© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 13, Number 2, p. 33, (2009)

Learning Qualitative Research

Lael Gerhart

Abstract

In this article I explore through a narrative how I came to do a research project in East New York. I show how first contact was established, how local contacts were made, and how trust between my research participants and me was created. I then explore how the research topic evolved through informal conversations, open-ended interviews, and careful listening.

Introduction

During my second semester as a master's student at Cornell University I applied for a research fellowship that would address the needs of underserved children, families, and communities in New York City. Although I had never thought about applying my interests to an urban context, I had through my time at Cornell learned about and become interested in the community gardening movement. I was familiar with some of the community gardens in New York because I had done my undergraduate degree at NYU, and I thought this could be an interesting opportunity to see how urban greening played a role in the environmental attitudes of people within the garden communities. I proposed an inquiry that would look at the effects of a garden-based youth education program on youth environmental awareness. My proposal was accepted, and I was awarded one of the fellowships. However, I was not able to conduct the study I proposed. The time frame of the fellowship and of the gardening education program were not well aligned, and would not have allowed me enough time to conduct a thorough study. Additionally, my advisor felt that the study I proposed was too grounded in the positivist paradigm.

The selection committee for the fellowship encouraged me to continue with my plan to focus on community gardens and allowed me to redesign my inquiry. I left for New York with no notion of the location of the gardens I would study as well as little idea of what aspect of community gardening I would research. Needless to say, I was feeling anxious and overwhelmed, but my advisor reassured me that once I got down there and spent some time looking around, things would fall into place and a study would emerge. At this time he offered me some advice that would prove invaluable. He suggested I approach my inquiry not with "Do" as the first word

in a question (for example, "Do urban gardens and farmers markets act as catalysts for community development?") but with "How": "How do urban gardens and farmers markets act as catalysts for community development?"[1]

Getting Started

I spent my first week tagging along with various people who worked with greening organizations in New York. I visited gardens in lower Manhattan, Harlem, the Bronx, and finally Brooklyn. Most of the gardens with which I was familiar in New York were primarily ornamental gardens. I remember getting really excited when I saw a garden in Harlem that was filled with rows and rows of vegetable plants. It is amazing to see any garden in the middle of all of the concrete and asphalt of New York City, but when I saw the vegetables growing, I knew I wanted to work with gardeners who were focused on growing food.

"It is amazing to see any garden in the middle . . . of New York City, but when I saw the vegetables growing, I knew I wanted to work with gardeners who were focused on growing food."

I attended a greening party at a garden in lower Manhattan. Many of the people there worked for greening organizations as well as gardeners. After informal conversation and coffee amid wondrously lush plants, we stood in a circle with our feet sinking into soft green grass. Everyone went around and described what their favorite thing about gardening was. Afterward people made announcements for upcoming events, and it was then that I learned about East New York.

A woman who worked for an organization called Just Food made an announcement about East New York Farms!, a community-based farmers market in East New York, Brooklyn. I was immediately curious and excited. After the greening party I called people to find out what I could about East New York and the farmers market. I learned East New York was a community way out in Brooklyn at the end of the 3 line and that there were numerous community gardens there, all of which contributed to a farmers market. The farmers market was established from the collaborative effort of neighborhood gardeners, locally based organizations, and greening organizations within New York City.

When I told friends in New York that I thought I might try and see about doing an inquiry in East New York, they looked at me

like I was absolutely crazy—that was a "dangerous neighborhood," they said. When I told them about the community gardens and the farmers market I had heard about, they looked surprised and puzzled, and then I really became curious.

I made a few more phone calls to contacts I had made within greening organizations to see if I could arrange to tag along with someone who would be doing some work in East New York. Hannah, who worked for the Green Guerillas, told me that she had arranged a guest speaker for the next East New York Gardeners Association meeting. The association had an interest in learning garden preservation strategies from other community gardeners who had been through the process of trying to achieve protection from development. That meeting became my introduction to the community.

The East New York Gardeners Association Meeting: First Contact

The meeting was held on the evening of June 11 in the basement of the public library and was attended by eleven community gardeners, all of whom were women, save one. I felt a little awkward being there as everyone in the room knew one another, and I honestly felt a bit like some kind of spy. My discomfort was raised as Hannah introduced the guest speaker to the group and then also introduced me. She said, "This is Lael. She is from Cornell University, and she is interested in doing a research project on the farmers market."

One of the gardeners, with whom I was to become close and who became one of my "key contacts," narrowed her eyes in my direction and was quick to respond, "Oh, yah, Cornell University! Well, I hope she won't be like the last ones who came here to do research. They came, asked me all these questions, took up my time, and promised to come back to show me the results. They never came back!"

