Intimate Inquiry: A Love-Based Approach to Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Academics have a hard time talking about the role of "love" in social research, and the lack of a working definition for its meaning only partly explains our difficulty. The more substantial barrier is our tendency to think about "research" not as a careful exploration of specific social, intellectual, or methodological problems that bear on the everyday circumstances of real people, but as the product of observable and replicable processes, of science. Love, many would argue, has nothing to do with this. I beg to differ. In previous publications, I have offered a radical counter narrative of the possibilities that a broadened view might enable. Using my own research experiences and efforts to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, I sketched the beginnings of an "intimate" approach to qualitative inquiry that is grounded in feminist theory, governed by an "ethic of love," and expressed as "love acts" for the individuals whose lives our work aims to shape. Here, I reconsider, push, and refine these ideas with greater attention to telling truth and offering practical wisdom.

Keywords: intimate inquiry, love, qualitative research

For the past several years, I have been openly wondering about what it means for educational researchers to do their work from a place of love (see Laura, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). As I understand it, love—the material and conceptual pursuit of our own or someone else's humanity—is as sorely needed in the field of education as it is in the city streets. My earlier writings on the subject were attempts to articulate that point and to tentatively build the framework for a love-based approach to qualitative studies in education, what I have called "intimate inquiry." In this article, I rethink these ideas with greater confidence and clarity by addressing the following questions: (1) What is intimate inquiry? (2) What are the assumptions and methods of intimate inquiry? (3) What are the implications of invoking love in qualitative work, especially for critical, truth-telling educational researchers? For context, though, I offer a prefatory note about my entry into this methodological tradition.

Turning Toward Intimate Inquiry: A Preface

Not long ago, when my then-fifteen-year old brother, Chris, began flirting with the idea of dropping out of school, I was finishing a pilot study of student discipline policies in one of Chicago's public high schools. I spent most of my days immersed in recent research on the ways in which 'common sense' discourses, school practices, and educational policies work in concert to

facilitate the movement of poor youth/youth of color from schools to alternative educational placements, the streets, and prisons. Because I desperately wanted Chris to stay and do well in school, I began to draw upon these literatures and perspectives for insight into his lived world. I revisited each scholarly piece to search for explanations of his past social and academic experiences, prophecies about what laid ahead for him, and indications of what I could have done in that moment to change the course of his life in some educational way. I looked at programs that could assist him, talked to people, and read more material. In November 2007, I practically moved back into my parents' home to be near my teenage brother in the midst of his decision-making process as it unfolded. Almost intuitively, the researcher in me began documenting much of what occurred in my family home, talking with my kin casually and sometimes more formally about how they made sense of my brother's social and academic lives, and retrieving and analyzing many of his personal artifacts to contextualize what I observed and heard.

In the meantime, our parents sought professional support—from psychologists, medical doctors, social workers, and teachers—to help Chris and themselves. I ran across and eventually recommended to my mother Helen Featherstone's (1980) *A Difference in the Family: Life With a Disabled Child*, a book about families who love, live with, and share the impact of a child's "difference." In this text, Featherstone describes some of the advantages and limitations that such professionals generally bring to the tasks of advising parents and describing their experiences. "As for the strengths," she writes,

> many of these professionals have received some training in thinking about feelings and human behavior and in evaluating evidence; most have also worked extensively with parents and children and thus may have learned to see common themes and to set individual responses in some larger perspective. (p. 7)

On the other hand, "a professional sees each family from a certain distance, and his or her understanding is in some sense theoretical" (p. 7). Lacking an insider's view, neutral credentialed parties watch, listen, and make inferences, focusing "so intensively on parents[']" vulnerability that they [may] miss their strengths," or worse, blame parents for all family problems (p. 7).

While, as far as I know, my parents never felt compelled to admit culpability under the care of their professional advisors, Mom and Dad inevitably pointed their fingers inward. They held themselves accountable for Chris' problems because they lead busy working lives. They mined their memories for inconsistencies and delays in applying discipline, for relying upon different and sometimes competing approaches to childrearing, for providing Chris with what he wanted as much as what he needed, and for failing or being unable to respond to their son's complaints about uncomfortable experiences in school. Then, all of a sudden, they would move from self-reproach to blaming Chris and the burden of responsibility would shift to his shoulders. His flunking grades were attributed to his presumed laziness, "bad" attitude to a spoiled identity, active nature to the naughtiness of his gender. His impatience with teachers was connected to his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and growing behavioral adjustment record to his dire need to fit in, at all costs, with kids of his own age who come from vastly different backgrounds than the comfortable, middle class, suburban lifestyle that he is afforded. The tension at home was so thick that I could taste it.

Against this backdrop, in January and March of 2008 we endured the loss of both maternal grandparents and a close cousin, sudden tragedies that seemed to amplify the frequency and intensity of Chris' academic and behavior troubles at home, at school, in our surrounding community,

and with the law. By now, these problems had lingered unabated for nearly six years. To cope with the grief of our kinfolk's deaths, and to track the issues that my recurrent visits raised, I kept a journal and catalogued the details of critical incidents, the settings in which they took place, the conversations that occurred within and/or about them, and my own reflections on it all. With no histories of usage to ground academic work so close to home, it took me nearly one year 'in the field' to begin publicly articulating the questions that I developed about my little brother's life pathway, and with their permission, to frame certain aspects of my family members' personal lives as researchable educational problems. Unfortunately, my intervention proved to be too little and too late. As a final prerequisite for enrollment in the U.S. Department of Labor's Job Corps, his educational alternative of choice, Chris withdrew from high school altogether in October 2008. He was sixteen.

