Article

Understanding Participant Experiences: Reflections of a Novice Research Participant

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Abstract

There is very little empirical work on the experiences research participants have engaging in qualitative inquiry; yet, qualitative researchers often think of themselves as forging critical relationships with their participants. It seems that perhaps the actual experiences of participants in the research process are being taken largely for granted. I want to problematize research participants being taken for granted. In this article, I analyze the existing literature and report on insights from my own experience as a participant in two interview studies. The article offers insights regarding participant experiences that are not well captured in the existing literature.

Keywords: Research participant, member check, ethics, qualitative interviews

There is very little empirical work on the experiences research participants have engaging in qualitative inquiry; yet, qualitative researchers often think of themselves as forging important interpersonal relationships with their participants (Korth, 2002). It seems that the actual experiences of participants in the research process are being taken largely for granted. I want to problematize the idea that we do not need to question what the experience of being a subject of research is for our participants in qualitative studies.

It was not until I started to write this article that I examined the literature on the topic of participant experience. Although my particular interest was inspired by my own participatory engagement in these two studies, there are many reasons why this interest is worth investigating. Perhaps the most obvious is that our ethical commitments to research require that we take participants' experiences into account. This is minimally articulated through the expectations of internal review boards through which the maxim of do no harm is operationalized and monitored (See Wu et al, 2009 or Watanabe et al, 2011 for an example of research that focuses on this set of concerns) On a substantive level, we want to be able to anticipate how participants will respond to and react to our engagements with them and this requires understanding the more general possibilities (for example, how do participants tend to react to interviews about trauma) and the more specific possibilities related to the particular participant involved (for example, how might a specific child experience a particular set of questions). This set of concerns is examined in Herbenstreit and DePrince, 2012, as well as other studies on participating in trauma research. From a utilitarian perspective, we want to know how to best carry out the research and we are more likely to be successful if we understand the participants' motivations and potential outcomes of the research. Last, the outcomes of our research are directly tied to the way participants experience and engage with the research process. See Goldblatt et al, 2011 for an example of a discussion on the utilitarian costs/benefits of member checks. In other words, because qualitative research findings are intimately derived from interpersonal contact with participants, their experiences will be directly reflected in those findings. Generally speaking, so long as the participant leaves the research unharmed, her experiences with the process itself have not warranted significant attention. I know that individual researchers have been concerned for participants and their experiences; yet, published articles focusing on this topic alone are needed in order to draw out the various reports tucked into research articles.

In this article, I analyze the existing literature and report on insights garnered from reflecting on my own experience as a participant in two interview studies. The article offers three modest insights regarding participant experiences that are not well captured in the existing literature.

When I examined the literature, I found that there were two consistent interests through which an analysis of the literature could be framed: (a) what the studies suggested about the quality of participant experiences and (b) how the researchers (through the research itself) conceptualized the participants' experiences. I focused specifically on the experiences of participants engaged in qualitative interviews because this matched the designs of the studies in which I participated.

What Do We Know About How the Substantive Topic of Research Relates to Participants' Experiences?

There were a number of studies that reported on how participants experienced their engagement in studies when the topic of the research was sensitive or drew on participants' earlier traumatic occurrences. In fact, trauma studies were the most prevalent in the literature on participant experience. One reason for this might be that mundane topics or explorations the participant experience seems like it stands right before our eyes, not in need of understanding (Bourdieu, 2003). This makes sense if we think in terms of review board concerns that subjects not be harmed (emotionally or otherwise) through our research. If one is interviewing on traumatic

topics, the risk of referred trauma must be taken into account as a potential harm.

Lowes and Gill (2006) sought to understand the interview experience from their participants' perspectives. They found that subjects articulated some initial uncertainty or anxiety about participating (p. 590), but also expressed a tendency to get involved in the research despite these feelings of apprehension for the sake of others, whom they thought might benefit from the study itself. Moreover, the participants also listed some personal benefits, namely that they appreciated the therapeutic outcomes of being able to talk about their challenges. Despite the impacts of being interviewed on sensitive traumatic experiences happening near to the time of the interview, participants did not report any concern or regret regarding their decision to be included in the study (p. 591).

Along those same lines, Hebenstreit and DePrince (2012) contributed to one of the strongest threads of research on participant experience—explorations of what it is like for victims of trauma to engage in research that targets that trauma specifically. According to their analyses, the 236 women indicated that the benefits of participating outweighed the costs. There was one interesting, unexpected finding associated with the qualitative data of the study: 11.9% of the respondents reported feeling as if "they had [emphasis added] to participate" (one of the options on the survey) despite being told by researchers that participation was optional and could be discontinued at any time (p. 66). The data they collected and analyzed were unable to explain why the participants felt this responsibility.