The gardener's statement did more than just make me feel uncomfortable—it reinforced my own hesitations and reservations about academic research. Many aspects of research made me uncomfortable. I felt awkward about the prospect of coming from "Cornell University"—into a community where life was so clearly different than any place in which I had lived—to ask people to tell me about their feelings, thoughts, and lives, so that I could in turn write a paper that would illuminate what was important about their situation. Who was I? Why should they tell me anything, and what

did I have to offer to them—the privilege of being in my research? The whole process seemed strange to me, a person or a team of people coming out from the lauded halls of the university, armed with important questions and hypotheses, now descending upon a community to extract the required information—so that they could then leave and return to the university to write up a conclusive report on the significance of their work.

That seemed to me rather predatory and in a certain way self-aggrandizing. I knew this was not how all research was conducted, but the gardener's statement was a very real indication that she had indeed been the "subject" of an inquiry and had been treated as such: she was a tool used to write an important report that she would never see. I knew I did not want to conduct my research in such a manner. At no point did I want the people with whom I would be working to feel like "subjects" that could validate the hypotheses I had formulated about their lives and work before I had even met them.

"At no point did I want the people with whom I would be working to feel like 'subjects' that could validate the hypotheses I had formulated about their lives and work before I had even met them."

When I think back to that first meeting in East New York, I am stunned by how absolutely clueless I was about who these people were and what their neighborhood was like. In a way it seems comical to me now that I would come with an agenda as to what would be important to study about this neighborhood, its gardens, and its market before I had even been there. I had done a lot of reading on community gardens before I arrived, and did have specific interests and convictions about how localized agriculture may function within a community to influence its environmental, social, and economic qualities, but I did not enter into the research with a preconceived notion of how I would uncover or discover these elements as operational in East New York or which (if any) of these elements would be the focus of a study, because I had never been there.[2] Thus the focus of the study was to continue to evolve as I learned more about East New York and the people who lived there.[3]

During the meeting I sat next to a woman who was watching me as I scribbled down notes. She wore a straw hat and had a warm face. She peered down over her glasses at my notebook and said, "If I was your teacher I would fail you for writing with those chicken

scratches. If you want to learn about the gardens you can come and help me in my garden any time. It is the 'New Visions' garden." I was to learn that her chiding was very much her way of showing affection. I replied that I would be happy to help her and wrote down the name of the garden.

After the meeting drew to a close and everyone was packing up to go home, I went to the back of the room where the gardener who had made the comment about Cornell researchers was cleaning up the table of food that was prepared for the meeting. I felt awkward and intimidated doing so, because she had been so outspoken about her experience with people from Cornell. Still, I really wanted to use this meeting as an opportunity to "make contacts," so I took a deep breath and began helping her clean up the leftovers and plates. I told her I was sorry that she had had that experience with people from Cornell and asked her what happened.

She actually seemed a little embarrassed that I was reaching out to her after her comments and was a bit bashful when she told me what happened. I again apologized and promised her that I was not that kind of person, and that I would not behave in the same way. She looked at me and said, "Thank you." This surprised me. I then said it was very nice to meet her and told her I hoped we would meet again.

During this meeting I did not want to ask anyone for an interview or for anything. It was my intention to go and get a feel for the people and the place and to just be present so that I could, in time, become more familiar to people in the neighborhood. Three of the women who attended that first meeting became my strongest contacts and introduced me to other gardeners and customers from the farmers market.

The United Community Center

Following the meeting I walked with Hannah up the block to the United Community Center garden. This, she told me, was a youth garden run by the Community Center where local teenagers applied to work in the garden and at the market for the summer. When we came upon the garden, I was stunned to see how large and lush it was. It had been an extremely wet spring and early summer, and everything was so vividly green that it seemed to glow in the early evening light. After growing up in the country I was accustomed to seeing this glowing quality of green in the evenings, but it was a wonder to see it against the backdrop of the raised subway line and the city block.

The United Community Center Garden

Several youths in the garden were gathering tools and finishing their work for the day. Georgine, the youth coordinator, and I resemble one another in many ways. She is fair-haired and around my age and height. Later that summer, people often mistook us for one another when they saw either of us at a distance.

Hannah and Georgine chatted for a while. Hannah asked her how things were going, and they talked about all of the rain and how that was affecting the crops. Georgine also told her that they had so many youth applicants that year they had to turn several people away. In fact, as they were standing there talking, a group of three youths walked by the garden and yelled in from the sidewalk, "Can we get a job here this summer too?" Georgine responded by telling them that all the jobs had been filled but that they could apply next year.

