The Vulnerable Researcher:
Some Unanticipated Challenges of Doctoral Fieldwork

Patricia Ballamingie
Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Sherrill Johnson
Colabora Consulting, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

This paper draws explicitly on the field experiences of two doctoral researchers in geography to elucidate some of the challenges and issues related to researcher vulnerability that are especially acute for graduate students. In spite of significant differences in context, both researchers experienced an unanticipated degree of professional vulnerability during their doctoral fieldwork that warrants further exploration, including a theoretical interrogation of the complex (and shifting) terrain of power relations within qualitative research projects. This paper addresses the lacuna in the qualitative methodological research literature on the topic of researcher vulnerability (in contrast to the well-developed discussion of participant vulnerability). Throughout, the authors suggest possible strategies for mitigating researcher vulnerability while protecting the overall integrity of the research process. Key Words: Researcher Vulnerability, Doctoral Fieldwork, Qualitative Research, and Power Relations in Research

Graduate students who choose to undertake the rigours of doctoral research do so for a variety of reasons, but for many it is a first and necessary step towards acquiring future academic employment. In the current hiring environment in which those who seek academic employment in the social sciences exceed the number of available jobs, a great deal depends on the quality of one's doctoral dissertation and subsequent potential to generate research publications. Yet for those whose research is motivated, in full or in part, by a commitment to environmental and/or social justice, there is another aspect of performance measurement to be grappled with as part of a doctoral research project. Starting from a critical, and in our cases feminist, research perspective, required that explicit attention be paid to the ethical nature of the research project, particularly when research participants are involved.

Finding an appropriate balance between the requirements of ethical research and the requirements of academic success can be challenging, particularly for novice researchers. For example, while peer-reviewed publication of research findings is the sine qua non of academic research, and considered a critical factor in securing post-doctoral academic employment, publication of sensitive findings may conflict with requests for participant confidentiality. In some cases participants may request that researchers withhold publication of results for a period of time so as not to undermine local initiatives. In particularly sensitive cases, participants may request that researchers not publish the findings at all, leaving researchers in a compromised position in terms of

their professional advancement. We contend that this tension can situate doctoral researchers in a position of unexpected professional vulnerability – potentially jeopardizing the timely completion of their degree and subsequent ability to succeed in the academic arena. We argue that issues of researcher vulnerability must be made visible so that these tensions can be explicitly addressed – theoretically and practically – as part of the doctoral research process.

Those engaging in doctoral work are often assumed to be in positions of privilege, especially when the research involves vulnerable and/or marginalized populations. Yet doctoral students are also, in many ways, highly vulnerable themselves. Successful and timely completion of a doctoral degree is often dependent on factors largely outside the researcher's immediate control, including adequate funding, and sufficient departmental and supervisory support. For those attempting to engage in participatory, community-based research, the availability of fieldwork (including identification of a relevant, timely, and topical issue as well as a community willing to participate in the research) is a minimum prerequisite for success. Moreover, doctoral candidates tend also to be younger and/or less experienced scholars, many of whom are likely unaware of their professional vulnerability as researchers. As novice investigators, they may be more likely to undertake the type of research that will leave them in a vulnerable position. Given that we found ourselves, in various ways, both powerful *and* vulnerable in the course of our doctoral research, we did our best to "work the hyphens" (Fine, 1994, p. 70) between these two positions in our attempts to engage in meaningful, ethical, and academically rigorous research.

While we were both successful in completing our doctoral dissertations, we were surprised by the degree of professional vulnerability each of us experienced during the research process, and equally surprised to find little methodological or theoretical guidance within the existing research literature. Researcher vulnerability in general, and doctoral researcher vulnerability in particular, remains an un(der)-researched area – one seldom addressed in the literature. This paper attempts to address this gap by making visible aspects of researcher vulnerability as a means of problematizing current discussions about the complex (and shifting) nature of power relations within qualitative research theory and practice. While we have drawn on our experiences as doctoral candidates, we would argue that issues of researcher vulnerability extend well beyond the boundaries of doctoral research.