While most researchers appear to select their research projects—melding personal interests and skills to determine a particular topic of research, which, in turn, appears to guide the research methods employed in its service (Stacey 1991)—I began with the end in mind. I knew that I wanted to study the school-leaving experiences of black middle class youth because I needed to work with, learn more about, and create useful knowledge for my own immediate family. Born in the heat of a furnace, and thrust into action on the basis of urgency and conviction rather than cosseted reflection on research question and design, my intimate dissertation project *chose me*.

Defining Intimate Inquiry

The most obvious reason for calling my methodological approach "intimate" is that it reveals a researcher's positionality—who the researcher is in connection with the people under study—and the nature of their affiliation. In a brief and concise way, it emphasizes, as dictionary definitions of the term do, a familiar and significant relationship that would exist even if the research did not. In another sense, this term announces the way that intimate inquirers see the world and how they believe that we come to know themselves and others within it. Nobody schooled in qualitative work will be amazed to learn that intimate inquirers think people, especially young people, are active thinkers, movers, and shakers of the world, and that each of us has the capacity to make sense of our experiences, to claim expertise on our own lives. Intimate inquiry is grounded in the idea that the fastest way to the get to the "truth," that is, the reality that a person constructs, is to delve close to the source of the quandary—to ask the simplest questions and pay scrupulous attention to what the individual thinks that he or she is up to—and in light of the person's social surrounds, to interpret (to the best of our ability) what these meanings tell us. At the same time, "intimate" refers to the personal and emotional aspects of life on the "inside." Not to be confused with the distant and voyeuristic cliché about "self as instrument" of research, here "intimate" signifies the concern, the passion, and the individual will to do that drives engaged and political work.

Curriculum theorist and educational philosopher, Nel Noddings (1992), reminds us that "to care and be cared for are fundamental human needs" (p. xi). When we "care" we worry about what happens to people in our everyday lives and we attend to them—to their individual needs, perspectives, and interests—by asking the basic questions: who, what, where, when, and why. For Noddings, the answers to these questions may bring a level of consciousness to the ways in which we receive, recognize, and respond to others and ourselves. Noddings urges educators and scholars to organize our work around caring—for human affections, weaknesses, and anxieties—to know people in all of their particularity. This, of course, is the easy part. Our challenge, then, is to connect what we know with what we do.

"All spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations—should and could have as their foundation a love ethic," an obligation to act on behalf of our own or another's well-being, cultural critic bell hooks (2000) wrote in her book *All About Love* (p. 87). "A love ethic," hooks (2000) argues, "presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well" (p. 87). The world that hooks envisions is one in which individuals choose to "love," meaning that we "learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" in ways that protect, enhance, and sometimes alter our own and other people's lives (p. 5). When we understand loving practice as the foundation of our research, then we may begin to establish the conditions for the production of valuable knowledge that shapes and informs the way we think, speak, and act. hooks (2000) tells us,

> we do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire and respect; by committing to give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet. (pp. 87-88)

For intimate inquirers, hooks' words are an invitation to do research not on "the subjects," but with "*my* people"—family members, neighbors, colleagues, students—and to treat research participants with the regard and reverence that we extend to our own kin.

If our research purpose is "solidarity," as I am implying, then we should consider "using data collection and analysis methods that involve accompanying, co-construction, and co-interpretation," Corinne Glesne (2006) suggested in her presentation given at the *International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*. For Glesne, being in solidarity, that is, "working with others in a research endeavor determined by others" needs and perceptions in conjunction with our own, requires that scholars make two basic commitments: 1) to abide by the terms of community and 2) to promise hospitality. In practice, to do right by community means that we open and demystify the research process, and are willing to take the time for shared decision-making. We participate in and become as much a part of "family" matters as possible, with all of the responsibilities that this entails, and "we consider our academic communities and how our connections, constraints, and obligations there have implications for the people with whom we do research." We also have an obligation to be generous, she insists, to "give freely of ourselves"—love, vulnerability, authority, and abundant resources—"in the research process…to share what it is that we can do, not as an imposition, but as service determined in conjunction with others."

This kind of work is necessarily messy and moving, publicly affirming and personally empowering, humanizing and unabashedly interventionist, precisely because it is governed by a different set of values. The intimate inquirer works under the assumption that the process and product of his or her scholarship has real consequences for the lives of three-dimensional human beings, the researcher him- or herself included, not for imagined "others" somewhere out there. hooks (2000) explains,

> In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions…[and] we learn to value loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement. While careers and making money remain important agendas, they never take precedence over valuing and nurturing human life and well-being. (p. 88)

Intimate inquiry is, as the term suggests, unavoidably subjective, that is, personal, person-centered, and perspective-based, a fundamental characteristic that draws many researchers within its folds despite vigorous calls for detached scholarship that reinforces normative notions of authentic academic work.

