, stimulating, and challenging. Our ethnographic encounters carried with them some long-standing and dynamic social narratives that surround relations between and across groups of relative privilege and oppression. These narratives produced ‘ethically important moments’ wherein I confronted microethics of research practices that remained largely under-theorized and misunderstood in methodological literature. By critically examining my reflexive processes and practices within one of these moments, insights into the workings of social narratives about race, class, and sexuality are revealed that can potentially assist future researchers as they confront the politics and microethics of working within and across the intersectionalities of oppression and marginalization.

Keywords: ethics; reflexive research; immigrant youth

Introduction

When friends or relatives ask me what it is that I do, I sometimes describe myself as an anthropologist of education. I am from a working-class family, and most friends and family members seem to recognize anthropology as something a professor might do, more so than education, particularly since I do not work with teachers. It is sometimes easier to explain than describe what it means to be an educational researcher focused on the social contexts of educational opportunity. Also, my sociocultural approach to education is largely grounded in anthropology, so I feel confident that I am representing myself fairly and accurately. I once named myself an anthropologist to a good friend who wanted to know more about what I did when I spoke of working ‘in the field’.

He asked, ‘So, you’re like Indiana Jones goes to school?’
I responded, ‘Not quite. Indiana Jones is an archeologist.’
My friend said, ‘Oh. I thought that he was an anthropologist, too.’

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I clarified, 'You're right, absolutely, sorta. But he studies dead people. I work with people who are still alive.'

My friend laughed a little and said, 'Yeah that makes sense. You've never fallen into and escaped from a pit full of snakes. Haha. What was the most dangerous thing you last did in the field?'

I kind of chuckled along, then reflectively I shared, 'I took two students out to dinner.' We both sort of laughed.

Although my jovial discussion with my friend paints a simplistic picture of fieldwork in critical qualitative research in education, a haunting truth hangs in my coda to our narrative. I should not be so brazen about the dangers that dinner can bring, nor should I downplay the importance of the ethical terrain that dinner might provide. Rather, there are important insights to glean from reflecting on this site of inquiry.

In this paper, I reflect critically on an 'ethically important moment' from my fieldwork with Mexican immigrant youth in California. This was a moment when and where my responses to the situation had potential to harm/help individual participants, constrain/enable the research process, and perpetuate/disrupt master narratives about immigrant youth in relation to dominant cultural communities; yet, this moment was not available or appropriate for procedural ethical review boards to assess. Within the purview of my critical ethnographic research design, I took two student participants out to dinner.

I use Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) framework for understanding reflexivity as an ethical notion in combination with Milner's (2007) framework for working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen in research to make sense of how these moments challenged the critical ethnographic endeavor. By critically examining my reflexive processes and practices within each moment, insights into the workings of race, class, and sexuality are revealed that can potentially assist future researchers as they confront the ethical terrain of working within and across the intersectionalities of oppression and marginalization. I aim to contribute to the development of what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) called for when they stated:

Although this ethical dimension [ethically important moments] is often apparent to researchers, there is often little conceptual work available to draw on to make sense of it. We need both a language to articulate and understand these ethical issues and an approach that assists us to deal with these issues when they arise. (265)

I hope my reflective analysis of my reflexive practices in situ extend the conversation about how we understand and conceptualize ethics in practice. Specifically, I argue for notions of reflexivity to incorporate reflective work *with* research participants, not just about them.

Throughout this article, I intentionally resist engagement with the long-standing insider/outsider debates in social research. These debates assume sets of innate values, practices, allegiances, and/or cognitive congruence between people of the same identity (Villenas 1996). Further, the insider–outsider debates tend to rely on static notions of culture, whereas I work from dynamic understandings of culture as produced over time and through practices (Gutiérrez 2002). Rather, I assume that all social research is cross-cultural, albeit to varying extents. I do not deny that the Mexican (im)migrant youth with whom I collaborate in inquiry are racialized dramatically differently than I. Nor do I deny that their particularly *Chicano* and/or Mexican ethnicities place them in dramatically different cultural spheres than my Anglo ethnicity. Further, as recognized by Critical Race theorists (Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006), ethnic/racial