As they talked I stood there and took everything in: their conversation, the activities of the youths, the passersby, the train occasionally rumbling above our heads as it passed. I thought, "This is definitely it. This is where I want to be this summer." It just felt right. I was relieved to have this feeling, as it had been almost two weeks since I had arrived in the city, and I was feeling very anxious to find a place where I felt inspired to work because I had a limited time to actually conduct the research.

A few days later a Cornell Cooperative Extension educator I had met was going to East New York to talk to a schoolteacher about using a garden-based learning curriculum in their school garden. Although his visit did not have anything to do with the farmers market or the gardens that contributed to it, I decided

Jonah in the UCC Garden

to tag along and see if I could stop in at the United Community Center garden afterward. I was going to meet the educator at the school, so that was my first time trying to navigate my way through the neighborhood from the subway, since I had been in a car on my previous visit.

I thought this would be a good opportunity to see more of the neighborhood, but I was definitely apprehensive since I kept hearing what a "scary place" East New York was supposed to be. I got off the L train on Livonia Avenue and descended the long flight of steps to the street level. I walked down Livonia under the elevated subway tracks for several blocks. I noticed many things I hadn't seen before. In some places trash lined the street sides and filled the gutters. Empty lots were overgrown with mugwort, an extremely aggressive and invasive weed. Storefronts were boarded up near small bodegas.

I was nervous, and I felt like I stuck out and that everyone was looking at me. I made my way to the meeting place, trying to look casual, and I felt relieved when I arrived safely.

Following the meeting I asked directions to the United Community Center. The teacher told me that it was several blocks straight down on New Lots Avenue. I figured it would be no problem to find it because I had been there only a few days before.

After walking past it several times, I found the center and stopped in to see if Georgine, the youth coordinator, might be around. I had called her a day or so before to try and set up a time to meet with her. I had not heard back from her yet, so I thought an in-person visit might be more effective.

The people in the center directed me out to the garden. I did not find her or any of the youths at the garden, but there was a young man, Jonah, there working. I introduced myself to him and told him I was looking for Georgine. He told me she was out picking up some supplies for the garden and asked if he could give her a message for me. I explained who I was and that I was in New York for the summer on a research fellowship and wanted to find out more about the gardens and market in East New York.

Jonah was very friendly and welcoming and wore a smile the whole time we spoke. He told me that he had worked at the UCC garden the summer before and would be working there all that summer as well. I asked him a few general questions about the garden, and I wondered how many youths worked there. We talked as he showed me around all of the vegetable beds, explaining how much of what was planted was growing slowly because of the rain. We talked a while longer before I left. Jonah told me that he would tell Georgine that I stopped by and that I should try calling her again—or that I could just stop by, as she was outside in the garden for much of the day.

Establishing More Local Contacts

Over the next week I met with several different people who worked for organizations that do various kinds of work with the East New York gardens and farmers market. I conducted informal interviews asking them about the history of the market, which gardeners were involved, and how the farmers market functioned.[4] I heard a lot about how the market was a tool for nutrition education, food systems education, youth and adult development, and economic development. This was useful background and orientation information for me, and it confirmed much of what I had read about the potential of urban agricultural initiatives—but I was not really getting to know any of the people who actually lived in East New York. I wanted to find out how they saw the market and the gardens functioning in their lives.

"I heard a lot about how the market was a tool for nutrition education, food systems education, youth and adult development, and economic development."

These interviews, however, did allow me to arrange for a few more tag-along sessions in East New York and to establish some

local contacts.[5] John Ameroso, a Cornell Cooperative Extension associate, is very involved in several urban agricultural initiatives throughout the five boroughs. He was going to be driving around to several sites in Brooklyn with a visiting Congressional Fellow, and he invited me to join them. Luckily, East New York was one of the stops. We stopped in at the UCC garden and found Georgine and Jonah at work there. Jonah knew John, and he introduced me to Georgine. She said she had actually just returned my call that day. We all looked around the garden, talked about how to increase production capacity, their plan to install a rainwater harvester, and various other technical aspects of food production. Before we left I asked Georgine if it would be all right for me to come by one day and help out in the garden so that I could get a feel for how the garden functioned. She said, "Sure"—and that I could stop by anytime. We arranged a date and said our goodbyes.

Following our stop at the UCC garden, we drove over to the Herbal Garden. John said that the woman who ran the Herbal Garden was one of the very first gardeners to be involved in the farmers market and that she was instrumental in getting the market established. I was thinking to myself, "Great! This will be a perfect person to meet."

