

# Introduction: Reflections on Methodology in Literacy Studies

**Gesa E. Kirsch**

Wayne State University

**Peter Mortensen**

University of Kentucky

Qualitative approaches to research—ethnographies and case studies in particular—continue to gain prominence in composition studies as researchers strive to enrich our understanding of literacy in its myriad cultural contexts.<sup>1</sup> This arrival of qualitative research has been signaled in many of our professional forums. In recent years, for example, an increasing number of submissions to the NCTE Promising Researcher competition have featured qualitative research methodologies.<sup>2</sup> The *CCCC Bibliography of Composition and Rhetoric* each year lists more and more dissertations that involve case study and ethnographic inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Journals in composition studies seem more willing now than ever to publish segments or summaries of ethnographic fieldwork. And academic publishers are meeting the challenge to bring out qualitative research in long form.<sup>4</sup> Further, teacher research on writing—largely qualitative in nature—is finally receiving due notice, professionally and institutionally.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite the popularity of qualitative research, scholars in composition studies are only beginning to examine the informing assumptions of this work: assumptions that, when analyzed, yield difficult questions about ethics and representation that demand our consideration.

Wendy Bishop recalls that in 1986, while planning an ethnographic study, she felt that she was practically "inventing ethnography"—inventing it in the sense that her only guidance came from texts "written for social scientists and anthropologists" (148). These texts did not address issues of language and literacy in ways that were especially useful to her. Since the mid-1980s, a number of new books have appeared that discuss qualitative research design, and scholars in composition may no longer feel the distress that Bishop did, at least not in terms of procedural questions: the mechanics of gaining access to, making observations in, and collecting data from writing communities. Also, there exist now a number of book-length ethnographic studies in composition that model good practice (e.g., Chiseri-Strater; Cross; Goldblatt; Schaafsma; Sunstein) as well as chapters and articles that render specific methodological advice (e.g., Bleich; Bridwell-Bowles; Brodkey; Calkins; Chin; Cintron; Herndl; Kleine; Moss, *Literacy*). All of this work makes clear the interdisciplinary borrowing that has animated qualitative research in composition. But there remains a pressing need to scrutinize what it means to import, adapt, select, and transform ethnographic and case study methods in order to investigate literacy and writing communities. As Bishop's comment attests, this need is recognized, but unmet.<sup>6</sup> A desirable critical conversation about qualitative research and its theoretical underpinnings cannot be borrowed from other disciplines; the conversation must begin with and be sustained by scholars in composition studies themselves.

One starting point for such a conversation takes us back some fifteen years to a time when composition researchers began sharing critical reflections on conducting and reporting ethnographic studies of literacy. In their 1981 article in *Research in the Teaching*

of *English*, Kenneth Kantor, Dan Kirby, and Judith Goetz comment on the growing popularity of ethnographic studies in English education and composition. After detailing good and bad ethnographic practice, they examine five problems they believe qualitative researchers must account for: "Reliability and Validity," "Interpretive Language," "Data Collection and Analysis," "Correspondences with Experimental Research," and "Resources for Research" (302–05). As these categories suggest, Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz attend mainly to the integrity of *processes* through which observation becomes data, and through which data become report. In only one section do the authors speak directly of the *people* whose literate lives are taken up in qualitative research, and that is in "Data Collection and Analysis." In that section, prospective researchers are urged to choose their "key informants" carefully, for such informants have the potential to greatly enhance the validity of ethnographic narratives (303). Implicit here is that by foregrounding key informants, researchers may maintain a distanced, objective stance—both in the field and in its reconstruction on the page. Throughout the 1980s, this positioning of researcher and subject remained fairly stable in arguments about how to do and how to read qualitative composition research, especially case studies and ethnographies (see, for example, Calkins; Doheny-Farina and Odell; Lauer and Asher 23–53; Myers 9–25; North 273–74; Odell). In recent years, criticism of the positivist assumptions characterized in Kantor, Kirby, and Goetz's article has prompted recastings of qualitative inquiry in composition. The urgency to fix hard standards of reliability, validity, and generalizability has given way to a provocative range of questions about power and representation that are manifest in the field and on the page. Many scholars now assume that interpretation is central to all research, that researchers' values permeate and shape research questions, observations, and conclusions, and that there can be no value-neutral research methodology.<sup>7</sup> With interpretation a crucial issue, researchers must grapple with the rhetorical construction of interpretive authority. And attendant upon rhetorical construction are a host of ethical questions regarding the rights and responsibilities of representation.