Most research studies exact a cost on time and energy from their participants, but some studies also inflict discomfort or pain. What is it like for these participants? Tillman (2009) interviewed a male patient diagnosed with peripheral arterial disease (PAD) about his experiences as a medical research participant. The medical treatment research he participated in had some costs (having to maintain an exercise regimen, for example), and yet, he reported that "on the whole" his research experience was "a very positive one" (p. 127). With only one participant, we have to wonder, how typical this response is.

What Do Research Findings Indicate About How Specific Research Practices Impact Participants' Experiences?

Some researchers examined how particular methodological aspects of the studies (like member checking) or particular requirements of research participation itself (like monitoring one's breast-milk production) might impact the experience participants have with the research. This literature provides us with an understanding of how very specific methodological practices (practices that might be integrated into any number of studies) might have particular impacts on the findings of the studies themselves, and on participants' experiences during the studies. Because there is not much literature, we must begin with explorations of some of the interesting points raised to date.

Wu, McClean, Brown, Aschengrau, and Webster (2009) returned to subjects of a breast-milk biomonitoring study to learn about the mothers' experiences with the research. The investigators were particularly interested in whether or not the experience with biomonitoring resulted in early termination of breast-feeding (under the assumption that the biomonitoring was intrusive, unpleasant, and challenging to keep up). What they found through a follow-up questionnaire was "that participation in the biomonitoring study, including reading recruitment materials, providing a breastmilk sample, and learning about individual body burden, did not negatively impact participants' attitudes towards breastfeeding or the duration of breastfeeding" (Wu et al, 2009, p. 6). Findings also suggested that steps researchers took (like providing pro-breast-feeding support materials) mitigated potential negative impacts (Wu et al., 2009, p. 6–9).

Another group of researchers (Watanabe et al., 2011) was concerned about the inherent

limitations of obtaining informed consent in the conduct of biobanking research or projects. Because of the manner in which biobanks work, it would prove unwieldy to communicate directly with subjects whenever a researcher wants to use samples from the bank. Researchers found that participants' willingness to live with a lack of clarity about how their samples would be used by researchers was directly linked to the extent to which they "trusted" the particular researchers with whom they were in contact. This finding might jibe with the findings of Green et al (2007) where participants lied on surveys, but opened up to the interviewer when trust was established.

This study points out that informed consent practices are buttressed by the need for participants to trust researchers. Equally as important, in my mind, is that participants' praxis needs were not met when the loop of information or knowledge was not closed (This idea of praxis is discussed more closely in a subsequent section.) Subjects wanted, minimally, to hear about the findings of studies conducted using biobank data. Studies that looked at the motivation of participants for consenting to the research found that, overwhelmingly and consistently, participants were motivated for altruistic reasons—to find answers to their own challenges in order to help others (Watanabe et al., 2011). When subjects never see the fruits of their labor, in terms of the knowledge produced, praxis may not been achieved for them.

Priebe, Bäckström, and Ainsaar (2010) noted through their review of the literature that qualitative studies invited increased opportunities and demands for therapeutic concerns to directly arise in conjunction with the methodology because, as Birch and Miller (2000) pointed out, qualitative inquiry invites "intimacy." It seems more likely, then, that research that directly engages the subjectivity of participants will, potentially, have more of an impact on them. This could be the case for focus group research, ethnography, participatory action research, and other forms of qualitative research, which bring the researcher into regular and intimate contact with participants. Yet, very little documentation is available assessing these impacts for participants.

Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, and Neuman (2011) investigated what it meant to share qualitative research findings with participants through member checking. Goldblatt et al. (2011) reported four examples from different research studies; each example highlighted an interesting challenge in the use of member checking. The findings suggested that member checks might not be a good way to establish credibility. However, what the authors did not point out is the extent to which the four examples of problems they articulated were also connected in important ways to the identities of the participants. This examples they articulated support the point that participants can reflect on their own behavior (feel embarrassed because of the way they acted, as was the point in example 1), shift their perspective on an experience so much so that the earlier perspective seems foreign (as was the issue in example 2), find ways to be "good" participants so they seek to please the researcher (locating identity claims in relation to the researcher directly, as in example 4), and place themselves in vulnerable positions by speaking with researchers in ways they would not speak in the ordinary life context, particularly with respect to their own ongoing subordinate positions (as in example 3 where patients spoke negatively about their doctors). Each of the four examples clearly problematized the use of member checks solely for the purpose of validating the data. However, the authors simultaneously illustrated the way subjects' identity claims were personally engaged in the member checking process. The potential for consciousness-raising seems ripe, but untapped, in these examples (Korth, 2002). Goldblatt et al. (2011) focused the discussion of their findings on the methodological aspects (do member checks enhance research credibility?) and ethical aspects (do member checks adequately protect human subjects?), but they did not push their findings toward the question of how member checks might have better served participants themselves or what the participants' experiences of member checking was. Koelsch (2013) examined the use of member checking as a validity strategy by raising the point that participants are not static and should not be expected to hold the same perspectives as they

did at the time of the study. Goldblatt et al. (2011) raised the point that people can change sufficiently enough that their experiences are completely reinterpreted, Glodblatt's conclusions can be contrasted with Koelsch (2013) who was concerned with how participants produce intentional re-interpretations through active reflection. Koelsch (2013) conducted member-checking interviews with women who participated with her in a qualitative interview study, and she concluded, "participants were able to reflect on how their participation in the study affected their thoughts and/or behaviours" (p. 175). This is interesting and deserves more attention.

What Is It Like for Subjects to Participate in Qualitative Interviews?

"[Q]ualitative interviewing ideally solicits the participant's perspective while eschewing judgment. Our impressions were that participants [in our interview studies] felt relief as a result of openly discussing stigmatizing and traumatizing events" (McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007, p. 343). McCoyd and Shdaimah (2007) conducted research aimed at "examining whether qualitative interviews provide research participants with any benefits beyond the intended academic and practice use of such research" (p. 340). The results of their study indicated that there are "personal and political implications (both positive and negative) for research participants" (p. 340). Their analysis identified three potential effects: "(1) the validation of being understood and of having one's story heard in full without judgment; (2) the chance to have one's story joined with others in such a way as to create a 'voice' on a topic of shared experiences, and (3) the knowledge that findings will be published and communicated to providers, policymakers, and the public" (McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007, P. 347). These results were consistent with categories Ortiz (1995) had previously articulated. McCoyd and Shdaimah (2007) offered up explanations for why these positive effects might have been found through qualitative interviews. First, they said that "participants generally want to please and are reluctant to offend by reporting discomfort and other negative outcomes" (p. 347). Second, they said that, perhaps, "people who voluntarily participate in research studies may represent" (p. 347) a selection bias in favor of those who had more positive things to say about the research. These speculations are, themselves, interesting.

Koelsch (2013) conducted a yearlong interview study with women on the topic of unwanted or nonconsensual sexual experiences. Her main point was to better understand how member checking could contribute to validity, but what interested me were the insights her article provided about how women trusted her and experienced their participation in the study through that trust, how women anticipated good outcomes for others (contributions of the study to our knowledge), and how women changed through self-reflection. This kind of finding deserves further study.

Conceptualizations of Research Participant Experiences

In this subsection of the article, I would like to reframe the literature. Each of the studies reported above reflects a particular conceptualization of research subject/participant experiences. Often this conceptualization was not made explicit. This review of literature found that most scholars thought about their subject/participant experiences through a cost/benefit approach. Even those who also employed either a relational approach or a critical consciousness-raising approach still used the language of costs and benefits to articulate these other approaches, though the relational and consciousness-raising approaches were implicit in their works. Thus, this section begins by explicating the cost/benefit approach and moves on to discuss relational and critical consciousness-raising approaches found implicit to some of the studies.

Cost/Benefit approach.

Examining the merits of any particular study for the subjects themselves was most commonly accomplished when subjects articulated the costs and benefits of their participation. This way of

thinking about how participants are impacted focuses primarily on how the researcher is collecting data from the participants (including the demands on participants, confidentiality, and so forth). For example, Tillman (2009) wrote,

"The interviewee's experience of participating in a research study was, on the whole, a very positive one. The most difficult aspects of the study for him were following the exercise prescription when it became more challenging and sacrificing his time to come in for training 3 days a week. However, in his view the rewards were worth the work [emphasis added]." (p. 127)

Zhang and Moore (2005) conducted a study to examine participant experiences when deception was part of the research process. Zhang and Moore (2005) assessed their subjects' experiences through the cost/benefit approach, complicating this by adding in their own view of what was beneficial. For example, they reported that a "new perspective, increased empathy, and heightened awareness of the impact of deception were desirable outcomes in students [subjects]" (p. 157). Though not all subjects reported these experiences, 20 of the 24 claimed that "the overall benefit of the deception in class outweighed the cost" (p. 157). The costs included feeling embarrassed and angry at having been tricked (p. 157).

