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Great  
Work!

## FOR WHOM?

Qualitative Research, Representations,  
and Social Responsibilities◆ Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen,  
and Loonmun Wong

I grew up in a world in which talking about somebody's mama was a way of life, an everyday occurrence. For all of us, boys and girls, it was a kind of game or performance. Whether we called it "capping," "snapping," "ranking," "busting," or simply "the dozens," most of it was ridiculous, surreal humor bearing very little resemblance to reality: "Your mom's so fat she broke the food chain"; "Your mama's skin's so ashy she was a stand-in for Casper the Friendly Ghost"; "Your mama's so dumb she thought ring-around-the-collar was a children's game." More than anything, it was an effort to master the absurd metaphor, an art form intended to entertain rather than to damage. . . .

You would think that as a kid growing up in this world I could handle any insult, or at least be prepared for any slander tossed in the direction of my mom—or, for that matter, my whole family, my friends, or my friends' families. But when I entered college and began reading the newspaper, monographs, and textbooks on a regular basis, I realized that many academics, journalists, policymakers, and politicians had taken the "dozens" to another level. In all my years of playing the dozens, I have rarely heard vitriol as vicious as the words spouted by Riverside (California) county welfare director Lawrence Townsend: "Every time I see a bag lady on the street, I wonder, 'Was that an A.F.D.C. mother

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who hit the menopause wall—who can no longer reproduce and get money to support herself?” I have had kids tell me that my hair was so nappy it looked like a thousand Africans giving the Black Power salute, but never has anyone said to my face that my whole family—especially my mama—was a “tangle of pathology.” Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan has been saying it since 1965 and, like the one about your mama tying a mattress to her back and offering “roadside service,” Moynihan’s “snap” has been repeated by legions of analysts and politicians, including Dinesh D’Souza, the boy wonder of the far Right. (Kelly, 1997, pp. 1-2)

In this essay, we work through the decisions we made about how to represent the consequences of poverty on the lives of poor and working-class men and women in times of punishing surveillance and scrutiny by the state. We have discussed some of these issues—alternately called *ethics*, *dilemmas*, and simply *research*—with friends and colleagues. Some think we make “much ado about nothing.” Others are relieved that we are “saying aloud” this next generation of troubles. Many wish we would continue to hide under the somewhat transparent robe of qualitative research. And yet we are compelled to try to move a public conversation about researchers and responsibilities toward a sense of research for social justice.

Because we write between poor communities and social policy at a time of Right-wing triumph, and because we seek to be taken seriously by both audiences, we know it is essential to think through the power, obligations, and responsibilities of social research. Entering the contemporary montage of perverse representations of poor and working-class men and women, especially people of color, we write with and for community organizers, policy makers, local activists, the public, and graduate students.

This chapter represents a concrete analysis—an update, perhaps—of what Michelle Fine (1994) has called “working the hyphen”:

Much of qualitative research has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the “Other.” This essay is an attempt to review how qualitative research projects have Othered and to examine an emergent set of activist and/or

postmodern texts that interrupt *Othering*. First, I examine the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others. I then take up how qualitative researchers work this hyphen . . . [through] a messy series of questions about methods, ethics, and epistemologies as we rethink how researchers have spoken “of” and “for” Others while occluding ourselves and our own investments, burying the contradictions that percolate at the Self-Other hyphen. (p. 70)

We seek not necessarily to engage in simple reflexivity about how our many selves (Jewish, Asian, Canadian, woman, man, straight, gay) coproduce the empirical materials on which we report, although clearly that is an important piece of work (see Weis & Fine, in press). Instead, we gather here a set of self-reflective points of critical consciousness around the questions of how to represent responsibility, that is, transform public consciousness and “common sense” about the poor and working classes, write in ways that attach lives to racial structures and economies, and construct stories and analyses that interrupt and reframe the victim-blaming mantras of the 1990s.

Writing against the grain, we thought it would be useful to speak aloud about the politics and scholarship of decisions we have made.

### ◆ *Flexing Our Reflexivities*

In the social sciences, both historically and currently, the relationship between researcher and subject has been “obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions” (Fine, 1994, p. 72). There has long been a tendency to view the self of the social science observer as a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled. This bracketing of the researcher’s world is evident in social science’s historically dominant literary style (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995), which is predicated on a “clarion renunciation” of the subjective or personal as-

pects of experience (Morawski & Bayer, 1995), particularly those of researchers. As Ruth Behar (1993) explains, "We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable" (p. 273). Our informants are then left carrying the burden of representations as we hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality.

Although it may be true that researchers are never absent from our texts, the problem of just how to "write the self [and, we would add, our political reflexivities] into the text" (Billig, 1994, p. 326) remains. Simply briefly inserting autobiographical or personal information often serves to establish and assert the researcher's authority, and ultimately produces texts "from which the self has been sanitised" (Okely, 1992, p. 5). But flooding the text with ruminations on the researcher's subjectivities also has the potential to silence participants/"subjects" (Lal, 1996).