This ethical turn springs from developments within several of the intellectual traditions composition scholars routinely draw upon. Take academic feminism, for example. Its practitioners' interest in ethics arises from frustration with a kind of ethical relativism that has often overtaken—and paralyzed—discussions of subjectivity and agency in postmodern theories of culture. And despite great diversity among the various schools of feminisms, most feminists agree on some basic ethical principles, such as that feminist research should aim to validate and improve women's lives, not simply observe and describe them. (For statements about research *for* women rather than *on* women, see Fonow and Cook; Kirsch and Ritchie; Smith.) This commitment to emancipatory goals leads many feminist scholars to reassert the importance of agency, a move that departs from and sometimes stands in opposition to postmodern perspectives. But in so doing, feminists do not propose a return to an unproblematic, unified, Cartesian subject. Instead, feminist scholars recognize the multiple and shifting subject positions we inhabit at work and play, and they aim to develop ethical principles that foreground such questions as the following: Who benefits from the research? Whose interests are at stake? What are the consequences for participants? In developing a feminist ethics, scholars are not generating a foundational code; rather, they are reconceiving ethics with the knowledge that subjects and agency may take many forms within and against normalizing rules of culture.<sup>8</sup> In other words, feminists wish to avoid reinscribing a single ethical code, such as the traditional "ethics of rights," for they recognize the folly of developing "universal principles" that turn out, time and again, not to be universal at all, but to privilege only those values held by a dominant group.

So as a consequence of feminist interventions, as well as (sometimes conflicting)

contributions from poststructural and postcolonial theorists, we have come to recognize how hierarchies and inequalities (marked by gender, race, class, social groupings, and more) are transferred onto and reproduced within participant-researcher relations. On this count, James Porter summarizes pointedly: "Ethics is not a set of answers but a mode of questioning and a manner of positioning" (218).

In *Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, contributors take up this project of questioning and positioning with respect to their own research and the research of others. They reflect on their past and present practice: on how they have addressed (or failed to address) ethical dilemmas, on how they have represented others in the ethnographic narratives they have written, and on the political, institutional, cultural, and gendered contexts in which they have conducted their work. In speaking to a broad range of issues that bear on the representation of literate lives in research reports, contributors to this volume explore questions like the following:

- How do power, authority, and equity figure into researchers' relationships with their subjects? How is the position of the subject defined by the role of the researcher, and vice versa?
- What ethical issues must composition scholars consider when undertaking qualitative research?
- How do researchers' identities and subjectivities (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class) shape their cognition and interpretation of "data" at the site of inquiry?
- How do institutional and historical contexts shape the conduct and outcomes of qualitative research?
- How are ethnographic data transformed into narratives? What happens—what is gained and lost—in this transformation?
- What narrative and rhetorical strategies do authors of ethnographies and case studies invoke in their writing—and toward what ends?

*Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, then, is not so much a "handbook" of qualitative research techniques as it is a book that illuminates the complex ethical and representational questions that are rarely discussed in research manuals. The chapters collected here are amplifications of dialogues already begun in recent articles scattered in composition journals and edited collections. The chapters are also infused with strains of conversations taking place in anthropology and sociology, disciplines in which practitioners have for some time reflected critically on the nature of fieldwork (e.g., Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* or Wolf's *A Thrice-Told Tale*).

The authors in this collection do not all share the same views, nor do they speak with a singular voice. In fact, many differences of opinion are audible within and at the margins of every chapter. For example, Thomas Newkirk, whose chapter opens this book, views the researcher's "consent form," designed to protect participants' rights and choices, as part of the "seduction and betrayal" that participants in qualitative research often suffer. Yet Paul Anderson, whose chapter concludes the book, stresses the importance of consent forms as part of the federal and local regulations aimed at preventing harm to research participants. Somewhere between these two views lies the perspective of Cheri Williams, who notices that the strict guidelines designed to protect the privacy and anonymity of study participants can actually have unanticipated negative effects: she argues that we may lose opportunities to publicly recognize the achievements of research participants who could serve as

important role models in their communities.