Undertaking Research Employing a Critical, Feminist Research Approach

Feminist scholars have made significant contributions to the field of critical research methodology, and these insights have informed our respective methodological approaches. While neither of us engaged explicitly in gender-oriented research, we both adopted a critical, feminist methodological approach to conducting case study research. First, feminist scholars have problematized the very possibility of a neutral, objective, dispassionate researcher, arguing instead that purported objectivity is socially constructed and contingent upon context and social identity (Rose, 1997; Scott, 1992). Second, feminist scholars have critiqued the process of *Othering* so prevalent in the research relationship (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Fine, 1994). Third, feminist scholars have elucidated the interplay between power and the production of knowledge(s) and have emphasized

the need to situate oneself ". . .as a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge" (Rose, p. 306). And finally, feminist scholars have explored at length how ethical considerations "… are empirical and theoretical and *permeate* the qualitative research process" (Birch, Miller, Mauthner, & Jessop, 2002, p. 1).

Feminist scholars have argued for an approach that employs strategies of reflexivity and positionality[1] (Bingham, 2003; Doucet & Mauthner, 2002; England, 1994; Rose, 1997), and strives to be participatory (Birch & Miller, 2002; Cotterill, 1992; De Vries, 1992; Pratt, 2000). Feminist research is also – and importantly – often action-oriented (Gillies & Alldred, 2002; Harding, 1987; Reay, 1996) – aimed at alleviating suffering, uncovering an injustice, or bringing previously silenced voices to the fore. By adopting such an approach, researchers remain sensitive to potential power relations with informants, attempt to make visible the process of knowledge production, and seek to effect positive change. In many cases, research participants become actively involved in all stages of the research project – they become subjects, rather than objects, of the research process. [However, it should be noted that the real degree to which power can be democratically shared vis-à-vis participatory involvement has been repeatedly called into question (Gillies & Alldred, p. 43)]. Yet these discussions about power relations in research are based on the (generally unstated) assumption that the researcher is the more powerful partner in the relationship, and must be highly sensitive to the needs of the less powerful research subjects.

While we both chose to employ critical, feminist methodological approaches for our dissertation research, we were unprepared for the degree of professional vulnerability we experienced during (and after) the research process as a result of this methodological approach. As we searched for guidance to help mitigate, or at least explain, some of this vulnerability, we were also surprised to find a lacuna in the methodological literature. While much was written about participant vulnerability and the consequent importance of protecting vulnerable participants in research processes, the topic of researcher vulnerability was largely ignored. A survey of feminist literature in particular and qualitative methodological research more generally quickly uncovered a lack of attention (scholarly or otherwise) to the question of researcher vulnerability.

Perhaps most relevant were critical insights generated in the feminist methodological literature around ethics in qualitative research (Birch et al., 2002). For example, Duncombe and Jessop (2002) alluded to participants who exercised power not only by withholding information, but also by transgressing the implicit cues about how research relationships should proceed (p. 119). Luff (1999) interviewed hostile, anti-feminist women, and widened the feminist discussion of researching the powerful. However, in both cases, the challenges faced by researchers were not explicitly framed as points of vulnerability, though further investigation indicates that the descriptor would be apt.

An expanded search around researcher vulnerability to include a broader base of social science literature revealed some research that focused on the vulnerability of

---

[1] However, as Rose (1997) notes, strategies of positionality and reflexivity are not without their limitations since the very notion that self and context are fully understandable demands "an analytical certainty that is as insidious as the universalizing certainty that so many feminists have critiqued" (p. 318).

researchers working with particularly marginal sub-populations (albeit almost exclusively in health-related contexts). For example, Kidd and Finlayson (2006) examined issues of emotional intensity that arise when nurse researchers effectively co-construct narratives with interviewees. Davison (2004) explored the ways in which researchers working with vulnerable informants may through empathy experience undue conflict and distress. Similarly, Hill (2004) touched upon the impact of role reversal in collaborative research relationships, whereby the researcher may experience powerlessness and abandonment. Behar (1996) examined the vulnerability of anthropological observers in heart-wrenching circumstances. In each of these cases, existing literature around researcher vulnerability tends to refer primarily to personal (rather than professional) vulnerability, deals with the psychological aspects of researcher vulnerability, and occurs most often in fields of study where caretaking is the focal point (e.g., nursing). Though clearly valuable, these insights provided insufficient guidance in theorizing the professional vulnerability facing doctoral researchers undertaking particular types of research.