When we arrived, the woman who greeted us with a broad smile—and who was clearly excited to see John—was none other than the woman who had expressed her frustrations with Cornell researchers at the Gardeners Association meeting! Upon seeing her again, I was relieved that she was so jovial and welcoming to us. She showed us around the vegetable beds and the compost area and then explained to us her never-ending battle with mugwort. I could see the weed was being kept at bay, but that even one week of inattention would allow it to creep into the vegetable bed area. As we were getting ready to go, the gardener insisted that we treat ourselves to a few of the plump strawberries that were ripening in one of the beds. On our way out I asked her if I could come by sometime and help her with some weeding in the garden. She quickly responded yes. I tried to arrange a time with her, but she said she was there most of the time, and that I should just stop in. I left that day feeling very excited that I had established two local garden contacts.

I made my third contact the following week when I accompanied one of the women who worked for Just Food to the New Visions Garden. She was going to coordinate a canning training session with the garden manager. Just Food, among other things,

New Visions Garden

arranges different food production and preservation training sessions between gardens and gardeners in New York City. A gardener from Harlem was going to do a session on pickling at the New Visions Garden.

I arrived at the New Visions Garden before my Just Food contact. By this time I was more comfortable navigating the neighborhood and less nervous while walking in the streets. However, I was always relieved to arrive at cultivated green spaces that felt so soft and serene after walking through the streets of East New York. When I arrived at the garden, several men in the front were shoveling out a big pile of mulch. I said, "Hello," and said I was there to meet the people from Just Food. They smiled warmly and said to come in. When I walked into the garden I was greeted by a mosaic of green rows of raised beds and a sign that read, "New Visions Garden, Working For A Better East New York."

From the back of the garden emerged the manager, who recognized me immediately from the East New York Gardeners Association meeting. She was the woman who told me I had writing like chicken scratches. She said, "I remember you! How come you haven't come by to help me in my garden, like you said you would!"

I apologized and said that I wasn't sure how to contact her, because I didn't know her name. She quickly told me her name, and said that she lived right across the street. She pointed to her house and said that I could either find her there or in the garden almost anytime during the summer. I asked if she really would like me to

come and help her, and she said, "Yah, girl, look at this place, I need all the help I can get!"

The garden seemed to me very well tended, but I realized what a large space it actually was, and I knew from my own gardening experience that you could always use extra help. So I replied, "Okay, how about tomorrow?"

She liked this, smiled, and said, "Come on out of that sun and sit yourself down under the tree. It is too hot to be underneath that sun today." It was a very hot and humid day, and I was happy to comply.

In the back half of the garden we sat under the shade of a large willow tree where there was a wooden bench. We sat down together and arranged for a day and time to meet. She then asked me, "Who do you work for, Green Guerillas?"

I said, "No."

"Green Thumb?" she asked, and again I replied, "No." I explained to her that I was there only for the summer, and that I was interested in learning about the gardens and the farmers market in East New York.

"What are you so curious about that for?" she asked. That was a really good question and one that I would continue to ask myself throughout the summer and into my writing process.[6]

Establishing a Routine: Establishing Trust

After establishing these contacts I began what would become a routine for most of my summer. I spent most of my days in the various gardens in East New York. I would go and help with weeding, watering, harvesting, pruning, shoveling mulch, and even installing drip irrigation systems. Each day I talked informally about the gardens and the market with the gardeners. I listened to conversations they had with other gardeners or people who stopped by while we were working, and I watched interactions between the youths while they were busy at work. I also looked and listened carefully on my way from garden to garden, taking in many details. It was only after spending several working sessions in the gardens that I asked to conduct my first interviews.

Helping out in the gardens before conducting any interviews did allow for the trust that researchers so frequently cite as so important to develop between me and the gardeners. When I first came to East New York, I felt awkward, uncomfortable, and definitely like an "outsider." As I spent more time in the gardens and walking through the streets, I lost much of that awkwardness, and I

began to feel more like myself as I interacted with people. I think it was much the same for the people with whom I had been working. Peoples' personalities began to shine through and be clearly recognizable as unique and individual. The grooves of frequent interaction and mutual fondness began to form.[7]

I never, however, lost my sense of being an outsider.[8] In fact, the more time I spent in East New York, walking, talking, and working beside people, the more I realized how much of an outsider I really was. This feeling was not due to a lack of warmness or openness from most of the people with whom I worked or whom I interviewed, but from my very clear realization that the environment in which I had been raised, the places I had been educated, and the opportunities for development to which I had become accustomed, were drastically different from those that I had observed in East New York. Each day my conversations with people who lived there confirmed these observations.

The Interview Process

All of this "pre-interview" and "establishing rapport" time allowed me to develop interview questions based on my "participant observations" of the previous weeks. It was becoming apparent to me that the gardens and the market were doing a lot more than providing fresh vegetables to the people in East New York. I wanted to start finding out whether the people who were growing and buying the vegetables felt the same, and if they did, what they thought some of those things were. I felt that conducting interviews with people was the best way for me to get a grasp of how the people who participated in the gardens and the farmers market understood their involvement in and experiences with the East New York Farms! initiative.[9]

After I conducted more formal interviews with a few of my "key contacts," I went about the lengthy and tedious process of transcribing the interviews word by word. Although tedious, transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to become very familiar with the stories of people's experiences and feelings around the gardens and the farmers market.