Methods of Intimate Inquiry

Intimate inquiry is organized around three activities: witnessing, engaging, and laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape.

Beth Brant (1994) reminds us that, "Who we are is written on our bodies, our hearts, our souls," and that in each of us there is a desire to be known and felt. To be acknowledged and validated, and to have our histories confirmed—to be witnessed for "what has been and what is to be" (p. 74). *Witnessing*, as an act of love, involves the deliberate attendance to people, seeing and taking notice of that which they believe is meaningful. Fears and desires are situated in a sense of past and future, and experiences become the fabric of time and space. To witness is to validate the existence of stories, and to protect their places in the world. Becky Ropers-Huilman (1999) writes: "We are acting as witnesses when we participate in knowing and learning about others, engage within constructions of truth, and communicate what we have experienced to others" (p. 23). For Ropers-Huilman, witnessing is qualitatively different from observing people as a research strategy.

When we show our love for others by witnessing their lives, we are complicit in active and partial meaning-making about those experiences, up close and personal to the phenomenon of collective interest. While it is impossible to really know other people or completely understand what is happening to them, the act of witnessing is an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn about lived lives, and to explore rationalizations of people's experiences.

There is a particular urgency for the act of witnessing within the context of marginalization or wrongdoing. Being a spectator of calamities taking place both near and afar is a quintessential part of the modern experience. I think of the recurring theme in slave narratives and the writings of Holocaust survivors who describe the trauma of public indifference to their struggles—the persistent feeling of invisibility and being made mute—as equally egregious assaults. At a minimum, bearing witness to the pain of significant others is the act of validating and advancing their fundamental rights to peace, justice, and humanity.

We do this by watching closely in the particular contexts in which our people try to make sense of things. We listen intently and provide a captive audience for critical reflections on the tough questions of guilt and responsibility. Dori Laub (1992) warns, "the absence of an empathic listener, or more radically the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish…and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (p. 68). For Laub and for me as well, the act of listening is vital to the production and co-ownership of people's truths. But it is also the obligation of engaging the conversation that is central to the process of intimate inquiry.

Engaging points us to the posing of problems and the highlighting of contradictions that are inherent to all experiences of the peopled world. To engage is to put people in deliberate dialogue around the mundane, the taken-for-granted, the whispered, and the hushed. When we engage, we publicly name what we have witnessed and draw upon multiple vantage points—including the lenses of the inquirer herself—for a fuller and more complicated understanding of people's issues. Through engaging, we aim to establish the conditions for personal empowerment. Patti Lather (1991) reminds us that this means we create the space for "analyzing ideas about the

causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives" (p. 4). Of course, providing the opportunity for people to speak for themselves and with others may not in fact lead them to do so, but there is an obligation, in a Levinasian (1998) sense, on the part of any researcher who witnesses and engages loved ones' lives to take some course of action.

Writing as testimony—an incomplete account of events—is a considerable part of carrying out this task. The narrative becomes a vehicle through which we come to know other people and ourselves by implication; it reflects not merely a distant other but the social relations in our own environment. The love-based ambition for writing lives is a certain kind of reception that involves empathy and responsibility to think differently about the world, what Megan Boler (1999) refers to as "testimonial reading." Constructing a text that might nudge this sort of intentionality and introspection is a labor of love. *Laboring* encompasses the mental work of writing, but also the physical labor—the work of the hands and the bodies—of sharing available resources.

Implications and Challenges of Doing Intimate Work

Academics have a hard time talking about the place of love and other components of intimacy in educational studies, and the lack of a working definition for its meaning only partly explains our difficulty. The more substantial barrier is our tendency to think about "research" not as a careful exploration of specific social, intellectual, or methodological problems that bear on the lives of real people, but as the product of observable and replicable processes, of science. Love, many would argue, has got nothing to do with this.

Now, as it has for the last five decades, positivistic conceptions of science have dominated education discourse and divided the research community along predictable lines of epistemological and methodological approach: quantitative camps of scholars, with their emphasis on the separation of facts and values in the interest of objectivity are pitted against their more "touchy-feely" colleagues, many of whom use a range of exploratory and qualitative methods. A case in point is what education philosopher Kenneth Howe (2009) calls the "new scientific orthodoxy" in education research,

> which has been codified in the National Research Council's (NRC) *Scientific Research in Education* (2002) and reinforced in its subsequent *Advancing Scientific Research in Education* (2004) as well as in the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) *Standards for Reporting on Empirical Social Science Research in AERA Publications* (2006). (p. 428)

The authors of each of these recent reports articulated and promoted a cohesive framework for scientific inquiry in education that distinguishes "research" from other kinds of intellectual pursuits and summarily excludes "challenges and alternative views from the conversation about education policy and practice" (Howe, 2009, p. 437).