Another set of contrasting views is provided by Ann Blakeslee, Caroline Cole, and Theresa Conefrey on the one hand and Roxanne Mountford on the other, all of whom draw on feminist theory in their work. Blakeslee, Cole, and Conefrey contend that there is epistemological and methodological coherence in blending postmodern and feminist stances, and they make this claim by appealing to the authority of social constructionist ideology. But Mountford turns this argument on its head, claiming that much postmodern theorizing—in anthropological circles particularly—focuses on subjects in ways that undermine the very social gains that feminists seek to achieve.

Clearly, our goal is not to provide in this collection a smooth, seamless narrative aimed at containing the discourse on ethics and representation in qualitative research. Rather, we wish to stake out spaces that permit disciplinary dialogue, debate, and dissensus and to bring into public view the many kinds of ethical and representational quandaries researchers tend too often to keep to themselves. But having stressed the diversity of thought exhibited herein it is important also to illuminate one concern contributors in this volume share: all view research as a complex of rhetorical acts, and so they are sensitive to the power of spoken and written words to liberate as well as to regulate experience in public and private life.

In creating a forum for debate and discussion, we hope to provide both new and experienced researchers with the opportunity to better anticipate the conditions and decisions they will encounter in the field. We hope the collection will be especially useful in graduate seminars, introducing advanced students and novice researchers to representational and theoretical issues not readily apparent from reading research reports alone. The book is also intended for composition teachers and writing program administrators interested in learning more about the subtleties of composition research. We want to encourage such teachers and administrators to view their own classrooms and writing programs as sites of inquiry. Finally, we wish to advance methodological know-how in composition studies: knowledge of how to design, conduct, write, and read ethnographic narratives; of how to address ethical and representational questions in qualitative research; of how to think through the tangle of conflicting literacy narratives circulating in our profession, in the academy, and in the culture at large.

*Ethics and Representation in Qualitative Studies of Literacy* is arranged in three sections that address, in order, ethical dilemmas in qualitative research; questions of representation, voice, and subjectivity; and the nature of institutional and social contexts. These issues overlap to a certain extent, as our contributors make quite evident. In fact, for many contributors, particular ethical dilemmas are a point of departure for thinking through subsequent problems of representation. The arrangement of sections, then, is not meant to define static boundaries; section headings are instead signposts that mark the terrain traversed in the collection. Chapters that could fit into more than one section (because they take up several issues) are located at the beginning or end of sections so as to underscore their bridging function.

Part I, *Confronting Ethical Dilemmas*, explores the complex and at times vexing ethical predicaments inherent in qualitative research, such as how to write revealing and "truthful" accounts of fieldwork while also honoring the interests, trust, and privacy of subjects. The chapters in this section illustrate just how common ethical dilemmas are in qualitative research, how difficult they can be to address, and what compromises researchers have had to make in negotiating them.

In "Seduction and Betrayal in Qualitative Research," Thomas Newkirk maintains that the close, even intimate, relationships researchers establish with their subjects constitute a form of seduction. This said, he examines a major ethical quandary faced by qualitative researchers: how to be critical of study participants without violating their trust and (sometimes) friendship. Newkirk observes that when researchers withhold judgment during observations, participants and

researchers lose valuable opportunities for dialogue, growth, and insight. Furthermore, participants often feel betrayed because they only learn about the researcher's judgment from the final report of the study. Looking at published work in which subjects are portrayed negatively, Newkirk asks whether the "greater good" of a project ever justifies betrayal. He concludes that researchers need to address this ethical dilemma by committing themselves to sharing "bad news" with participants during the research process, by granting participants rights to co-interpretation, and by taking on the responsibility of intervention.