In the following section we present a brief overview of our individual research projects and highlight the various research challenges we encountered that left us feeling professionally vulnerable. This is followed by a broader discussion of researcher vulnerability, including some suggestions for mitigating this vulnerability in research projects.

Case Study Research

Ballamingie Case Study

Through the lens of critical political ecology, I conducted a discourse analysis and critical review of the Government of Ontario's *Lands for Life* public consultations over Crown land, and the claims to power implicit in such a process (Ballamingie, 2006). Part of this project involved an investigation into how select voices were privileged while others were silenced; how certain knowledges were deemed legitimate, while others were dismissed and/or subjugated. Most notably, I explored how counter-discourses of resistance invoked by First Nation peoples were ultimately silenced. I also examined the potential for, and obstacles to, the formation of a political alliance between First Nation representatives and environmental non-governmental organizations from the Partnership for Public Lands (a coalition including representatives from the World Wildlife Fund, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, and the Wildlands League).

I first looked exhaustively at those First Nation peoples who spoke at the *Lands for Life* public hearings (i.e., whose testimony is included as part of the public record). I then selectively supplemented those voices with a few key figures recommended in the course of other interviews (i.e., snowball sampling), with a view to clarifying, updating, and enlivening the substantive core of my data. These interviews took place in person during a field trip through the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence planning region. Although this experience proved to be a highlight of the research process, it also presented an interesting set of methodological constraints. In conducting interviews with First Nation institutional and community representatives, several unexpected challenges emerged, including: restricted access to key social actors, residual negativity based on poor

practices and ethical abuses of past researchers, the cumbersome nature of university ethics protocols, and the difficulty of working in politically charged contexts.

Restricted access to key social actors. In a number of cases, potentially interesting participants failed to return my repeated calls, and, in the end, I accepted their tacit refusal to engage in a dialogue. Although I found the lack of response to my various queries somewhat disheartening, I was all the more grateful to those who did consent to an interview. Whether the lack of interest on the part of these actors reflects logistical constraints, scepticism towards my interests as a researcher (to be elaborated upon shortly), or some other reason, remains unknown. However, the non-participation of select First Nation actors represented a limiting factor, and point of professional vulnerability – in this instance, to the charge of failing to include key stakeholder perspectives.

Foucault's interpretation of power as multidirectional, "operating from the top down and also from the bottom up" (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 185) is useful here. Certainly, a multidirectional understanding of power does not preclude the possibility of domination or oppression (in this case, in the context of potentially unequal researcher-participant relations), but rather, acknowledges the potential for interviewees to resist domination. Perhaps the most obvious – and relatively low risk – way that interviewees (both marginalized and élite) resist domination is through non-participation; or alternately, through withholding of testimony (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002, p. 119). It would behoove novice researchers to keep at the fore that participant access is a privilege, and not an entitlement, and to adjust expectations – and assumptions – regarding participation accordingly when planning research processes.

Interview access can also be denied for reasons completely unrelated to the project (and researcher) in question. Poor practices and ethical abuses of past researchers can legitimately result in limited access to interviewees. I faced this specific challenge when attempting to interview an aboriginal elder, in spite of having adhered closely to the ethical protocols established by my research institution. I first approached the Acting Chief (and gate-keeper) of the First Nation Band in question with a Letter of Introduction. I then obtained permission to speak with two senior members of the Land Resources Committee, designated to speak on these issues on behalf of the Band. However, on meeting in person at the Reserve, following a verbal introduction, it soon became apparent the interview would not proceed as smoothly as anticipated.

According to the interviewees, a researcher from an American university had spent a summer some years ago gathering detailed personal narratives, promising to return the original tapes, transcripts, and video footage. However, this researcher made no subsequent attempts to contact the First Nation band, and failed to return their findings to the community. Based on this previous encounter with an academic researcher, I was met understandably with immediate distrust. I investigated these allegations, identified a number of publications based on the previous researcher's findings, and detailed these to the Band representatives in question – an action that embraces Cotterill's (1992) suggestion that the research relationship be reciprocal. The Medical Research Council of Canada, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1998, Section 6.2) summarized a history of such unethical research, including instances of cultural appropriation,

mistreatment, and inaccuracies that have led to stigmatization. The authors conclude: "Such conduct has harmed the participant communities and spoiled future research opportunities" (p. 56).