If the exclusionary effect is an unintended consequence of explicating scholarly norms internal to the education research community, it is also a fiscally responsible consideration of external factors. Purging the education enterprise of "(so-called) research that consists of some combination of subjective, ungeneralizable, partisan, hypercritical, incomprehensible, useless, speculative conjecturing" (Howe, 2009, p. 438) in order to claim the mantle of science provides "a means for education research to retain or enhance [prestige, credibility], support—including financial,

from its patrons, such as the federal government and private foundations" (Howe, 2009, p. 433). Within this context, embracing intimacy in education research is beyond suspect, it is bad for business.

The implications of such thinking are far reaching, as the space and tolerance for social inquiry that is committed to documenting the complexity of human lives, oppression, and resistance shrinks, and the risk of silencing, invisibility, and unemployment strengthens pressures to assimilate to dominant expectations of researcher practices. Ethnographer Harry Wolcott (2002) puts the point pithily: "If you don't do or present research as our self-appointed standard-bearers feel it should be done or presented, they [your colleagues] may do *you* in" (p. 167).

Intimate researchers in the academy are poised to reconcile a kind of duality akin to W.E.B. DuBois' (1903/1990) "double-consciousness," in which blacks in the U.S. at the turn of the nineteenth century were compelled, he argued, to preserve perspectives as both Africans and simultaneously as Americans. We are at once committed to developing research processes that are more ethical, sympathetic, collaborative, useful, and connected to "real" lives, and at the same time, I think, struggling to maintain productive "academic" lives in the interest of legitimacy, collegial respect, and professional marketability. It is an inconvenient duplicity, a path fraught with contradiction and conflict that leads to self-doubt—of our autobiographies, intentions, and our own intuitive sense about what counts, who matters, and what questions are worth asking. Too often, scholars negotiate this tension by relegating themselves to prefaces and footnotes, or downplaying controversial features of their work—in their writing and on the conference circuit – for example. The flip side of what indigenous researcher Stephanie Daza (2008) refers to as "covering," the ways in which we go about fitting in or playing roles in order to be perceived as legitimate scholars, is "preaching to the choir," circulating critical and innovative work within a cloister of polite company. Meanwhile, the youth whose lives our research is meant to shape bear the imprint of our politics.

Many scholars may not be certain of exactly *how* to embrace intimacy in academic research or they may have ideas about how but choose not to *do* so. To suggest, however, that there are not ways in which we *can* bring love into our scholarly pursuits is a dangerous idea. It is also a familiar trope.

Around the time that I was nearing doctoral candidacy in my third year of graduate school, I enrolled in a research design seminar led by a senior scholar at a large university in the Midwest to facilitate the trudge toward a rough draft of my dissertation proposal. We began one particular class meeting by soliciting feedback to oral sketches of each student's project, and much of these exchanges focused on underscoring the significance of research questions or clarifying justifications of methodological choices. When it was my turn to describe the study of school-leaving experiences that I had crafted around my own family members' everyday lives, I read key passages of my problem statement and summarized other important elements of the study's design. Following what I perceived to be an awkward moment of reflective silence, my professor asked, "How will this project move beyond navel-gazing? I mean," he went on, "no one will base policy decisions on your brother."

I had anticipated some anxiety on the part of my colleagues and professors at the university upon choosing to name my little brother as the subject of a dissertation project about high school dropout among the black middle class. I expected cautionary tales about the personal and professional costs of vulnerability in academic scholarship, advice on navigating the complexities of ethics and intimacy in fieldwork, and passing references to the ongoing debate about validity in qualitative research. In retrospect, I too wondered about some of the problems that pursuing an

academic project arising from my personal life might pose, especially at such an early juncture in my academic career. My worries, though, focused squarely on how to move back and forth between a provocative familial story and its broader contexts—in my writing and lived experiences—not on the suitability of my methods, the worth of my study, nor the legitimacy of my status as a researcher.

Emergent, yes, but the research design did not, as far as I can tell, lack historical or structural perspective. Of course, my family stood to benefit most from our work together. By mapping the ebb and flow of our emotions while we discovered more about what was going on with Chris (and us), we could have immediately approached transformation in ways that created healthier and happier spaces to learn and dwell. However, rendering my brother visible, documenting his marginality, and transforming his story into accessible texts (Gluck, 1991) served to fulfill a purpose beyond my family: to directly shape how he and other black youth are perceived and treated in societal and intellectual contexts. Still, as firmly as I believe in the significance of my work, I second-guessed my judgment and went back to the drawing board to devise two variations of the original research design out of fear that my teacher's prediction about the fate of my project would bear strange fruit. Each of the three versions of my dissertation was rooted in an intimate perspective, and each raised questions about the necessity of new methodological and academic interventions in real lives, and grappled with the politics of "personal" work within the academy. What differentiated the studies were the methods and ethics that I attended to, the kinds of dilemmas and possibilities that each version implied, and the progression with which I repositioned my brother at the forefront.

Variation #1 – Covering: a Study of Assimilation

Given my intimate approach to authentic intellectual life and explicit research purposes, writing my brother out of the story appears to have been a visceral response to the feedback that I received about my proposed work. At the time of course, realigning my dissertation's methodology with normative notions of legitimate interpretive research felt like the most reasonable methodological decision to make.