In the next four chapters, researchers offer critical reflections on their research processes and their responses to ethical dilemmas. Brenda Jo Brueggemann interrogates how her role as participant-observer in a study of deaf student writers at Gallaudet University colored her representation of those students, their literacy, and their culture. She describes her efforts to participate in both the Deaf and the Hearing cultures of the university and recounts the difficulties and pain she encountered when she was not being fully accepted by members of either one. Attending to the institutional, educational, and cultural debates surrounding the university, Brueggemann argues that the role of participant-observer carries with it some serious liabilities that can ultimately undermine the researcher's ostensible respectability. Cheri Williams also takes us into the world of Deaf culture, but her research focuses on young deaf children's language and literacy development. Williams continues the discussion begun by Newkirk about when and how to intervene at the scene of observation, referring to an incident in which she watched a teacher engage in potentially abusive treatment of a deaf student. Williams also candidly reflects on coming to terms with parents' pain at discovering, through reviewing her research, that they treat their deaf and hearing children quite differently, to the detriment of the deaf child. Finally, Williams addresses questions of anonymity, giving the topic an interesting twist: instead of emphasizing the importance of protecting participants' confidentiality, she asks what is lost when researchers conceal participants' identities.

The next chapter, by Russel Durst and Sherry Cook Stanforth, examines collaboration and conflict in composition research, focusing on a study conducted by the authors, an experienced researcher and writing program administrator and a junior colleague whose own classroom was the site of the research. Durst and Stanforth investigate power relationships, researchers' multiple roles, and the politics of studying scenes of instruction. They offer an honest description of the personal and professional tensions they encountered in the research process, tensions they attribute to differing genders, ranks, and roles in the university setting. Unlike other, more celebratory descriptions of collaborative research practices, this chapter cautions those who engage in collaborative research to expect conflict to be part of the experience.

Helen Dale concludes Part I by revisiting the ethical dilemmas she faced in a study of ninth-grade collaborative writing groups. Like Newkirk and Williams, Dale examines how she negotiated the roles of "participant" and "observer" when she felt the need to intervene in, and not just observe, the emotionally scarring behavior of students in a collaborative writing group. Further, she looks at the institutional constraints at school which made for multiple and conflicting loyalties to the participating teacher, to the students in the classroom, to the school district, and to her dissertation committee. Importantly, Dale notes that dilemmas of fidelity experienced by researchers often resolve into choices among equally valid priorities—choices that many times, unfortunately, must be made with little time for reflection.

Part II, *Representation: Positionality, Subjectivity, and Voice*, charts the ethical and rhetorical problems entailed in representing others—their voices, experiences, and lives—in qualitative research. With the decline of esteem for positivist research paradigms (at least outside the natural sciences), scholars of many stripes are experiencing a "crisis of representation": they are questioning their authority to speak for and about others. Contributors ask such questions as: What does it mean to speak for others, to render their experiences in writing? Can we speak for and about

others without appropriating their experiences or violating their realities? What happens to their experiences—and their right to claim their experiences—after they have been passed through the critical filter of the ethnographer? And does that critical filter necessarily essentialize the "subject" of research? Addressing these questions, authors in this section draw on feminist and postmodern theory to explore new ways of working with research participants and of translating that work into ethnographic reports. They argue that a major task facing composition scholars is the development of new rhetorical strategies for representing sites of inquiry and the figures populating them. Specifically, there is a need to foreground rather than conceal conflicting perspectives that emerge in the analysis of data, so that research reports register the diverse voices of research participants as well as the multiple subject positions of researchers (see Peshkin). Finally, this section's contributors also evaluate some recent experimental ethnographies and speculate about researchers' responsibilities to readers, sponsors, and participants. Some argue that, for experimental ethnographies to succeed, researchers need to help readers (including journal and press editors) understand the unfamiliar discursive conventions they employ.

Patricia Sullivan opens Part II by exploring the problem of representing "others," particularly when they are members of the same community as the researcher. She examines alternative forms of presenting ethnographies (e.g., Denny Taylor's oral performances at conferences to which she invites her research participants) and of writing ethnographies (e.g., Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater's work on academic literacies) that intentionally include and amplify the voices of those being studied. Sullivan notes that we can never escape the "room of mirrors" we create in self-reflective ethnographic narratives, particularly when we study literacy and writing, because the subject we study and the medium we use to report our findings are one and the same.