It should also be pointed out that a call for the inclusion of subjective experience of the researcher into what has traditionally been conceived of as subject matter bears different implications for differently situated researchers. In the hands of relatively privileged researchers studying those whose experiences have been marginalized, the reflexive mode's potential to silence subjects is of particular concern. It is easy for reflexivity to slip into what Patricia Clough (1992) has called a "compulsive extroversion of interiority" (p. 63). In the words of Renato Rosaldo (1989), "If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other" (p. 7). Yet from an entirely different and overlapping perspective, some critical race theorists (e.g., Ladner, 1971; Lawrence, 1995; Matsuda, 1995) have suggested that for people of color whose stories have not been told, "the assertion of our subjective presence as creators and interpreters of text [is a] political act" (Lawrence, 1995, p. 349). According to Donna Haraway (1991), "Vision is always a question of the power to see—

and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices" (p. 192); who is afforded—or appropriates—this power to see and speak about what is seen as well as what is hidden from scrutiny is a question that is at the heart of our examinations of our social responsibilities to write and re-present in a time of ideological assault on the poor. Thus we seek to narrate a form of reflexivity in our concerns with representation and responsibilities in these very mean times.

### ♦ The Textual Subject

In the remainder of this chapter, we reflect on the materials drawn for a book written by Michelle Fine and Lois Weis about poor and working-class city dwellers at the end of the 20th century, The Unknown City (1998). In this work, Michelle and Lois center the voices, politics, disappointments, and hopes of young urban adults. These men and women—African American, white, and Latino/Latina, poor and working-class—render oral histories of their struggles, victories, and passions, detailing lives filled with work (and its absence), schooling, family life, spirituality, sexuality, violence on the streets and in their homes, and social movements that seem no longer vibrant. Our analyses suggest that these young adults, men and women, constitute an unknown, unheard-from, and negatively represented constituency of the American democracy. Between the ages of 23 and 35, with neither the resources nor the sense of entitlement typically narrated by members of Generation X, they have been displayed and dissected in the media as the cause of national problems. Depicted as being the reason for the rise in urban crime, they are cast as if they embody the necessity for welfare reform, as if they sit at the heart of moral decay. Although much of contemporary social policy is designed to "fix" them, our investigation reveals that they have much to say back to policy makers and the rest of America.

The late 1990s witnessed a flood of books written about and sometimes despite those who

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have been grouped together as the poor and working class. But the members of this group, particularly the young, are fundamentally unknown, at once quite visible as "moral spectacle" (Roman, 1997) and yet fundamentally invisible (A. J. Franklin, personal communication, October 14, 1997). As our nation walks away from their needs, desires, strengths, and yearnings, we abandon a generation. Millions of poor and working-class children continue to grow up amid the wreckage of global corporate restructuring, in the shadows of once-bustling urban factories, reinvigorated U.S. nationalism and racism, and a wholesale depletion of the public safety net, at the same time witnessing increasing violence in their communities and often in their homes. And mostly, they blame themselves and each other. The state retreat from the social good and corporate flight from urban centers, the North, and the United States are shockingly absent as blame is doled out. As calls to reverse civil rights, affirmative action, welfare, and immigration policies gain momentum, it is noteworthy that the voices of the men and women in the poor and working classes are never heard.

*The Unknown City* reveals not only common pains among members of the poor and the working class, but a deeply fractured urban America in the late 20th century. In spite of legislation and social politics designed to lessen inequality and promote social cohesion in the 1960s, we stand as a nation in the late 1990s deeply divided along racial, ethnic, social class, and gender lines. Our goals in conducting the research for *The Unknown City*, then, were to examine the commonalities among Americans and the fractured nature of U.S. society, focusing on what we call "communities of difference," as low-income people settle for crumbs in one of the richest nations in the world. We sought, further, to place these voices at the center of national debates about social policy rather than at the margin, where they currently stand. This chapter consciously reflects back on the work of writing that book—the headaches and struggles we experienced as we entered the battle of representations happening on, about, and despite but rarely with poor and working-class urban dwellers at the end of the 20th century. Amid economic dislocation and a contracted public sphere, we seek to

re-present men and women navigating lives of joy and disappointment, anger and laughter, despair and prayer.

Much as we sought to escape the narrow confines of demographic, essentialist categories, what we heard from both Jersey City and Buffalo tended to bring us back to these categories. That is, much as we all know, read, teach, and write about race, class, and gender as social constructions (see Fine, Powell, Weis, & Wong, 1997), loaded with power and complexity, always in quotation marks, when we listened to the taped interviews with African American men living in Jersey City or Buffalo, they were strikingly different from those of white men, or Latinas, or African American women. Indeed, both the very distinct material bases and cumulative historical circumstances of each of these groups and the enormous variety "within" categories demanded intellectual and political respect. So we tell the "big story" of people living in poverty as well as the particular stories narrated through gender, race, and ethnicity. Thus we write with and through poststructural understandings of identity and possibility, ever returning to "common" material bases (the economy, state, and the body) as we move through the nuances of "differences."

### ◆ On Framing the Work

#### On Community

Perhaps our most vexing theoretical dilemma swirled around the question, So, what constitutes a community? How do we write about real estate, land-bounded communities like Buffalo or Jersey City, geographically valid, zip-code-varied, "real" spaces in which we nevertheless found so little in the way of psychologically or socially shared biographies or visions?

We recognized from our theoretical interests, confirmed by the narratives we collected, that profound fractures, and variation, cut through lives within these communities. Simple demographic nuances, by race/ethnicity, gender, class, generation, and sexuality marked dramatic dis-

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