In March 2008, I first considered redeveloping on a larger scale an exploratory study that I completed five months earlier for the purposes of a research methods course in which I enrolled. I designed the pilot study to create dialogue within a Chicago public high school of my former employment around its policies and procedures related to student climate. The school's discipline policy and the juxtaposition of administrators' goals with student perceptions of its meaning were of particular interest. The three-tiered system of behavior management, euphemistically referenced as the "Incentive Program," sorted the student body into colored groups: Gold Group, Red Group, and Orange Group. Membership to one group garnered a different set of rewards or penalties than belonging to the others. All students began each term in affiliation with the Red (default) group, and depending on whether or not detentions were accumulated and served at the end of each school week, could have moved between groups throughout the year. Belonging to the Orange Group, the bottom rung of the hierarchy, brought notable consequences: these students could not receive passes out of class, were required to display an orange identification card on their person, could not enter the dining hall during mealtime until all Gold and Red Group students made their selections, and could not participate in extracurricular activities. Connection with the Orange Group carried, as well, significant ideological connotations: students and staff alike recognized them as the "bad kids."

I learned about the discipline policy during my tenure as a tutor for the school's college readiness program, but I had real reservations about engaging its politics. For one thing, my critical lens was abuzz within the walls of the "ivory tower" and on the school grounds where I worked. I saw the Incentive Program as particularly problematic—a deliberate effort to monitor, sort, and contain troublesome black adolescents who "are discursively constructed as under-achieving, violent-prone, education-aversive youth (i.e. the dregs of society, who are in need of discipline and restraint), [and] the imposition and presence of enforcement policies [as an effort] to 'civilize their untamed spirits'" (Brown, 2003, p. 127). I was also hesitant to support the policy because so many of the Orange Group students were my students, a relationship that enabled me to closely observe the stigma attached to membership and students' varying reactions to it. I cringed every time students seemed to play into others' expectations of "bad kids." I hurt when students self-segregated, assuming that behavior problems proved intellectual inaptitude and apathy. I celebrated in the moments of resistance to these meanings. At some point, it occurred to me that I cared about them because, in circumstances and physical characteristics, they reminded me so much of my brother. Within a few short months, I left the job on good terms to pursue with vigor the roots of my intellectual curiosities that these young people managed to clarify for me. It was November 2007 and the beginning of my home/work with Chris.

I returned to the school shortly thereafter to satisfy the mutual interests of the principal and me: the principal sought feedback on the Incentive Program that would inform the school's improvement plan and I wanted to fulfill the fieldwork requirement for my methods course on a topic of genuine interest and significance. I constructed, with much help from the principal, an interpretive study that helped us understand the meaning that the Incentive Program had for students, and especially their thoughts about the Orange Group. I used notes that I jotted about my own observations and information shared during separate semi-structured interviews with the assistant principal, who created the discipline system, and one Orange Group student, and a questionnaire completed by 78 students to find out their impressions of the Incentive Program and the Orange Group. The study found that while students understood the "official" goals of the discipline policy, as articulated by the administrative staff and widely distributed written materials, they believed an "unofficial" agenda to be at work. Specifically, in contrast to the administrative perspective of the Incentive Program as a means of forging accountability and responsibility, maintaining order and consistency, and discouraging students from displaying behaviors that garnered detentions, students believed the policy to be racially discriminatory and damaging to their social and academic prospects.

Together with a classmate who helped with data analysis, I wrote the final report in the jargon that would jibe with an audience of peers, who practiced traditional qualitative research techniques, and the school's administrative team. The presentation of my pilot study to the methods class received positive reactions, and seemed to move people in the ways that I anticipated. Many of my peers asked questions about my time in the field. Some probed for more of the participants' insights. A few expressed anger about the Program itself. After all, my professor, a highly respected scholar in the field of educational leadership suggested that I think about pursuing this project beyond the course. Based upon the study's findings, the school acted upon an aspect of its discipline policy that seemed to bear the most explicit racial undertones. As opposed to filing into the dining hall only after their peers got first dibs, students who have unattended detentions now eat lunch together in detention hall, an infanticible change to the Program in the broad scope of issues it raised, but a sizeable victory for the youth under its charge.

This exploratory study uncovered narratives of "bad kids" as expressed in a single public high school's discipline policy. For just a few months, I worked to expand the pilot as an alternative version of my dissertation to include a larger sample size, additional in-depth interviews, and more observational time at the school, but the limitations of such a study seemed to outweigh its advantages.

First, as a former employee and familiar face, my relationship to the school's administration and students may have enabled me to take observational field notes, speak informally with students and staff, and generally move within the school building without arousing alarm to a researcher's presence or unnecessarily influencing the natural research setting. On the other hand, the administration's intimate role in shaping and facilitating the execution of the pilot and dissertation studies may have framed me as an apparatus of administration. This perception would not have been far from the truth, as the administration's necessary involvement in the study, particularly in my quest to (re)locate former student interviewees and seek new ones, may have infringed upon my attempts to protect students' anonymity. Or to take a different angle, if I developed rapport and trust with the students in my role as principal investigator, but changes to the Incentive Program since the exploratory study have remained miniscule, then resistance or lack of motivation to buy-in to the dissertation's value, to volunteer participation, or to share forthrightly would seem reasonable.