A number of studies have talked about the altruistic motivations of participants, and researchers have pointed out that both the personal insights gained and the expectation that others will gain something from the findings are benefits that easily outweigh costs to time/energy, and initial negative affective experiences (stress, anger, etc.) (Lowes & Gill, 2006; Watanabe et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2009). This indicates that the costs are not so equally compared with the benefits because participant motivations will set these in balance with one another.

Ethical standards encourage researchers to minimize harm, but this maxim gets translated institutionally into cost (risk)/benefit terms. It is common for those who either explicitly or implicitly conceptualize subjects' experiences from a cost/benefit perspective to ask participants themselves to comment on a listing out of the specific benefits and the specific costs. The basic assumption of the approach is that subjects can recognize and articulate the balance of costs to benefits and that after doing so, if the benefits outweigh the costs, the participants' experiences are counted as positive and vice versa. Some scholars have generalized from such research findings to make statements about the merits of the research practices or to raise concerns about research practices. Decker, Naugle, Carter-Visscher, Bell, and Sifert (2011) examined ethical issues involved in conducting studies on sensitive topics. They did this by explicitly investigating participants' experiences with distress (as a cost) in comparison with "benefits" concluding that benefits outweighed the costs of distress. They counted as participant benefits "learning something about themselves" and the feeling that their participation could help others (p. 60).

One of the problems with the way this cost/benefit conceptualization is applied in research is that participants are all treated as if the same cost/benefit analysis might apply in a particular context. Sikweyiya and Jewkes (2012) remind us that the costs (and possibly the benefits, too) can entail ripple effects outside the research context, while still being linked to the research itself. Variations across race and socioeconomic status have also been found. Another problem with this cost/benefit conceptualization is that subjects are assumed to be able to explicate costs and benefits for researchers. It is difficult to know the extent to which subjects are not able to do this. Self-report is often accepted as adequate, even though evidence suggests that participants might be dishonest on surveys and questionnaires (Green et al, 2007) and potentially unaware of the risks and benefits, which are socially taken for granted. Finally, the cost/benefit analysis limits the way experiences are interpreted without discussing the values or norms involved in the identification of benefits and the experience of costs. For example, researchers considered inconvenience a cost to participants (Wu et al., 2009) even though ideas about convenience and inconvenience would be culturally value-dependent.

The relational approach.

In the relational approach, the participants' experiences were interpreted through the juxtaposition of the relationship between the researchers and the participants themselves. Some have characterized the relationship as "intimate" (Birch & Miller, 2000), non-judgmental (McCoyd & Shdaimah, 2007), and democratically impassioned (Ritchie & Barker, 2005). Other scholars have characterized the relationship in terms of the power dynamics (Goldblatt et al., 2011). The power dynamics privilege the researcher and may explain why participants provide largely positive feedback to researchers regarding their experiences. When taking a relational approach to understanding participants' experiences, researchers are interested in trust, intimacy, equality, and participatory structures through which the participant is engaged with the researcher in the research encounter. In the literature, this approach is best exemplified by McCoyd and Shdaimah (2007), though even they talked about the outcomes of the relationship as "benefits." In addition, Lowes and Gill (2006) implicitly conceptualized the participants' experiences relationally, though, in the end, their conclusions were punctuated through the framing language of cost/benefit.

The critical consciousness-raising approach.

The critical consciousness-raising approach examines participant experiences from the perspective of what becomes new in their thinking, their self-reflections, and their consciousness (Koelsch, 2013; Korth, 2002). Recall that Zhang and Moore (2005) reported that their participants gained a "new perspective, increased empathy, and heightened awareness of the impact of deception [in research]" (p. 157) as a result of the study. These changes might well relate to the idea that consciousness-raising can be a way of conceptualizing participants' experiences, but in this case, consciousness-raising was treated as a benefit and not as an approach to understanding participant experience. Zhang and Moore (2005) had a particularly educative motivation for their study, but the experiment itself was challenged by the power the researcher held over the participants who were his students. The results of the study cannot be considered free of validity problems, but the critical consciousness-raising approach was implicated in the purpose they had for studying their subjects' experiences. Though several studies reported that acquiring new insights and new ways of thinking about one's life was something their participants experienced (particularly those involved in studies of trauma), these consciousness-raising outcomes were framed as benefits rather than constituting an approach for conceptualizing the research participant experience itself.