Following Sullivan's lead, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater argues that researchers need to make themselves-as subjects—the objects of contemplation and reflection. She illustrates her argument by tracing her own development as a researcher over the course of two ethnographic projects, her master's thesis and her book, *Academic Literacies*. In doing so, Chiseri-Strater uncovers how, each time, her own subjectivity as well as the dominant research paradigm influenced the kind of data she observed, her interpretation of those data, and her discursive voice. Finally, she articulates the thin line between self-centered display and revealing positionality that researchers must negotiate when they foreground themselves in their texts.

Continuing the discussion of voice and positionality, Ann Blakeslee, Caroline Cole, and Theresa Conefrey argue for the integration rather than the appropriation of the voice and authority of the ethnographic "other." Drawing on feminist scholarship, the authors urge researchers to treat the "other" as a thinking subject who can collaborate with the researcher in authoring ethnographic narratives. They illustrate their argument with a study in which the research participant, a physicist, disagrees with the researcher (Blakeslee) on a key interpretive issue. Only through ongoing conversations do researcher and research participant come to new understandings of a disputed term ("collaboration"). Blakeslee, Cole, and Conefrey stress the importance of negotiating authority and voice with participants while realizing that such negotiation always contains the potential for further conflict.

In the next chapter, Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Stephen Fishman explore how to create "A Text for Many Voices." They argue that reports of naturalistic inquiry should be heteroglossic—that is, they should represent and respect the diverse voices speaking at the scene of research. In so arguing, they evaluate two recent articles that attempt to capture multiple voices and perspectives. McCarthy and Fishman also reflect on their own collaborative practice and the difficulty they have encountered in their efforts to create an egalitarian research relationship. Although equal in academic rank and status, the authors work in separate disciplines, a

difference that has contributed to conflicts of voice, authority, and commitment in their research. Such problems notwithstanding, the authors conclude by suggesting that heteroglossic reports may have a liberating effect on researchers as well as on the ethnographic others they represent.

In "Culture on the Page," Bonnie Sunstein examines rhetorical and aesthetic features of ethnographic discourse. Drawing on her published work about a summer institute for English teachers, Sunstein describes the process of collecting, selecting, and transforming data into ethnographic narratives, and comments on the uneasiness and guilt researchers often experience in that process. She explores representational and rhetorical issues involved in writing ethnographies, compares her textual strategies to those used by other ethnographers, and calls for self-reflexivity in the field and on the page.

Part III, Social and Institutional Contexts, addresses the ways in which institutional, social, and historical factors can at once enrich and constrain ethnographic and case study inquiry. Of special interest here are the anthropological origins of ethnographic inquiry. To what extent, one contributor asks, must researchers in composition studies accept methodology flawed by the sexism that marks another discipline's history? Two other contributors find that the institutional forces at play in qualitative research are best accounted for outside academic disciplines, outside the university. They report insights from work conducted in an urban high school and a metropolitan hospital. Yet another chapter takes up a thread that runs through many contributions to this collection by investigating how federal and local regulation of human participant research determines what we can know about literacy in various communities.

The first chapter in Part III, "Engendering Ethnography: Insights from the Feminist Critique of Postmodern Anthropology," addresses both representational and institutional contexts for ethnographic work. Roxanne Mountford traces disciplinary forces in anthropology that have led to the degraded position of gender in postmodern anthropology, and she assesses critical responses of feminist anthropologists to this significant oversight. Drawing numerous examples from the work of Zora Neale Hurston, whose innovative ethnographies of African American culture were suppressed because of their reflexivity, Mountford offers ways for ethnographers in composition studies to foreground gender in their research. Noting that composition researchers often look to postmodern anthropologists for insights into the rhetoric of ethnography (e.g., Geertz and Clifford), she suggests that better models of reflexive cultural accounts can be found in the marginalized work of women anthropologists.