Second, on any given week, the pool of Orange Group students from which to select participants would be large, variable, and lend itself to random or probability sampling, but I am not interested in causal relationships, predictions, or extrapolating findings to other situations, time periods, or people. These purposes are aligned with a positivist paradigm, whereas my goal is depth of meaning-making for students in their social spaces.

Third, I may learn much about what it is like to be considered a "bad kid" through an additional series of in-depth interviews and long-term observations of classrooms and detention halls, but this would neglect other important contexts outside of schools that contribute to the social ecology of discipline.

Fourth, a questionnaire allowed me to impute response items, reduce them to numeric values, and disaggregate the data, but there was a serious problem with this. Even if the students or data gathered from other sources informed the subjective response items, the responses that I imputed in the pilot survey or may have inserted in an additional questionnaire for the dissertation are my own constructions, not the students' own words. "Bad" kids' own stories are what I am after.

Fifth, and most important to my purposes here, conducting this version of the dissertation certainly would have appealed to the sensibilities of conventional qualitative researchers, but my authentic interest and immediate concern was in interrupting my brother's journey along the school-to-prison pipeline, and I simply did not know how studying the Incentive Program could assist Chris in that moment. Even if it was only for three months, each passing day that I split energies between my continued work with the family and my attempt to expand the pilot into a dissertation, transferred acquired knowledge across projects, and combined those discourses and managed the contradictions among them, was not only crazy-making (Heald, 1991), but a waste of valuable time. By now, my brother and our parents were looking into two alternative education programs, both of which required his willingness to leave school and our home altogether for serious consideration. The dissonance of my attempts to be in two places at once, intellectually and often physically, and the rapid progression of my brother's decision-making process brought me back to where I began.

Variation #2 – Undercover Lover: A Study of True Lies

In May 2008, I redesigned my dissertation to focus on Chris and the meaning our family made of his school-leaving experiences, but he would appear in the final write-up of this version as a composite character in a story based upon my experiences as an educator and my observations in schools. Merging my brother's life, as gleaned from the observational records that I accumulated during my family visits, with my memories of other black youth with whom I have worked in schools, would allow me to do the interpretive work that I originally proposed in way that draws attention to its partiality, and conceal the relationship that caused pause. Of course, incorporating narratives of self and fiction presents a different set of problems, for it is one thing to posit the personal or explicate my sense of self in another's story, but quite a different matter, it seems, to recapitulate the selective experiences of others in highly personalized tales of my own lived world. Critics of self-studies have accused many scholars of giving up on writing about the "other" by writing, instead, about themselves, and the legitimacy of stories that are fictitious as to person and perhaps place, but accurate as to practices and beliefs, has been debated (LeCompte, et al., 1992).

Having conceded that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) would find incredulous my family's communal efforts to protect its rights and privacy, especially for the sake of my teenage brother, and either disapprove of the project or turn it "into a bureaucratic nightmare" (Wolcott, 2002, p. 148), creatively disguising their identities was vital to keep the research afloat. In the end, by determining that my study did not meet the definition of "research," the IRB did nothing, except dilute my argument for the legitimacy of alternative forms of presentation in the minds of some academics.[1]

Exemption from the requirements for the protection of human subjects, "a series of steps and procedures designed ultimately to protect the institutions themselves" (Wolcott, 2002, p. 148), does not, however, provide relief from the guidelines of my own moral compass or accountability to the people who have agreed to participate in this project. As Wolcott (2002) makes plain and I firmly believe, "Ethics are not housed in such procedures" (p. 148). There are important ethical dimensions to intimate fieldwork and the publication of the details of my formal study, for which there are no clear prescriptions for handling, but that need to be acknowledged, troubled, and worked through.

The complex nature of our relationships, for instance, necessarily wedged an element of coercion. In addition to the potential personal and educational benefits of this project, I suspect that their willingness to participate in this study was grounded, in part, in the interest of my own educational progress. Undoubtedly, completing the proposed dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctorate, the highest degree held by anyone in our family, was a common goal and publishing "the book" will be a shared accomplishment. Therefore, concern for my well-being may have infringed upon their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Unfortunately, beyond reminding the family that they reserved this right, I was at a loss of strategies to deal with this issue. Small, but steady monetary incentives may have also compelled family members, especially Chris, to participate. Our individual and whole-family meetings sometimes occurred at various places outside of our home (e.g. over coffee or dinner), the financial costs of which I often assumed; but, as long as they knew that I provided compensation for their time, and not their responses this arrangement should not have posed a significant problem.

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1. The specific definition of research under 45 CFR 46.102(d) is: Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to *generalizable knowledge* (my emphasis).

Another good example of the ethical dimensions of my intimate work involves the issues of informed consent and confidentiality. Although I did not draft and attain family members' signatures on an official permission-granting document, my intent to draw upon information gathered in my capacity as a family member (e.g. sibling and daughter) *and* in my role as a researcher (e.g. participant-observer and interviewer), was always transparent. This does not mean that I used my familial "access" in ways that were deliberately stealth, sneaky, or deceitful, such as rummaging through our family home for personal artifacts to advance my research agenda. However, this does mean that the family was aware of the converging character of my identities and agreed to grant me broad discretion to record observations and descriptions of relevance within and beyond our formal or scheduled talks.