identities can be politically notable, while remaining problematic. Queer theorists have helped to show that fixing identity locations, such as insider and outsider, constrains understandings of how power can operate in productive, rather than solely repressive ways (Butler 1993; Sullivan 2003). Despite our racial and ethnic differences, Mexican (im)migrant students and I share and *participate* in some cultural systems and practices in far more similar than different ways. Of particular relevance is our mutual engagement in our critical ethnographic context of college-going and inquiry. As such, I do not portend that our racial, ethnic, linguistic, economic, or educational backgrounds do not matter in how we relate to each other, but rather argue a more generative, dynamic, and informative reworking of the insider/outsider discourse. Hence, I resist engagement in the normative insider/outsider discussion and choose instead to anchor my analyses in the culturally analytic frameworks provided by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Milner (2007), explained further below.

On reflexivity and immigrant youth

As outlined by Rossman and Rallis (2003), qualitative research can be understood as learning. Rossman and Rallis assert, 'its ultimate purpose is learning ... The transformation of information into knowledge is an active learning process' (4–5). From a sociocultural perspective, understanding qualitative research as an activity of learning then inherently requires me to understand it culturally – that is to say, all learning is culturally mediated (Cole 1996; Engeström 1999; Roth and Lee 2007). Simultaneously drawing from critical inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Kincheloe and McLaren 2000), I seek to work toward reflexive research praxis – a way of doing inquiry that attempts to disrupt and displace oppressive social practices with radically democratic ideals seeking to eliminate oppression and marginalization. Hence, I strive to enact a culturally reflexive inquiry – an inquiry that is culturally responsive in design, procedure, and practice, as well as outcome. Engaging this kind of reflexivity requires carefully thought out theorizations of the practices of research – an inherently ethical endeavor. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest that the institutional review board (IRB) provides guidance for procedural ethical considerations, but fails to address ethics-in-practice, or microethics. I focus on these moments in the learning activity of my critical inquiry in this article.

In arguing that IRB fixates on procedural ethics, ignoring the microethics of qualitative research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) describe what they call 'ethically important moments' or moments in research practice that become significant 'for there is the possibility that a wrong could be done' (265). These moments in research practice generally cannot be foreseen or prevented by the procedural ethics that IRB addresses; nor should they. The microethics of social research are not moments when inquiry should be suspended, rather, they are the ethical concerns that arise while working in the field, often in the very moments that remind researchers why fieldwork is a valuable tool in social inquiry. Still, a need remains for a discursive understanding and material experiences that will produce ethical research practice (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). And so enters the notion of reflexivity.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) define reflexivity as 'a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated' (274). Although primarily used by qualitative researchers to ensure the rigor of their work, when reflexivity engages critical reflection by researchers of themselves and participants as subjects in the process of inquiry, the process then could

encompass interpersonal dimensions of research – what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call ‘the substrate of the ethical dimensions of research practice’ (275). Such reflexive research would then pay close attention to the ethical dilemmas permeating the practices of research (addressing the microethics of research) and the ways these ethical dilemmas influence knowledge creation (ensuring rigor).

From these understandings of the microethics of social research and the role/responsibility of reflexivity, Guillemin and Gillam put forward a broad framework of reflexive research outcomes. Ongoing reflexivity is required to: (1) ‘check that the researcher’s practice is actually embodying his or her [methodological, theoretical, and epistemological] principles’; and (2) enable 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 ... participants’ (276). Further, reflexivity in the microethics of research would mean that researchers recognize how microethics are pervasive in research practices and reflexive research should encourage awareness of these microethics before fieldwork commences (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Thus, for Guillemin and Gillam, reflexivity, as an ethical practice in social research, insists on a process of becoming aware and scrutinizing oneself in relation to the inquiry – both intrapersonally (theoretical congruence) and interpersonally (theoretical appropriateness).