General Insights from the Literature: A Preliminary Set of Conclusions

From the literature we can derive some insights worth further investigation. First of all, the cost/benefit approach to thinking about participant experience (and as guided by review boards) is insufficient for the task of really understanding participant experience. Second, most of what we know about research participant experience comes from the researchers themselves checking with participants. This is a good thing to do, but may also be insufficient on an empirical level. If we really want to better understand participant experiences, it would be best to deliberately study that, drawing participants from other people's studies. Third, it seems that participants are largely motivated by altruistic reasons and that their altruism might not typically be acknowledged or fulfilled, especially since it is unusual for participants to receive final reports or have the outcomes of the study shared with them. Last, the relationship between the researcher and the participants will affect the participant's experience. This point is not a new one in discussions on validity, but it takes on a new frame when it is examined from the perspective of how the participant's experience is affected.

Reflections on My Own Experiences as a Novice Research Participant

The opportunity to take part in two studies as a participant gives me reason to challenge the literature as it stands. In fact, my experiences help to shed light on some of the insights garnered through the literature. In this section of the article, I want to briefly describe my experiences and then simultaneously challenge the literature.

How I Got Interested in This Issue

For over 15 years now, I have been conducting qualitative studies. Only recently have I served as a participant. Talk about turning the table! I participated in two qualitative interview studies. In my opinion, the researchers behaved well above admirable because they did everything one would hope in terms of treating me with respect, honoring my responses, and they went beyond the typical member checking (Goldblatt et al., 2011) by additionally offering me an opportunity to read their final write-ups. Yet, my experience as a participant was complicated in ways I felt I had to hide. This tweaked my interest in better understanding how participants experience and engage within a qualitative inquiry project. Frankly, though I was aware that there were problems with member checking as a validity strategy, I was not really aware of other complications and problems that might riddle the research as a result of not understanding participant experience in a very detailed way. Among qualitative inquiries, participatory action research designs afford (require) an ongoing and systematic inquiry into participants' experiences with the research process itself. Most other qualitative inquiries have not attained that level of engagement with participant experiences or at least are not publishing accounts of their participants' experiences. There are few published accounts or studies of participants' experiences, and nearly all of those that are published involve researchers returning to participants in their own studies. In addition to the value that a better understanding of participant experiences offers researchers, I think that this better understanding could also help in preparing researchers for the field.

I participated in two interview studies exploring spiritual experiences and research ethics, respectively. These two opportunities provided me with the most in-depth research involvement I have had to date in the role of participant. In both studies, I was interviewed twice, accepted the opportunity to provide member checks on the transcriptions of the interviews and on the analyses, reviewed and commented on reports of findings, and witnessed public presentations of the findings. The first study was an exploration of people's stories about spiritual experiences. In my second interview for that study, I mentioned having felt "self-conscious" in the previous interview. I explained to the researcher that I was worried it would be easy to misunderstand me and that I feared what others might make of my experiences. I was also worried about how the interviewer herself might interpret my stories and relate them to her own. As I was preparing this article, I found that I was not alone and that these concerns had some justification. Green, Bishkoff, Coleman, Sperry, and Robinson-Zaňartu (2007) and Sykes and Piper (2010) found that participants were willingly dishonest in order to try to mediate similar worries. For example, participants willingly agreed with researcher interpretations and prompts even when they were not an accurate reflection of the participant's own experiences. Also, Mulholland and Wallace (2003) found that researchers tended to interpret their participants' experiences using their own life experiences. My initial angst served as a catalyst for me to reflect in fresh ways on my own experiences. By the end of this particular research process, my interest turned toward the subtle aspects of a participant's encounter with research.

Later, I was invited to participate in another qualitative interview study with a different researcher who wanted to examine the ethical perspectives of established educational researchers. This further engaged me in reflecting on the research from the perspective of the participant. I started to imagine that a better understanding of what inquiry engagement was like for participants could inform my own research practices and also my inquiry teaching. As I said, the studies I

participated in were qualitative interview studies so were not a direct match with my own ethnographic research practices; yet, the insights are relevant to ethnography and qualitative social science more broadly speaking.