In "Writing, Rap, and Representation," Jabari Mahiri documents how capturing and representing lived experiences in the context of formal schooling requires considerable attention to students' lives outside the classroom. Mahiri illustrates his argument with excerpts from his ethnographic research on African American and popular youth culture, research in which he used rap music as a bridge between students' extracurricular experience and school literacy. He recounts how he had to negotiate different and at times competing interests of funding agencies, participating teachers, concerned parents, and students participating in the project.

Jennie Dautermann takes us into the domain of workplace writing, where she examines the complex social fabric that supports writing in a hospital setting. She focuses on two crucial yet often contradictory needs in ethnographic inquiry: the need to maintain informants' trust and the need to explore freely the power arrangements at work in institutional circles. Dautermann describes how she negotiated her dual roles as writing consultant and researcher, roles that led to loyalty divided among the nurses participating in the writing project, the head nurses who provided her link to the hospital administration, and the hospital administrators who financed her labors as a consultant.

In the chapter that concludes Part III, Paul Anderson traces the history of U.S. government regulations intended to protect human participants in research. He identifies underlying regulatory principles, describes the administrative structures within which human

participant research is governed, and discusses several areas in the regulations where ambiguities and controversies have arisen to perplex administrators and researchers alike. Four areas of controversy are found especially pertinent to researchers in composition studies: special exemptions for educational research, applicability of guidelines to qualitative research, questions of boundaries between research and practice, and relevance of guidelines to research conducted by students. Anderson's chapter, written from the perspective of someone who submits proposals to institutional review boards (IRBs) and who has served on a university IRB, makes a valuable contribution to composition studies. He demystifies the review process and its implications for composition by outlining the federal regulations that guide IRB decision making; he also describes local factors, such as individual institutional history, size, and board membership, that affect the review process.

As our introductory discussion suggests, composition scholars need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the methodological, ethical, and representational complexities in their research, understanding similar to that in fields where such discussions already have a considerable history. We are just entering an era when the canon of qualitative research in composition is deep and broad enough to enable thoroughgoing analysis and critique of this sort. Part of our critical effort must be to examine precisely how qualitative methods from other fields have been *transformed* as they have been adapted to study literacy. The moment has arrived for reflection on methodological issues specific to literacy studies. It will no longer suffice to glimpse such reflections in mirrors polished by practitioners in other disciplines.

## Notes

1. When illustrating what we mean by "qualitative research," we often refer to its most popular forms—ethnographic and case study inquiry. But we recognize that there are many other forms of qualitative research: oral histories, narrative inquiry, craft interviews, observational-descriptive narratives, introspective reports, and more.

2. Information provided by Russel Durst, University of Cincinnati, chair of the NCTE Promising Researcher Award Committee, 1993–95.

3. Recently, the Conference on College Composition and Communication's dissertation award has gone to emerging researchers who work in an ethnographic vein: Harriet Malinowitz in 1993 and M. A. Syverson in 1994.

4. See, for example, Eli Goldblatt's *'Round My Way* and David Schaafsma's *Eating on the Street* (in the Pittsburgh Series on Composition, Literacy, and Culture), and Beverly Moss's edited collection, *Literacy across Communities* (in the Hampton Press Written Language Series).

5. See, for example, Ruth Ray's recent work on teacher research, as well as important contributions by Miles Myers, and Dixie Goswami and Peter Stillman.

6. So far, most published work on research methods in composition either prescribes how projects ought to be designed (e.g., Lauer and Asher's *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*) or critiques already completed research studies (e.g., North's *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*). The book Kirsch edited with Sullivan, *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*, begins to address epistemological and ethical research questions, but it is much broader in focus than the present volume in that *Methods and Methodology* also includes chapters on historical, cognitive, and experimental approaches to composition research.

7. For more detailed histories of the ascent of qualitative research, see Athanases and Heath; Beach, Green, Kamil and Shanahan; Bridwell-Bowles; Denzin and Lincoln; Gere; Hillocks; Lunsford.

8. A diversity of approaches exists here as well: for example, "an ethics of care" (Noddings; Tronto) and "lesbian ethics" (Frye). For recent books on feminism and ethics, see Card, *Feminist Ethics*; Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

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