As stated previously, to varying extents, all social inquiry is cross-cultural. There is more differentiation within group than between groups. Yet, this inherent characteristic to our social and cultural lives does not erase the reified borders and boundaries constructed between and among different cultural communities. In order to make sense of the ethical dimensions that come along with culturally analytic research, Milner (2007) offers a way-of-seeing grounded in Critical Race Theory that explains how ‘dangers seen, unseen, or unforeseen’ (388) can manifest when researchers ‘reject their racialized and cultural positionality in the research process’ (388). In my work with immigrant youth, I try to work against such rejection, making use and sense of the cultural assets our collective racial and cultural differentiation affords the inquiry. In doing so, I draw from Milner (2007) to understand how seen dangers ‘can explicitly emerge as a result of the decisions researchers make in their studies’ (388). Whereas, ‘unseen dangers are those that are hidden, covert, implicit, or invisible in the research process’ (388). And finally, ‘unforeseen dangers are those that are unanticipated or unpredicted in a research project based on the decisions that researchers make in the research process’ (388).

At stake in each of these dangers are the ethics of interaction, treatment, and representation of/with non-dominant cultural communities. I put forward that all ethically important moments embed some element of danger. Put another way, it is engagement with Milner’s dangers that constitutes moments in research practices as ethically important. Therefore, dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen need to be theorized in making sense of the microethics of research practices. Milner suggests that reflexivity can help mitigate these dangers. Milner’s reflexivity focuses on researchers’ racial and cultural positionality. Milner (2007, 395) offers a four-part framework for achieving such reflexivity: researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system. These four dimensions help researchers recognize and work through dangers as they emerge in research processes.

Similar to Guillemin and Gillam’s notions of reflexivity, Milner’s framework asks researchers to be vigilant in examining the theoretical congruence and appropriateness

of research activity while in practice. Milner (2007) begins by asking researchers to raise awareness and consciousness of their own racial and cultural backgrounds and understandings in order 'to engage in processes that reject the exploitation, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation of people and communities of color' (395) (researching the self). As culture plays a major role in learning and therefore, in ways of knowing, a reflexive researcher must move beyond her or his own positionality and consider how dangers might manifest in relation to others engaged in the inquiry (researching the self in relation to others). Milner calls for researchers to:

think about themselves in relation to others, work through the commonalities and tensions that emerge from this reflection, and negotiate their ways of knowing with that of the community or people under study. (396)

Qualitative research, as an activity of learning, then inherently requires cultural engagement with the subjects of inquiry. In preparing for and meeting the demands of dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen in the microethics of research practice, Milner asks researchers to work with their subjects through reflection and representation. Understanding that these reflective and representative practices might conflict with one another, these tensions can be fruitful sites for analysis themselves if treated as data, and they should be made explicit for consumers of research (Milner 2007). Thus, reflexivity is not a solitary process, but rather a process of engagement (engaged reflection and representation). Still, the reflective work of the researcher, the subjects of inquiry, and the relation and engagement between them must be connected to a broader concern for reflexivity to make a difference in the ethics of research practice. Thus, Milner puts forward that researchers can prepare themselves to face the microethics of research and guard against succumbing to dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen by shifting their reflective work from the self to the system. As Milner wrote:

researchers contextualize and ground their personal or individualistic, new and expanded consciousness to take into consideration historic, political, social, economic, racial, and cultural realities on a broader scale. Shifting the process of inquiry from the more personalized level to consider policy, institutional, systemic, and collective issues is important. (397)

Both Milner's and Guillemin and Gillam's notions of reflexivity seek to empower researchers to make good choices while engaging in research practice. Guillemin and Gillam provide broader goals and expectations for the reflexive work required of ethical researchers, while Milner provides a more specific and pragmatic approach to reflexive praxis. Brought together, they offer a way of seeing the very doing of research that affords researchers cultural tools for productively engaging the microethics of research, when dangers seen, unseen, or unforeseen arise.

In application, reflexivity will look different with each researcher, research project, and across different research subjects. In addition to aforementioned warnings about cultural differences and the potential dangers or harm that might arise when they are ignored, I put forward that there are broader social understandings that must be engaged in reflexive work within qualitative research. These social narratives, described in more detail in the next section, saturate the research process. Although social narratives were not made explicit in either Guillemin and Gillam's or Milner's notions of reflexivity, I believe they cannot be ignored when making the important shift from self to society or in the development of a social consciousness as required by Milner and Guillemin and Gillam.