A General Description of My Experiences

My own experiences with both studies consisted of the following: (a) participating in interviews, (b) providing member checks on the analyses, (c) reading the articles that reported findings, and (c) attending presentations of the findings. My experience consistently toggled between being aware of my self-as-participant and my self-as-teller-of-my-own-stories (Strauss, 2009). The motivations and presumed audiences were different as were the identity-securing orientations involved in those two orientations for acting.

In alignment with what has been reported in the literature, my initial motivation for participating in the studies was also altruistic. That is, I wanted to help the researchers out and I was fairly convinced I could do that. Despite my work as an ethnographer, I did not enter the research expecting any particular outcomes related to my own consciousness-raising (Korth, 2002) or catharsis, but in both studies, I reaped personal benefits from having the opportunity to reflect on my stories. I found telling those stories to non-judgmental, open and attentive listeners was, indeed, quite satisfying. Moreover, when I thought that what I was saying might also prove valuable or interesting for the researcher, then my original motivation was also satisfied. These two general motivations can be connected to the way my participation also met my own praxis needs. That is, if fashioning myself through my stories and through my successful participation in inquiry gives me an opportunity for mutual social recognition, then my praxis needs were being attended to.

For me, there were two aspects of my conscious engagement with the interviews. One of those was an engrossed experience where I was authoring my stories, telling them to a willing, interested, and non-judgmental listener. During these times, my attention to myself specifically as a research participant was background context. But then, being a research participant would come to the foreground, and with it, more attentiveness and purposefulness related to the identity claims I was making for the researcher. That is, I was claiming myself to be a particular kind of person with the researcher as my specific audience. By engaging in this way I was assuming that to understand me meant that the researcher or others would see "me" as a "good, okay, appropriate, acceptable, sensible person." As the teller of my own stories, this "good, okay, appropriate, acceptable, sensible person" who is telling the stories, is not necessarily the "me" who was presented as the main character in my own stories. As research participant, this "good, okay, appropriate, acceptable, sensible person" was someone who performed the research tasks well, monitored for how the stories might be interpreted by others, and took the goals of the research seriously. The story was interesting enough to the researcher, that what it meant for me to be a participant seemed to get lost. But, my self-characters in the stories, for example, took the form of a scared 12-year-old girl, a blundering ethnographer, and a balancing academic.

"Being understood" as praxis.

When I am at least tacitly recognized by the researcher as a "good, okay, appropriate, acceptable, sensible person," my own praxis needs are met. This recognition is, of course, challenged or vulnerable at various points in the research process, but in different ways. During the interview phase of the research process, if the interviewer does not listen to me very well, or if my stories are taken up in a judgmental way, then this potential praxis is put at risk. Another way that praxis might be jeopardized during the research process is if I cannot tell the stories the way I need or want to. For the study of spiritual experiences, I started off the first interview talking about an event that happened when I was 4 or 5-years-old. For me, this event was worth telling because of its relationship to other subsequent events. The researcher just kept probing this one experience,

but I felt as if the real story I wanted to tell was being silenced. This first event was only part of a larger set of occurrences. This never came out in the interview. Consequently, the analysis, the report of findings, and so forth, situated my 5-year-old event as primary to my religious life story when I would not characterize it that way. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked me if there was more I would like to say, but at that point, we had gone for over an hour and I knew this question signaled the end of the interview. To say what else I wanted to say would have taken a long time, so, I responded with, "No, thanks." When I did a member check on the interview, I only reviewed the transcript for its accuracy, not for this problem. During the second interview I was able to make my stories more understood and I experienced praxis in the telling of the stories.

When I conducted member checks on the analyses for both research projects, my comments were primarily about clarifying what I meant in particular instances, but not about what I left out, how I felt, and so forth, which would have complicated how I was being understood in the project. In other words, the focus of the member checking had more to do with the specific words offered as they were in the text than it did with making sure the researchers understood me. Had the member checks focused more on how I was being understood, it would have better grasped how I experienced my participation.

Making myself know or "dramaturgical action."