I found this experience particularly frustrating in part because I desired strongly to give voice to these social actors whom I felt had been done an injustice in this political process. But the encounter was also difficult because I felt distinctly as though I had been constructed as *Other* by the potential interviewees, with foregone conclusions reached about my motivations and interests. No doubt, based on my outward appearance, I represented the history of White cultural appropriation. Only through repeated assurances of my intentions, and of my commitment to return my findings to the community, did these individuals seem progressively more receptive to the research project. If the logistics of my trip had been different (i.e., if more time had been allocated to each location, during which a relationship of trust might more readily have been built), perhaps an interview could have been arranged. However, with limited funds and familial obligations (I had my husband and nursing daughter in tow), an extended period in the field proved logistically unfeasible – inadvertently increasing my professional vulnerability. In the future, based on this experience, I would not presume to think I could conduct a meaningful interview with a community member without devoting adequate time to building relationships and spending time *in community*. Perhaps, rich involvement and good participation may only come about when the researcher has a developed history with the community – a relationship and personal commitment that would likely stretch beyond the time constraints of the typical Ph.D. research process.

This difficult encounter helped me to understand how identity is both negotiated and constructed. On the surface, I *am* a young, White woman from southern Ontario, presenting myself as an academic researcher. Perhaps it would be easy to infer from these facts alone that I come from a somewhat privileged background. Perhaps it would also be easy to assume I had only my own interests at heart (i.e., extracting data to advance my academic career). Since neither my history of activism around environment, development, human rights and social justice issues, nor my specific beliefs and values (e.g., of seeing myself in others, of recognizing the interconnected nature of all things, of striving towards non-judgment, of responding with compassion) were readily apparent, how could an aboriginal elder not remain wary of my intentions? And, as difficult as it is to know oneself, let alone another, this same difficulty arises in a research relationship. How, in a narrow span of time, do you establish a relationship of trust with a complete stranger, such that they would be willing to open up and share their unique insights? Without access to key participants (and their critical insights), research results can fall flat and lack nuance. Relatively inexperienced doctoral researchers might be particularly naive with regards to the assumptions they make about access, placing them in a more vulnerable position – thus making the successful completion of their thesis less certain.

In hindsight, I now believe that some kind of researcher *statement of positionality* and *promise of reciprocity* might have been helpful in gaining access. For example, simple and forthright statements such as: "I am here to interview you in order to explore the charge that the provincial government failed to protect the interests of Ontario First Nation peoples in the *Lands for Life* process. I would like to analyze this potential injustice, and your input would help me immeasurably." At least, then, my bias towards

social justice would have been clearly stated/implied, and could possibly have facilitated a smoother exchange.

The informed consent form as culturally inappropriate. A second, further complicating challenge arose with the use of the Informed Consent form (required, at the time, by my institution's ethics committee). As Miller and Bell (2002) explain: "Whilst ethics committees increasingly require researchers to produce consent forms for them to vet and for research participants to sign, the formality of such procedures will certainly alienate some groups and individuals" (p. 65) – an insight that certainly held in this context. In spite of repeated assurances that such a document was designed to protect participants' interests (i.e., primarily to ensure confidentiality and anonymity), one aboriginal elder I attempted to interview refused to sign anything, mocking the formality of the language with which the form was written. The participant was far more interested in having *me* sign the document – in having *me* put my promises in writing (which I gladly obliged). Although the same difficulties did not arise when dealing with First Nation participants at the institutional level, this experience raised the question as to whether an informed consent form – a standard ethical protocol – is *culturally appropriate* for use in some contexts, in this case with aboriginal elders.

In hindsight, use of the form felt insensitive in light of the negative historical connotations associated with the signing of treaties, of which First Nation elders are, perhaps, more acutely aware. However, a Letter of Commitment seems a reasonable means with which to address the challenge. Such a document, while closely following the content of the original Informed Consent, would assert the researcher's promises to the participants, and would be signed by the researcher alone. Participant consent would then be secured verbally. This implicitly acknowledges and seeks to address postcolonial power relations, ensuring mitigated vulnerability on the part of both researchers and informants.