Between me, us, and them: ethnographic context and (master) narrative(s)

The analyses related in this paper stem from my broader ethnographic engagement with Mexican migrant students and their families in California around issues of educational equity and opportunity. Since the summer of 2005, 12 Mexican migrant families and I have shared ethnographic encounters together, generating insights into the college-going and broader educational experiences of children of migrant farm-working families. Our ethnographic encounters included spending time together in students' everyday activities: hanging out, family meals, going to coffee shops or sporting events, and deliberating over decisions about students' educational futures. Over time, the project has evolved from a more traditional critical ethnographic study (Gildersleeve 2009, 2010) into a grassroots participatory action research collective that we affectionately named *Los Estudiantes Migrantes y Educación* (LEME-PAR) (Gildersleeve, Gómez, and Rodríguez 2009; Gildersleeve and LEME 2009). The primary participants in our project are the 12 migrant students and myself. We first met during an intensive summer outreach program called the UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI), in which I served as a social science/humanities instructor and tutor for the academic core courses that students took as part of the four-week residential program (see Gildersleeve 2009; Gutiérrez, Hunter, and Arzubíaga 2009). We sustained personal relationships after the 2005 MSLI and within weeks agreed to engage in a critical ethnographic inquiry around educational opportunities for migrant students.

As criticalists, our mutual engagement frames inquiry as a fundamentally pedagogical project – a critical pedagogy in particular (Jaramillo and McLaren 2008; Kincheloe and McLaren 2000; McIntire 2007; Trueba and McLaren 2000). As a project of critical pedagogy, our engagement disrupts many of the normative tenets associated with research relationships in more positivist-oriented frameworks. We seek to learn from ourselves, each other, and from our mutual engagement in supporting each other's lives and livelihoods. Explicitly political, the 13 of us that make up the LEME-PAR share commitments to struggles for immigrant rights and increasing educational equity across historically marginalized communities. Registering this shared pedagogical and political orientation between the students and myself importantly draws attention to the contested context through which the insights from this paper are drawn.

Students' home communities, where most of our face-to-face ethnographic engagement occurs,¹ are spread across the state of California, reaching as far southeast as the Imperial Valley where the California, Baja California, and Arizona borders triangulate and as far northwest as the East San Francisco Bay Area. At the time of our initial engagement, students' ages ranged from 14 to 17; today they are 18–21. I was in my mid-late 20s and an advanced doctoral student at UCLA when we first met. Currently, I am in my early thirties and working as an assistant professor at Iowa State University. All of the 12 student participants are children of Mexican immigrants; four of the students are immigrants themselves, all of whom are male and undocumented.² Overall, eight students are male and four are female. I am a male, native-born US citizen of European-American descent. The students grew up in families who engaged in migrant agricultural farm labor in a struggle to sustain poor and working-class livelihoods across poverty-stricken immigrant communities in California. I grew up in a working middle-class family in a generally affluent suburb in the American Southwest. The students generally identify as straight, understanding that

many of them are still developing their sexual identities over the course of our inquiry. I began to identify as gay while I was in college. As an academic, I have flirted with the *dis*-identification of *queer*³ in a subversive effort to playfully challenge sex- and gender-based assumptions about sexuality.

On (master) narratives

Master narratives operate to normalize oppressive conditions within society by telling stories from the perspective of the dominant social group in order to sustain their racial and class privilege (Dixson and Rousseau 2007). They often take shape as assumed rules, folk knowledge, and stereotypes that people cling to, draw from, or resist in order to make sense of their place in the world. These are social narratives – narratives that organize our understanding of social relations. According to Yosso (2006), stories from the dominant voices in society ‘perpetuate myths that darker skin and poverty correlate with bad neighborhoods and bad schools’ (9). These discursive configurations render the perspectives and experiences of non-dominant groups illegitimate and deficient in reference to the dominant group.