As I continued with my daily visits to East New York, the words of the gardeners became more recognizable to me during my observations. I would watch an action or interaction and hear the words of one of the research participants ringing in my ear. The forty-five-minute train rides to and from East New York every day afforded me the perfect opportunity to reflect upon and record

what I had seen and heard. I was able to record how my observations related back to the interviews I conducted as well as to keep a working record of my feelings and impressions of what I had seen.[10] These connections also helped me during further interviews. In the course of interviews, if someone mentioned a topic that I had heard another gardener or customer talk about, I would pay particular attention and ask them to elaborate.

In addition to working in the gardens, I also spent several hours every Saturday at the farmers market. I would do all of my weekly shopping there, and I would stop and sit awhile with the different gardeners at their tables. This allowed me to watch how vendors and customers interacted, listen to snippets of the shoppers' conversations, and watch the shoppers as they went about their business. I became a familiar face and began to feel as though I had established some strong relationships. At the farmers market I made contacts that allowed me to conduct interviews with customers and other gardeners. My key contacts introduced me to other gardeners who contributed to the market whom I had not yet interviewed. I learned that the relationships I had established with the key contacts were in fact as solid as I felt they were. When I met a gardener from the Floral Vineyards she said, "Yes, Janet says you are a good worker, that you have spent a lot of time with her in the garden," while she nodded at me approvingly.[11]

Over the course of the next three weeks I worked and conducted interviews with other gardeners. I also conducted interviews with farmers market customers. During this time I had many informal conversations with people at the farmers market and in the neighborhood as I went about my daily visits. I also attended a farmers market planning meeting, a neighborhood party at the New Visions Garden, and an organizational meeting at the New Visions Garden, where informal conversations also ensued.[12]

Listening to Echoes: Identifying Themes

These were busy and exciting weeks. I felt as though I was really starting to have a flow. During my interviews people said things that were in accordance with one another, and I was able to further discern several aspects of the gardens and market that were at work in peoples' thoughts and lives.

For example, every single person I interviewed mentioned the youths of the neighborhood. These people were concerned about creating a place where youths had a healthy environment in which they would be presented with opportunities to grow and be stimulated.

People talked about the gardens and the market as places to learn what vegetables are and how they affect our physical health. People talked about green space, things they had learned, and things they had taught, and people kept talking about this thing called "community."

I had always been interested in the notion of community being not necessarily determined solely by an actual physical space but through the interactions and relationships between people in that space. "Community" in my mind was a place where people did not cohabitate in a space in isolation from one another but a space where people were connected to one another through various networks of support and interdependence. What I started to find so very fascinating in my conversations with people in East New York was that the gardens and the market were providing opportunities to build these networks of support through interests such as nutrition, green space, and youth development and that people were establishing and developing relationships of interconnectivity through these efforts.[13]

"[T]he gardens and the market were providing opportunities to build these networks of support through interests such as nutrition, green space, and youth development. . ."

Simple as it may seem, I was coming to realize that the relationships in turn were an integral and essential element of what made the networks possible. Joyce, a UCC gardener, clearly articulated this notion in an interview when she said, "In a community it is the people [who] are important—people, people, people." These were among the words that I would hear ringing in my ears. What made me feel so excited was talking with different people and hearing their words resonating with each other in my head like an echo.

After these three intense weeks of interviews, conversations, hours spent working with the neighborhood gardeners, and Saturdays at the market, I began to get a feel for what I had spent the last two months studying, albeit in a broad sense: it was something people call "community development." "Community development" is a broad term that encompasses many facets of work around community issues—economic, social, environmental, and health issues among them. It was inspiring to see and hear some of these elements at work in "developing community" in East New York at that particular time through a particular medley of people. I realized, of course, that I was only scratching the surface of factors

in the neighborhood that contributed to developing community, but after spending two months with people at the gardens and market, I knew I was getting an understanding of some of them.

Leaving East New York and the Challenges of Writing

Leaving East New York to return to Cornell was extremely difficult for me. I had been welcomed by and established relationships with some of the most extraordinary people who had taught me so much. It felt so strange that all of a sudden I had to withdraw myself from their lives and their work that had made the theories of community-based development come alive for me. Of course everything was not perfect. There are always things that can be improved upon and developed, but I knew that when I returned to Cornell, I wanted to write something that would make these people and all of their good work come alive for the reader.