To be clear, note taking and reporting are two different actions, and I did not ask the family for free-reign authorship or permission to write anything that I wanted about them. As interpretive work often calls for, this study was collaborative at every opportune juncture. At least monthly, I disseminated copies of working drafts of the dissertation and met with the family to "member-check" or solicit feedback about the accuracy, completeness, and fairness of my treatment. Chris himself was satisfied with the developing drafts. Many of his exploits that I thought he might want deleted or at least subdued (stealing cars, breaking into houses, doing drugs) were unproblematic (Wolcott, 2002). His primary concern seemed to be that I might miss some important detail about such exploits that he deemed pivotal to any "book" about him. Otherwise, during these debriefings, we decided what not to disclose, to rid copy of sensitive information, and to fictionalize particular details, determinations that I would have noted in the final write-up. As the research progressed, however, and carving time out to reestablish expectations of and my respect for our privacy became part of the research process, we also began to question the usefulness of anonymity and to reassess the costs of candor. Six months into the development of the second version of my dissertation, together we redefined our own ethical code of behavior and decided to reveal ourselves to the public.

Going Public: On Uncovering

By October 2008, I had tired of finagling what we considered arbitrary methodological limits and my brother was on his way to live at the Joliet, Illinois Job Corps Center in the hopes of attaining a high school equivalency certificate and tile-setting apprenticeship. Participating in and conducting the research, and sharing my interpretations of the information that I gathered over the year with family in casual talks and in formal writings helped us communicate more frequently and intentionally about understanding one another and resolving tensions surrounding Chris' trajectory. Despite our work together though, Chris was convinced that even in his suburban, black middle class environment, public schools were too hostile, competitive, and isolating for boys like him, and that the family's efforts to keep him in this environment made us complicit in his school failure. This aspect of my research purpose, keeping him around long enough to earn a diploma, at this point, would necessarily go unfulfilled.

Having peered into my brother's life for one year in search of clues about how he understood his schooling experiences and how we—family members, educators, policy makers—could shape his life outcomes, Chris needed time and space to adjust to his new milieu and I wanted the same to write. Over the next four months after he left, I used the unstructured interview, journal and observational field notes that I accumulated over the year to construct a layered portrait of my brother, a black middle class school dropout and his social contexts. Even though I was able to

pull from a plentiful corpus of information to write, the story still lacked the insights of key family members who love and lived with Chris and Chris' point of view in his own words. From February to April 2009, in total I conducted and transcribed seven additional in-depth semi-structured retrospective interviews with each member of our immediate family, and when he was ready, which did not turn out to be until September 2009, Chris began authoring and sharing his own life history with me. While he wrote for the next two or three months, I gathered and analyzed documents from the two communities where he was raised to juxtapose his story with a picture of the local neighborhood and school backdrops that worked on and through him.

To be sure, the better part of nearly two years that I spent "working the hyphens" (Fine. 1994) in this intimate inquiry was complicated labor. Throughout "data" collection, I struggled to smoothly maneuver the thin lines between each of my identities (e.g. expert negotiator-supporter-child-peer-traitor-trusted loved one-sister-scholar-insider-outsider in my own home), and I cannot say with certainty that I performed any of these roles especially well. My researcher status, position to power, and relationships with participants not only produced multiple and simultaneous roles, but these issues surely had implications for what occurred in my presence, what I saw, and how others saw me. I engaged in casual family gossip with my sister and at the same time facilitated an unstructured interview. I answered telephone calls from a frustrated brother who simply wanted to vent and I wrote copious notes from the other end. I arranged times to "chat" with my mother, but felt awkward when she insisted that they took place in our museum-like formal dining room that only gets use on "special occasions." I formally interviewed my dad, but the transcript of this conversation was useless because of the background noise provided by the old-school records he played as we spoke. Doing this research provided the flexibility to wear many hats, but all in the family wanted me to put on each at different times and we could never predict (and I did not make it a practice of announcing) the moments when I swapped one in favor of another.

The intimacy between my family and me made "leaving the field" somewhat tricky as well. Typically, a researcher has a clear exit strategy, such as when research funding has exhausted, when the themes of interest seem to have fully manifested, or when one's welcome in the community under study has worn out. Because working from home is relatively inexpensive, our lives keep changing, and I am always welcome to stay, when to "draw a line in the sand" was a difficult decision to make. I mulled over when to make the transition from "researcher" and all of its associations back to "family member," and how do it in a way that did not give a sense of finality to or abandonment of the work that we constructed together. "Leaving the field," though, took on new meaning when at times, Chris would not answer my calls, return my text messages, or otherwise make himself available to me as a researcher, particularly when he was angry and worried that I was in cahoots with another family member. Oddly enough, our intimacy made me, not my brother, more susceptible to desertion. While his absence was often frustrating, I understood the need for a break. Being the primary participant, the center of the controversy, and the single source of insight about the under-researched school-leaving experiences of black middle class youth was a heavy load for such a young person to bear. I never perceived my home/work with the family to be exploitative or manipulative of my "access," but this was (and still is) something that I worry and converse with my family about.