There is an overriding master narrative that my work with LEME actively seeks to fracture and disrupt. That narrative precludes Mexican migrant students, and immigrant youth generally, from participating in higher education. This master narrative has been well-documented by scholars working within LatCrit and Critical Race theoretical frameworks (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001; Solórzano and Ornelas 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2001; Yosso 2006), as well as by sociocultural theorists engaged with Latino, specifically Mexican, and most particularly Mexican migrant communities (Faulstich Orellana 2001; Gutiérrez 2006; Gutiérrez and Jaramillo 2006). Yet, the master narrative and the sting of its dehumanizing power persist. Interrogating this master narrative is beyond the purview of this paper, but acknowledging its role in my relationships with LEME recognizes the broader research context of our shared commitment to educational equity.

Equally powerful, and more pertinent to my arguments in this paper, are the social (master) narratives that shape not only our identities as participants in the LEME-PAR, but also the ways we imagine, enact, and reformulate our relations together. These narratives about race, class, and sexuality plague not only those who appear to be the target of stereotype, but also those who engage with targeted individuals and groups. Master narratives about Mexican (im)migrant youth, white men, gay men, boys, immigrants, poor people, the middle class, and relations between and across these subjective social positions are at stake in the analyses I share below.

Writing and representing reflexivity in the microethics of social research

What follows are three illustrations of an ethically important moment. The initial representation follows in a tradition of ‘showing’ – what Ellis (2004) argues ‘brings readers into the scene’ (142) through the use of dialog affording them an experience of their own, from an experience of others. In the shown representation, I hope to provide a depiction of the moment, as I experienced it. By contrast, the second representation *tells* the moment from my own experience as the ethnographer, affording distance for the reader and author, but amassing detail unavailable from the shown version of events. In this told representation, I aim to interpret the meaning of action through the dominant narratives that provide surveillance over my life and the lives of

the immigrant youth with whom I work. The third representation analyzes the moment from the reflexive frameworks informed by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Milner (2007). By critically examining my reflexive processes and practices, insights into the workings of race, class, and sexuality are revealed that can potentially assist future researchers as they confront the politics and microethics of working within and across the intersectionalities of oppression and marginalization.

For some critical, indigenous, and other post-positivist researchers, my showing, telling, and analyzing might be viewed in tension with one another. As Adams (2006) put it, ‘the show-tell debate remains in contention’ (716). Adams acknowledges the value of both writing strategies – bringing readers into a situation and affording them distance – toward different goals from the narrative text. Adams sought to share personal stories of his relationship with his father in order to ‘think with theories in our lives, not analyzing their content but rather their practical use’ (715). I seek to engage theories of reflexivity in a similar vein, and as such, have taken a cue from Adams’s choice to both show *and* tell. There is a historical support for such representational strategies. Wolcott (1994) put forward an analytical schema for transforming qualitative data into meaningful research. His three-step approach includes describing, interpreting, and finally analyzing ethnographic data in order to make it meaningful for educational significance. I align my showing, telling, and analyzing activity presented below within Wolcott’s description–interpretation–analysis framework, with the relationships between me and the student participants in my inquiry as the primary subjects and the theories of reflexivity as the primary units of analysis in order to elicit significant educative insights about the workings of race, class, and sexuality in the microethics of critical ethnographic fieldwork.

Going out to dinner: an ethically important moment

*Cast of characters*⁴:

Gael, a Mexican migrant student

RyanEG, a critical ethnographer from UCLA

Felix, a Mexican migrant student

Waiter, a restaurant server

Setting: a national chain Italian food restaurant with sit-down service

Showing

Gael:

Umm, what’s this for?

RyanEG:

That’s a salad fork?

Gael:

Why do you need two forks to eat salad?

Felix:

That’s just how they do it. So you can use the other one for the rest of the meal. It’s so you don’t get salad dressing on the other food. Right?

RyanEG:

It’s just a silly tradition, really. It’s something restaurants do and like, for more formal dining occasions.

Gael (*interrupting and laughing*): But what if I’m not even ordering salad?

RyanEG (*to server*):

Could we have some bread, please?

Waiter:

Right away, sir.

Gael:

Ooh, he called you ‘sir’. That’s because he thinks you’re old. Hahaha.