When I returned to Cornell to write a paper discussing my research for the people who had so kindly funded it, I felt paralyzed. Sitting behind a wall of glass in the climate-controlled library, looking out onto one of the perfectly manicured quads of the campus, I did not know how to proceed.

What was my research about? Here was this confounded question again. It was about so many things, and I felt lost in a sea of interview transcripts, field notes, feelings, and memories. I had so much information that I wanted to write about all of it—youth development, adult development, intergenerational relationships, social networks, and environmental and nutrition education. But I really was struggling with the problem of how I could include the people. I could not divorce what I had experienced and learned from the people who had, through our interactions, created the experience. I wanted them to be in there, present, as much a part of the research as the subjects that I was trying to elucidate through *their* words and *their* actions.

I also suffered anxiety: people had opened up their lives and entrusted their words to me. I felt a responsibility to represent them with the respect I felt they deserved. I struggled through writing this paper and discussed a myriad of the things represented in the interview transcripts and my field observations. However, the topics were not developed thoroughly or with particular focus. I also did not feel I had captured any of the richness or nuances of the people or the place itself. Essentially, this first early paper was a good way for me to get my feet wet in preparation for writing this thesis.

When I met with the chair of my committee about beginning the writing process, I lamented that I did not know how to begin. I was still stuck with the same problem of defining the focus of the research. Again I felt like I could not pick just one thing to focus on because I felt everything was important to address and that everything was interrelated. He again gave me some very valuable advice. He told me that in any situation there are multiple stories that happen simultaneously. He said I just had to pick the story I wanted to tell.[14]

Shortly after this meeting I met with my other committee member. I similarly explained my frustrations, and he suggested that I simply begin by picking one of my interviews and reading it. When I came upon something I found interesting, he suggested, I could stop, isolate it from the rest of the text, and write out my thoughts and ideas about what it was I found interesting. He told me to work closely with the "quotes" and to try to understand what they were actually saying. Keeping in mind what my chair had suggested, I tried his advice.

I spent about three weeks finding different things that were of interest and writing about them, but I had still not really found the "plot." I was still struggling to find a flow and a focus. During this time I became drawn to a particular passage where a gardener told a personal learning story. I was intrigued by the story because it revealed a transformative experience, and I was struck by the actual language that she used because she used a word—share—that I felt simply and profoundly elucidated what she gained from the experience. But I struggled with the analysis. I was stumbling around and over the text trying to illuminate the parts that I found important with little success. What helped me make the leap that I needed to "get into the quote" and express what I found important about it was the suggestion from my committee member that I use her actual words, the exact language from the quote in my analysis of it.[15] This was a tremendous "aha!" moment, and it opened the door that allowed me to use the actual words of the research participants to understand and articulate what I was finding so intriguing. I felt I was able to let them speak instead of simply writing about them.

Using this approach I was able to use the words of the research participants to guide me to other quotes relevant to the subject that I was exploring. I had by now become so familiar with the transcripts that while exploring a particular quote, I would remember something that someone else had said and that was related. I would go and find the other quote, and connections and then interconnections were made. It was like having their voices ringing and echoing

in my head all over again. Slowly the story began to emerge. What I still find truly amazing is that a whole thesis could be written around one word that kept blinking at me in a sea of thousands: "share."

Endnotes

1. In "The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research" *(2000)* Denzin and Lincoln briefly discuss the differences between qualitative and quantitative research. They explain, "The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes." By advising me to ask *how* instead of *does*, my advisor was encouraging me to look for the ways in which a reality may be emergent and not to try and prove or disprove its existence. For further discussion of quantitative and qualitative research and the philosophical paradigms that are represented through these approaches, see Bent Fylvbjerg's *Making Social Science Matter (2001)*.

2. In their "Placemaking" *(1995)* Schneekloth and Shibley assert, "Each act of intervention in the world is unique even when framed by the same practice, based on similar theories, and using similar methodologies. . . . Each place occurs only once. To act responsibly in that historical moment requires knowledge of that time/place/culture." Coming into East New York in order to conduct research was an intervention into that neighborhood and the lives of the people who live there. Although I had specific ideas or frames for understanding how local agriculture systems influenced communities, I was aware that each community is unique and felt that it was necessary to understand how the gardens and the market were situated within the specific context of the community and its people as the meaning of the market and gardens would be based upon the particulars of that "time/place/culture."

3. Chapter 11 of Lincoln and Guba's *(1985) Naturalistic Inquiry* discusses how a researcher's prolonged engagement functions on

multiple levels, including the increased probability of the verification of credibility. They state that all researchers enter a situation with a notion of what they may find, but they argue that one must understand the specific context of a situation before one can hope to understand anything that exists within that situation. People, places, and events all derive their meaning from the specific contexts in which they are embedded.