As I read the reports of findings, I was oriented toward making sure that possible interpretations of "me" matched my intentions and my self-understanding. That is, I wanted the studies to leave people with impressions about me (as a "good, okay, appropriate, acceptable, sensible person," in general) that jibed with how I aimed to represent myself. For example, in the second study on research ethics, the researcher wrote: "Participant 1 had basically judged him to be a bad teacher [referring to one of the participants in my study] …" I provided the following comments in my member check: "Well, I don't think I thought of him as a bad teacher, but I did think it was quite likely that I didn't understand how his behavior could be considered consistent with being a good teacher. And I thought these particular attitudes and behaviors were not good." In my interview, I had described an ethical dilemma in a recent ethnography I conducted. The dilemma involved observing a teacher treat a student in way that I found offensive and the dilemma involved my not knowing for sure what to do about this. Though the person researching my experiences did not actually incorrectly portray the information, you can see from my comments that I wanted to be portrayed as someone who was not judgmental, as someone capable of acknowledging that I might be wrong in my assessment of the teacher. Earlier in my career I disagreed with a teacher's actions in the classroom, but when I talked with the teacher I realized that there were aspects of her action that I had not fully understood (Korth, 2002). From that experience, I learned that I must first try to see the situation from the perspective of the actor herself. This lesson was important to how I came to think of myself as a researcher and, also, to how I want myself portrayed. My picky, detailed response was an indicator of how much I wanted to set the record straight on this somewhat irrelevant point—relevant primarily to my own identity claiming.

Habermas (1985), drawing on Goffman (1990), linked claims subjects make about their own subjectivity with dramaturgical action. The idea is that actors will orient their presentation of self in everyday life by anticipating how an audience will interpret that presentation to mean something about their feelings, states of consciousness, intentions, and desires. These are characteristics of the subject that an audience cannot possibly know through direct means. Dramaturgical action seemed to be foregrounded in my action orientations when the research process itself was foregrounded, more precisely when I was experiencing my "self-as-research-participant." This performance of self was there in the background when I would find myself lost in the "storying" of my life, but as soon as the research context was put into view again, I would find dramaturgical action was more purposefully engaged, as was the case when I was doing a

member check or was being asked to specifically reflect on the research process in the presence of the researcher.

Contrast between facts and interpretations.

In the research process one is consistently expected to indicate objectively verifiable information. When one is providing a member check on the data one is largely offering consent to the facts of the data (Goldblatt et al., 2011). Facts are also interpretive, but in our experience of verifying facts—I am basically being asked whether or not I actually said something, but the truth is not quite that simple. Sometimes even though the audio-recorder can verify that I did say such and such, I might not have meant to say that. Sometimes the words actually come out wrong in relation to what we thought we were saying or intended to say. Nevertheless, responding to the request for a member check in this way emphasizes either the facticity or the potential problems in the match between what I said and what I intended to say. However, as soon as one provides feedback on analyses, findings, or research products (such as articles or presentations), then one is involved in interpreting the perspective of the researchers. This is the part that proved most challenging for me because it involved me judging the success of the researcher at interpreting "me," not just judging the facticity of what I said. During the interview on spirituality, the researcher often interpreted my comments as a reference to "the [spiritual] one." Though this was not entirely incorrect, the feeling I had at the time was that this is what the researcher wanted my words to mean. I did not use that phrase myself and I found it slightly off-putting when she would say it back to me. I thought that she was really committed to this idea of "the one" and I felt uneasy destabilizing that for her.

Insights for the Literature from My Experiences

There were three main problems with the literature that really come into view when juxtaposed with my experiences as a research participant. *First*, we find that the cost/benefit approach to making sense of participant experiences, which is limited philosophically and empirically, is also not aligned with the way I experienced my own participation. While it certainly would be possible for me to answer a question such as "What were the costs, from your point of view, of participating in the study?" Or "What do you see as the benefits of your own participation?" Or, even, "Do the benefits outweigh the costs of your participation?" None of these questions has much to do with the way I would talk about my research participation. In fact, if a study of my participation boiled down to a proclamation that indeed the benefits of participating outweighed the costs, my praxis needs as a participant would not be met. My real motivation for participating would not be recognized. In trauma research, the experience of reliving the trauma was listed as a cost, but the benefit of catharsis from reliving the trauma through the retelling of the story to a good listener means that I did not just "relive the trauma" —I did so cathartically. How can this then be articulated as both benefit and cost without clear philosophical understanding of what benefits and costs are? How do praxis needs figure into the cost/benefit analysis?