(*Gael laughs.*)

- Waiter (to Gael): Would you like more iced tea, sir?
 RyanEG and Felix: Hahaha. (RyanEG and Felix laugh at the server's use of the word, 'sir'.)
- Gael (whispers to RyanEG): Is it free?
 RyanEG: Huh?
 Gael: Is it, is it free?
 RyanEG: Huh? I still can't hear you.
 Gael (to server): Is it free?
 Waiter (to table, avoiding Gael's gaze): Yes, it's free, sir.
 Felix: Hahaha. (Felix laughs again.)
 Gael: Then yes.
 Waiter: More tea?
 Gael: Yes. If it's free.
 Waiter: It's free, sir.
 Felix: He called you 'sir'.
- RyanEG: Do you guys see things you like?
 Felix: I'm just getting what I got last time.
 Gael: What is this?
 Felix: What?
 Gael: This one.
 Felix: Oh, that's just like spaghetti, only fancy. Umm, I think.
 Gael (laughing): Fancy spaghetti?!
 RyanEG: There's also baked pasta dishes on the next page?
 Gael: I don't know this food. I'll just order salad. They do have salad, right? I can use the fork? (Gael laughs.)

Telling

I visited the Imperial Valley one week after Gael's graduation. This was a huge accomplishment that he and others in the LEME-PAR wanted to recognize. I offered to take Gael out for dinner to celebrate. Our friend Felix, another member of the LEME-PAR, joined us. When I asked where we should go, I was met with blank stares and silenced voices. I was confused. In my family, going out to dinner to celebrate major achievements was a normal thing to do. As the blank stares and silences grew longer, I prodded a bit. Then, I made some suggestions of my own. Gael and Felix agreed with every restaurant I named, even though they had never eaten in any of them.

We decided on an Italian restaurant similar to a number of national chains with sit-down service. What ensued was unsettling for me. Gael was taken aback by the offering of complimentary bread and free beverage refills. He was playfully unfamiliar with a formal place-setting that included multiple forks. By playfully, I mean to say that Gael knew that some people and places had multiple utensils for different parts of a meal, but he was unfamiliar with their actual use. His questioning was partly a desire to clarify which fork was which and partly a desire to poke fun at the need for multiple forks. Truthfully, he did not recognize many of the names of the food on the menu. The whole experience seemed unfamiliar to his everyday practices. He seemed a bit more awkward than usual, a bit more reserved. His humor seemed more contrived and juvenile than usual, as if it were compensating for something else or used to deflect attention away from something.

Felix chimed in with the joking around, poking fun in turn at Gael and at me. It was a jovial dinner, although an overtone of strangeness carried across the meal. With

each comment about how odd something was, with each question about protocol, with each correction from our waiter, it was like someone was keeping score about the differences between the three of us at the table. That was not a game we had asked to play.

Analysis: dinner as an ethically important (and dangerous) moment

When the check came, I got it – literally (I paid), and figuratively – these were dominant class practices of celebrating and dining out. Gael might well have recognized them from his own life observations, but he did not participate in them. Confronting them head-on put him in an awkward position. Should he acknowledge his unfamiliarity with what seemed to be second-nature to everyone else in the restaurant? Should he just follow what I did? Should he poke fun and make light of the situation in order to save face?

Dinner became ethically important because it afforded the opportunity for dehumanizing (master) narratives to play out against us. The potential wrong to be done in the moment was the harm of dehumanization. Students, in particular Gael, needed me to make sense of the practices to which they were subjected. Needing me in this way constructed Gael and Felix as less human than me. All of this was played out against a supposedly benevolent backdrop of three friends and colleagues celebrating an academic achievement together. That backdrop cloaked the social narrative that was operating. The score-keeping that registered each time Gael or Felix asked a question or the waiter corrected one of our responses was the presence of a strong (master) narrative that pitted poor, working, migrant students like Felix and Gael against working middle-class white professionals like myself.

In this narrative, Gael, Felix, and I are not supposed to relate to each other. We are not supposed to be friends. We are not supposed to work for the same goals, particularly when those goals are egalitarian and radically democratic, as is the case in our collaborative critical inquiry. I am supposed to feel confident that my way of celebrating is the right way. Gael and Felix are supposed to feel incompetent because they did not recognize it as such. We were not supposed to work through the dangers of dinner together, rather we were supposed to retreat and allow the master narrative to take hold, tearing apart the coalition we had been building together for the previous two years.