4. The interviews I conducted were with two women aged approximately 26–30 who work for the organization Just Food, two women aged approximately 26–30 who work for the East New York Development Corporation, one man aged approximately 45–55 who works for Cornell Cooperative Extension NYC, and one woman aged approximately 26–30 who works for Green Guerillas.

5. In *Interviewing as Qualitative Research (1998)* Irving Seidman discusses how it may be necessary for a researcher to contact potential research participants through "formal gatekeepers." In his text he refers to these formal gatekeepers as people who hold authority within institutional contexts, such as schools, and who may need to be contacted before access to participant groups can be established. Although I would not categorize the organizational-level people whom I accompanied into East New York as "authorities" like a school principal, local residents did accord these people a certain amount of respect and legitimacy that gave me an easier entry than integrating myself on my own.

6. In *Narrative Inquiry (2000)*, Clandinin and Connelly discuss the common expectation that researchers should have a clear and defined research topic or "research question," one that the researcher is set upon answering from the project's inception, through the fieldwork, and finally within the writing process. They argue that an inquirer is so often overwhelmed with the complexity and interactivity of situations that present themselves in the daily fieldwork, that often the "what of the inquiry" becomes difficult to define. Thus during the course of a "narrative inquiry" the researcher is constantly asking themselves "what is the phenomenon I am studying?" I was constantly asking myself this question while I was in East New York and even as I sat down to begin writing my thesis. So many aspects of the East New York Farmers' Market and gardens were constantly presenting themselves to me and were of interest. I heard about and saw youth development, intergenerational relationships, adult development, nutrition education, food

systems education, localized economies, and on, so that I could not begin to think of these things as separate from one another. I saw everything as interrelated and supporting one another.

At one point during the fieldwork I named my study as an inquiry that explored "how community-based farmers markets function as a support system for addressing the economic, social, and health-related inequities of low-income communities in NYC," in an effort to incorporate everything I was seeing, hearing, and learning about into the study. According to Clandinin and Connelly, the stating and restating of the specific research phenomenon is common and may happen at several points during the research process. They emphasize that such stating and restating is not simply due to inexperience, as they themselves also undergo the same process in their research.

7. Chapter 11 of Lincoln and Guba's *Naturalistic Inquiry (1985)* discusses trust between the researcher and the participants as something that must be developed through daily interactions in order to reassure the research participants that the information that is shared will not be abused but respected and treated in such a way that the interviewee is comfortable.

8. In chapter 11 of *Naturalistic Inquiry (1985)* Lincoln and Guba warn that prolonged engagement may lead to a phenomenon termed "going native," in which the researcher becomes so embedded in the culture that s/he is studying that their observations and views may become less acute.

9. These interviews were conducted with (1) gardener from the Herbal Garden, female, aged approximately 50–60; (2) garden manager of the New Visions Garden, female aged approximately 50–60 years; (3) youth coordinator/garden manager of the United Community Center garden, female aged approximately 26–30 years. Interviews were conducted in the gardens and tape recorded, with the exception of the New Visions Garden manager, which was conducted in her home and was not tape-recorded.

My interviews were structured around the phenomenological method of qualitative research, in which interviews are conducted in an open-ended manner. Open-ended questions allow the interviewer to use the research participants' responses as a basis for further exploration and an avenue through which the research participant can reflect upon and reconstruct their experiences with the interviewer. Often during my interviews a research participant would say something in response to a question that I wanted to

explore in further depth. As an example, in response to my request that she tell me about the gardening association of which she is a part, one gardener mentioned that she was not much of a "people person" before she became involved in gardening. I was interested in hearing more about how she thought this happened, so after she responded to another question, I asked her directly to tell me how gardening made her more of a "people person." For further discussion of the phenomenological method of interviewing see Seidman's *Interviewing as Qualitative Research (1998)*.

10. In qualitative research, field notes or texts are a commonly used technique for recording the details of researchers' observations. Clandinin and Conelley, in their *Narrative Inquiry (2000)*, discuss how field notes may function as a record of the outward events that the researcher observes as well as an internal record, or journal of the researcher's feelings or reactions to these events. My field notes took on this "duality" and were a way for me to "freeze specific moments" in the research process as well as a method for reflecting upon what I experienced. Often my reflections led me to make connections between previous observations or interviews.