Another one of my incessant concerns has always been the personal risks associated with our decision to write up the final version of this interpretive dissertation as an explicitly intimate methodology and unconventional approach to understanding school dropout. I knew that many audiences of people—education policymakers, education researchers, educators, parents, and youth themselves—connected to youth who are caught up in the school-prison nexus could use a

text that, as clearly and directly presented as possible, speaks to the broad significance of getting to know our kids in all of their particularity. Our parents' motivations for going public were as much about connecting with "fictive kin" (Stack, 1974) across the globe, relatives not by blood or marriage, but by social or economic relationships and reciprocal struggles to raise their sons as it was about dispelling the stigmatizing myth of "dysfunctional" black families, particularly as it impacts the efforts of black mothers. Chris too wanted to disrupt the dominant narrative of 'bad' black boys that is typically associated with his poor and urban counterparts, but manages to permeate class and spatial locations, and he figured that by baring all he could replace our mediated images with more realistic understandings of what it is like to be him. Still, I am apprehensive about my family's willingness to "keep it real" considering what such vulnerability can mean, especially later in my brother's adult life.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, multiple forces have continued to exert pressure on the academy in general and education in particular. As the call and federal funding opportunities for standards-based school reform repositioned the significance of 'scientifically based' empiricism in educational research at the fore, the place and tolerance for the kind of intimate social inquiry that I am proposing has dwindled. At this moment, eminent literary critic Edward Said (1996) notes, "the world is more crowded than it ever has been with professionals, experts, consultants" (p. xv). Yet even within academic circles, students and scholars who explore issues of marginality and invisibility, who invoke emotion and compassion in their work, and who challenge our "methodological imagination" are discouraged from critical research and practice (Fine, 2007).

Within this context, examining some of my experiences conducting intimate research with my own kin helps us see how and why some scholars "cover" (Daza, 2008) themselves and their work in order to be perceived as legitimate and academically viable. Through an examination of the three versions of my dissertation above, I attempt to problematize and complicate our views of what counts as academic scholarship and authentic forms of inquiry. The first variation is methodologically and ethically aligned with mainstream conceptions of authenticity for an imagined audience of traditional qualitative or interpretive researchers. The second variation is ethically, but not methodologically geared toward the standards of legitimate research that the IRB utilizes to make procedural determinations. The final version pushes us to consider the methods and ethics of authentic research as any engaged scholar would: as unabashedly passionate, participatory, personal, and political. Together, they raise concerns about the constructed nature of authenticity, and point to normalizing assumptions of legitimate research that unconventional scholars are compelled to negotiate.

Scholars are taught to confine our research to the norms of academic protocol, and to maintain separation of academic knowledge from the actual people whose lives bolster our professional livelihood (Luke & Gore, 1992). While my doctoral training was no exception, it was not until a senior professor called me out on attempts to connect prior research and abstract theories and perspectives to a single youth's real world experiences that I felt the pressures of these standards. In the course of (re)framing my dissertation to accommodate such demands, I not only became fully cognizant of the professional costs of breaking the rules, but also more attending to the intellectual and spiritual integrity of our texts. My brother's experiences and the process of coming to know him as a human being through his story makes us smarter about the lives of the young people who we claim to be educating, but that alarming rates of school-leaving at the risk of being consumed

by an ever-present prison industrial complex proves to us otherwise. When I reflect upon the purposes of, my places in, and the audiences for my work, I only regret that I did not begin sooner, not that I utilized my inquisition and resources to first try to help my own.

Intimate inquiry, in my opinion, may exemplify a variety of characteristics[2]:

- Identifies important problems (personal, social, intellectual, methodological) and poses questions that can be examined
- Generates, discovers, describes, and constructs new knowledge
- Explores, reflects upon, describes, and explains meaningful personal and social worlds
- Uses methods and strategies that can produce investigation of a particular phenomenon of interest
- Links research to relevant theory
- Tacks back and forth between local and broad contexts
- Fully discloses research processes and findings
- Explicates researcher and research values, purposes, commitments, and key background assumptions
- Encourages self-examination and critique
- Values care (knowing research participants in all of their particularity), love (acting on behalf of participants), and solidarity (working *with* participants in research endeavor)

Although my work adheres to these guiding principles, every methodological approach has practical, ethical, and political limitations, and I make no claims that any versions of my dissertation represent the only or best approach to intimate inquiry. In fact, I would worry about the consequences for education research and the landscape of the academy writ large if all of its (overwhelmingly white-American, male) scholars only worked on projects in which we have a personal stake of this particular sort. I do hope that this article helps other researchers grapple with different ways to research and to consider alternative possibilities for critical inquiry that really matters.

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2. R. Burke Johnson (2009) developed a set of guiding principles for conducting 'education science' that he argues is more inclusive and representative of research in education than those provided by the National Research Council's (2002) *Scientific Research in Education*. I have summarized and borrowed several of Johnson's principles in my own collection of characteristics that may help us think about notions of authenticity in education research.

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