As a master narrative, it is omnipresent, yet it can become especially salient in particular moments. The omnipresent yet particularized nature of social narratives on class and race suggests that they are dangerous to research in seen, unseen, and unforeseen ways. As manifest in my dinner with Gael and Felix, there was at least one obvious seen danger that I ignored – the restaurant itself.

After dinner Gael, Felix, and I went to hang out at Felix's parents' house. We laughed about the whole experience. Felix even said, 'Didn't you notice that everyone was white there? It's like, the only place in El Centro where there's more white people than Mexicans.'

Indeed, I had recognized the racialized components to the evening when we walked inside the restaurant. Still, it did not make me question my ideas of what celebrating Gael's graduation should be like. I blinded myself from recognizing these seen dangers of the dinner. The restaurant was plainly outside of their normative experiences, which I should have known.

The (master) narrative itself is an unseen danger. Its manifestation in the awkward exchanges between Gael, Felix, the waiter, and myself might have been seen ahead of

time, but its effects could not be. The scorekeeping notion that seemed to chip away at our relationships during dinner was an unseen danger that only our mutual investment in each other as research participants and humanizing agents could hope to mitigate. Those effects dangerously threatened the integrity of our project.

Our mutual investment in each other not only helped mitigate the unseen danger of the narrative's effects, but also represented an antithesis to the (master) narrative-as-unforeseen danger. That is to say, our engagement with the narrative was a potential unforeseen danger. It could not be predicted nor imagined pre-emptively, because our engagement with the narrative was a deeply contextualized experience. We relied on the narrative's saliency in the environment and our long-term, evolving care, concern, and *confianza*⁵ with one another to resist engaging in the master narrative in such a way that would have deteriorated our relationships.

Coda

I cannot say that Gael or Felix were necessarily uncomfortable. We had a very lovely dinner, and everyone agreed that it was a very nice time. We laughed together. We shared stories together. We celebrated Gael's graduation together.

I was unsettled, because I had orchestrated an event that positioned students as ignorant, simple, and less-than-me. This event, which had been intended to bring us all together, forcibly highlighted the ways in which society, and our own practices, keep us apart. As the orchestrator of the event, I was responsible for tipping the power balance unequivocally in my favor.

I felt like an idiot. Why did I think this would be a treat for them? Why would my family's version of celebrating translate into celebration for them? If I wanted to acknowledge Gael's academic achievement, why did I fail to inquire how he might want that event to be constructed? I had made a huge assumption that my values universally transferred into their lives. After all, I had celebrated several academic achievements in my lifetime. Then again, so had they.

The conversation at Felix's house reminded me about all of the celebrations that students had already invited me to participate in with them. Felix and Gael both reminisced about other celebratory events, such as quinceañeras and family members' birthdays. I remembered being at another student's graduation party just one week earlier. Two common characteristics across all of these events were that they included the entire family, and they took place at home. I ignored both of these dimensions. I am not trying to reduce migrant families' celebratory practices to these two characteristics. My reflection on this experience aims to highlight how complicated fieldwork can be, especially when all participants are committed to mutual social justice goals.

As an event within an ethnographic study, the dinner with Gael and Felix was in many ways, a complete failure. In no way was I engaged in the students' normative practices of celebrating academic achievements (e.g., graduation). At the same time, I *was* engaged in their normative practices of negotiating and navigating social environments that perpetuated dominance over their cultural communities. In this sense, failure in ethnography can also mean success. Even so, the potential for harm in this situation could easily outweigh any construction of 'success' in the field. Orchestrating an encounter as dangerous as this dinner failed my critical ethical requirement that inquiry should humanize participants. Reflexivity provides me a lens through which to recognize our dinner as a moment when I could have abandoned my

methodological position. As benign an event as dinner might seem, it proved to be an ethically important moment, and one with dangers that I failed to foresee, much less mitigate.