Clandinin and Connelly further discuss how writing field texts can prevent the researcher from "going native." They indicate, however, that it is possible to "fall in love with one's participants" or establish a deep level of trust and friendship and still maintain an acuteness of observation by composing field texts. They cite field texts as a way for the researcher to "'slip in and out' of the experience being studied, slip in and out of intimacy." Throughout my research process I have never felt like I "slipped out of" having a deep level of care and respect for the research participants. I did, however, find writing on the train a necessary procedure as it allowed me some distance from the immediacy of the sights, sounds, smells, emotions, and actions of the day. While in East New York I often felt all of these experiences seemed "too close" to reflect upon. While writing on the train I was able to record the observations with what Clandinin and Connelly call "cool observation." I am not fond of the term "cool," as I never felt as though my intimacy with the research participants was severed through writing the notes, but it was as if I could write from above the experience, recording all of the nuances and details of the environment, the actions of the research participants, and my own actions and feelings about the situation as well. Essentially, while writing the field notes I was able to see my own feelings and actions as they were in the actual situation as well as being able to reflect upon these feelings and actions once removed from the situation.

11. Seidman, in his *Interviewing as Qualitative Research (1998)*, refers to people who hold "moral suasion" with others in a specific group/community/setting as informal gatekeepers. He notes that if informal gatekeepers participate in a research inquiry or project, then other people in the community may feel their participation is also okay. He suggests that researchers do not use informal gatekeepers to obtain access to others within the community. But if the respect of informal gatekeepers is gained and they participate in the project, then it may be easier to gain access to others in the community. I was able to conduct interviews with other gardeners and customers through both formal introductions and through my actions within the community, as was evidenced by the Floral Vineyards comment that she had heard about my work in other gardens.

12. I conducted formal, tape-recorded interviews with

    1. A gardener from Floral Vineyards, female, aged approximately 65–70 years
    2. A gardener from the Good Shepherd Garden, female, aged approximately 55–65 years
    3. A gardener from the United Community Center Garden, female, aged approximately 55–65 years
    4. A gardener from the United Community Center Garden, male, aged approximately 25–30 years
    5. A gardener from the Olympus Garden Club, female, aged approximately 45–55 years
    6. A Community Supported Agriculture member and farmers market customer, male, aged approximately 45–55 years
    7. A farmers market customer, male, aged approximately 25–30 years.
    8. A peri-urban farmer who contributes to the farmers market, male, aged approximately 35–45 years.

For the purpose of this article, I had many informal conversations with farmers market employees and customers and gardeners.

13. Polkinghorne's "Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis" *(1995)* discusses how in narrative inquiries the information or "data" that the researcher collects from participants is not simply a "sense impression" or a description of experiences but is produced through the dialogue and interactions of the researcher

and the participant. In my interviews I asked people to elaborate on things that were of particular interest to me. After speaking with multiple people I had become interested in exploring in more depth this concept of community people referred to, and I would often ask them to elaborate on *how* the things they mentioned were "good for the community."

14. See Polkinghorne *(1995)* for his discussion on how people instinctually make sense out their own and others' actions by configuring them into a storied plot. In the context of using narrative in research he states "The storied narrative form is not an imposition on data of an alien type but a tightening and ordering of experience by explicating an intrinsically meaningful form. Because of the gap between experienced actions and the emplotted explication of them, it is possible that the same data elements can be configured by more that one plot." When my committee chair told me to pick the story I most wanted to tell, he was responding to my frustration that within my "data" there were so many stories that could be told. What he encouraged me to do was to find, through the "data," the plot that held the most resonance for me.

15. See John Forester's *The Deliberative Practitioner (1999)* for a brilliant example of how using the actual words of those whom we have interviewed can allow the writer and the reader to access the insights, emotions, and nuances of a person's story from which we may learn and then further develop.

References

Clandinin, D. J., and F. M. Connelly. 2000. *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Denzin, N. K., and Y. S. Lincoln. 2000. The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In *The handbook of qualitative research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 1–27. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Forester, J. 1999. *The deliberative practitioner: Encouraging participatory planning processes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., and E. G. Guba. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Polkinghorne, D. E. 1995. Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. In *Life history and narrative*, ed. J. A. Hatch and R. Wisniewski, 5–23. Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Schneekloth, L. H., and R. G. Shibley. 1995. *Placemaking: The art and practice of building communities*. New York: Wiley.

Seidman, I. 1998. *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

About the Author

- Lael Gerhart was born on a small dairy farm outside Ithaca, NY, and grew up alongside her family's yogurt business. Lael holds a BFA in photography from New York University and an MS in adult and extension education from Cornell University, where she focused on community-based food systems. Following graduate school she served as a senior program coordinator with Cornell Cooperative Extension, where she initiated the Tompkins County Buy Local Campaign and the Healthy Food for All program. After relocating to the Bay Area, she worked with SAGE—Sustainable Agriculture Education—and the SF Victory Gardens Program. Lael loves to garden and cook, dreams about having chickens, and is currently the proud new mother of twin daughters.