In the Wu et al. (2009) and Watanabe et al. (2011) studies, participants experienced physical costs (time, energy, loss of body fluid, for example), but the benefits were not cast in those terms. So there was a disjuncture between the types of cost and the types of benefit. I wonder what the findings might look like if we were to think of the costs in this case as part of the conditions of participation and then interpret the experiences given those conditions. It was not easy for me to find the time to participate, but I would not have thought about this intuitively as a "cost" unless someone asked me to list the costs of participating. I just thought of the time involved as a condition. Earlier I mentioned that in the first study, I felt limited by time constraints. Remember that when the researcher asked me if I had anything else to say, though I had not told the story in the way I wanted, I said, "No, thanks." I meant, "No, given the time constraint. Thanks." It isn't philosophically or empirically clear why the things listed as costs ought to actually be thought of

that way. Time constraints and their impact on participant experiences should be more rigorously studied.

Second, the power dynamics involved in the conduct of most social science research complicates an exploration into the participants' experiences in ways that are similar to the complications described for research in general. This would be particularly the case when the researchers who conducted the original study are involved in the secondary level of inquiry into participant experiences. I was not asked outside of the member checking to provide any kind of feedback to the researchers. Reflecting on it now, free of the researchers' constructs, has allowed me to tell the story in my own way. None of the studies reported in the literature worked in this way. Researchers asked their own participants about their experiences and they did so largely through researcher-driven means—surveys, interviews, and essays mostly with the same researcher conducting both the primary and secondary studies. This problem is perhaps most evident in the study conducted by Zhang and Moore (2005) and the comments offered by Tillman (2009). In the Zhang and Moore (2005) study, students who were deceived by the teacher, were asked by the teacher 2 weeks later to voluntarily describe their experience with the class experiment. It was no surprise that Zhang and Moore reported positive experiences such as "I thought the demonstration was a good idea" (p. 157) and "Some people were mad but I think if they weren't then it would not have been as effective" (p. 157). Tillman (2005) almost gleefully reports that "Overall, this research participant's experience was a good one and, as a research assistant, I sincerely hope that this is the norm" (p.128). She goes on to say that her participant had a "message for all those researchers out there: 'Keep doing what you're doing. Your work as a researcher is appreciated.'" (p.128). Such positive comments cannot be separated in their interpretation from the unequal dynamics of the research encounter as well as the interpersonal pressure to please one another that is common in such encounters in the U.S.

If I had been asked to comment on my research experiences by the researchers themselves, it would have been difficult to respond in a fully genuine way. I doubt I would have said anything to the first researcher about wanting to tell a larger story. As researchers, we need to better understand what would motivate a person to participate in the researcher's reflections on the research process and we need to find ways to do this so that any effects of power that might have riddled the original study are not automatically invoked in the secondary inquiry. Because in my case the secondary investigation was not directed by the original researchers, I was freer to explore the experience without the interpersonal responsibility I would feel if this investigation were taking place under their facilitation. Both researchers know I am writing this article, but the constructs used to process and conceptualize my experience has been left entirely up to me.

Third, the literature largely lacks a philosophical or theoretical foundation. The empirical literature reports what participants say about their experiences (usually through interviews, but, also, through surveys), with no theory about what to expect, why responses might look such and such a way, or what link might be evidenced between participant experience and epistemological bases for inquiry. The cost/benefit analysis most commonly used to frame the findings and discussions is not theorized. In fact, it is in these studies that this absence of theory seems to jump off the page. This is because a cost/benefit approach to understanding people's subjective experiences generally contradicts one's conceptualization of subjectivity itself. My own look into the experiences I had was informed by Mead's (1934) theory of the self and by critical pragmatism (Habermas, 1985, 1987; Tugendhat, 1989). While it is not really the point of this article to build an argument about these theoretical perspectives, the point is that I could not have conducted the analysis of my own experience in the absence of theory. This theory should be explicated when an investigation is undertaken using its principles. Scholars, by and large, failed to do this in the literature I reviewed.

Brief Concluding Remarks

I offer this article as an opportunity to expand our thinking of participant experiences. Though more questions than answers surface at this point, the article makes a contribution by organizing a loosely arrayed collection of literature and juxtaposing this with an exploration of my own experiences as a participant, which undoubtedly benefits from my knowledge of research itself. Studies of research participants' experiences are limited theoretically because underlying theories are not being articulated. The studies are also limited empirically because there are too few of them; for the most part, researchers are studying their own participants, and conceptualizations of one's experiences is limited largely to a cost/benefit analysis. My own experiences suggest that praxis, identity claiming, and a distinction between facts and interpretations are central to understanding what it was like for me to participate in these two qualitative interview studies. The problematic characteristics of contemporary studies of participants' experiences would inhibit such explorations.

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