Revisiting reflexivity: problematic microethics and dangers in the field

Aside from my confessional reflections, the illustration and the analysis of this ethically important moment point to an acute need for notions of reflexivity to be extended and account for (dis)engagement with the master narratives that permeate social relations. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Milner (2007) provide meaningful frameworks for the practice of reflexivity in and its integration into the microethics of research practice. However, their frameworks seem limited to kinesthetic and/or material effects of research practice. Whereas, the dominant narratives influence social relations discursively – they make certain ways of relating possible while constraining subversive ways of relating. Gael, Felix, and I were attempting to disrupt the social narratives of race and class that sought to separate us. Yet, despite our mutual affection and commitment to each other and our broader project, the master narrative was dangerously re-inscribed through our research practices together. Milner's notion of reflecting on the self in relation to the system might attempt to address this sort of dilemma in the microethics of research, but it more directly addresses the ways that policies and other social structures create cultural tensions and dangers in research. Social (master) narratives are more elusive, yet remain pervasive.

In order to rigorously work against dehumanizing social narratives in the microethics of research, I suggest that reflexivity should engage research participants. It was my relationships with Gael and Felix that helped us make meaning, make sense, and survive our ethically important moment together. These were mutually informed relationships, wherein all of us felt we had something at stake in the inquiry. Engaging research participants in reflexivity removes any sort of paternalistic notion that might emerge from positioning the researcher as the primary knower, the one who can make the call to abandon the methodological position. In Milner's language, this could add *reflection of selves in relation to each other* to his constitution of reflexivity. These reflections could help expose the discursive operations of dominant social narratives. Recognizing these (master) narratives then could empower all individuals involved in research practice to see and foresee dangers, as well as assess the embodiment of methodological, theoretical, and epistemological principles at stake in the microethics of research.

Conclusions

Fieldwork in critical qualitative education research requires reflexivity not just to ensure rigor and quality, but also as an ethical imperative. Unlike Indiana Jones who confronts violently dangerous situations, like a pit full of snakes, the educator-as-fieldworker confronts kinesthetic, material, and discursive dangers that are less apparent to an untrained or careless eye. These dangers constitute ethically important moments in research practice. These moments are possibilities for dehumanization to take effect in the research process, yet IRB cannot prevent them. These moments create the microethics of qualitative research, and they require reflexive researchers to make sense and meaning of them. Often, social (master) narratives can seem to take a stranglehold on all participants in these moments. As such, reflexivity, as an ethical

imperative and tool to mitigate the dangers of research, needs to incorporate reflective practices from everyone engaged in the research process.

In this paper, I sought to illustrate microethics from my critical inquiry with Mexican immigrant youth by showing, telling, and analyzing the dangers of my research practices. I also shared insights gleaned from my reflective practices and reflexive processes with these youth, however flawed. From these insights, I came to understand and argue for notions of reflexivity to include reflection of selves in relation to each other, as embedded and contextualized within any given research project. This added dimension to reflexivity as an ethical practice can help illuminate and then interrogate social (master) narratives that operate to enable marginalization and oppression. In these ways, the reflexive researcher can use the microethics of research practice to work toward inquiry as a humanizing endeavor.

Notes

1. As the LEME project has evolved, students have matriculated into college, and I moved to Iowa as an assistant professor, our engagement has increased in its modes of participation. Particularly, we have used online and digital-distance technologies such as social networking websites (e.g., *Facebook*), email, web-based office management tools (e.g., *Google-docs*) and online synchronic communication technologies (e.g., *Skype*TM) to enhance and sustain our ethnographic engagement.
2. The term ‘undocumented’ is used to signify students’ immigration status. These immigrant students entered the USA from Mexico as children without legal documentation.
3. ‘Queer’ as a signifier has been used by queer theorists and activists to disrupt the normative assumptions around sexuality that static binaries such as gay/straight perpetuate. To *dis-identify* is a post-structural/postmodern exercise of power to resist the categorization and stagnation of one’s sexuality into any discrete discourse (see Butler 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Thomas 2006 for more information).
4. Pseudonyms have been used in place of students’ actual names.
5. *Confianza* is often translated from Spanish into English as ‘trust’. In this instance, it is a cultural expression of trust within long-standing reciprocal relations. For more information about the *confianza* developed and practiced in the LEME-PAR, please see Gildersleeve, Gómez, and Rodríguez (2009); Gildersleeve and LEME (2009); Gildersleeve (2010).

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