In the interim period since this research project took place in 2001, the Carleton University Research Ethics Committee has developed a different aboriginal research protocol. Researchers are now required to prepare a script, and to proceed with oral consent. The name of the *Informed Consent* form itself has in some cases been changed to *Permission to Interview*. This shift has occurred in recognition that aboriginal culture is a largely oral culture that places paramount importance on a system of honor. Thus, the imposition of too much paperwork may jeopardize the research relationship.

However, in light of this encounter, it seems fair to suggest that doctoral researchers would have a more difficult time negotiating (or challenging) ethical obligations, even when they prove culturally inappropriate, than a more experienced, established, and tenured professor.

Challenges of working on politically contentious issues. The final point of vulnerability in this case study arose in particular because of the conceptual framework chosen, and in general because of the difficulty of working in a politically charged context. Although a poststructural discourse analysis inevitably involves deconstruction and critique, I became increasingly reticent not to further enrage political tensions. I fully acknowledge that it is much easier to sit back and critique a process such as *Lands for Life* than it is to actually engage in it, let alone coordinate it. Thus, I strove to put

forward a very careful presentation and nuanced delivery of some of the more politically contentious analysis (particularly around the injustice done to First Nation peoples, and failed alliance between First Nations and environmental groups). However, the fear of statements being taken out of context, misinterpreted, or not read in their entirety, remained. The difficulties I encountered in this regard highlight tensions around researcher neutrality – wherein researchers strive towards something that is ultimately unattainable. They also highlight the potential for experienced political actors to use the findings of researchers (especially inexperienced ones) to their strategic advantage.

I also sought to adopt a compassionate view towards different social actors, and to include prescriptive recommendations in the final chapter of my thesis, in spite of the charge that such normative findings might detract from academic credibility. In fact, there is a rich discussion underway within disciplines such as geography about the desirability and rigor of policy-relevant scholarship (see Kitchin & Sidaway, 2006). Many argue that a good deal of research has little practical relevance, and plead for a new policy turn in the discipline (Martin, 2001). But others deem prescriptive elements – a hallmark of engaged scholarship – to be insufficiently academic, leaving a researcher vulnerable to even more criticism than they would otherwise be.

Johnson Case Study

Based on a long-standing interest in the area of environmental conflict, and a personal belief that the number and intensity of natural resource conflicts in Canada is increasing and will continue to do so in the future, I actively sought an environmental conflict case study for my doctoral research fieldwork. I established the following criteria for case study inclusion: potential case studies had to involve a current, and ongoing, conflict, ideally still in its early stages; the dispute had to be centred around some type of natural resource development in Canada; resistance to the proposed development had to be locally-based (rather than externally initiated); and active members of the local resistance group had to be willing to participate in case study research. I hoped that a detailed study, occurring over an extended period of time, would provide sufficient data for a theoretically-rigorous discourse analysis of environmental conflicts in Canada.

After some searching, I was able to identify a conflict that met the above criteria, and proved an even richer source of data than expected because of two inter-connected factors specific to this particular conflict site. The first factor related to the geographic location of the site, a rural area located within commuting distance of a major metropolitan area, largely populated with ex-urbanites who had retired to the area after successful urban careers. Much research on the siting of locally-unwanted resource developments focuses on the imposition of these projects in marginalized communities. Consequently, conducting case study research in a decidedly non-marginalized community provided research findings that challenged existing orthodoxies in some of the research literature upon which I drew. These challenges are discussed in more detail later in this paper.

The second factor that enriched the case study research resulted from the amount of secondary source material generated in the course of this conflict. The project proponent and the local group resisting the proposed development had both hired several

consultants to produce reports on various aspects of the proposed development, and the local media provided ongoing coverage. In addition, at various points, extra-local journalists took interest in the story, producing a handful of other print and visual media perspectives on the conflict.

Specific details of this research area not included here, as the conflict is ongoing still, more than a decade after my initial contact with the local group resisting the natural resource development. Neither myself nor the group I worked with ever imagined this conflict would be so prolonged. An arbitrated decision ruling against the proposed project was finally delivered in November of 2010. But up until this point, with the decision pending, and much riding on the outcome for the case study group, I felt extremely uncomfortable publishing case study details and findings. The impact of this request on my ability to publish is discussed in more detail in the section to follow.

Publication of findings. The most noteworthy point of researcher vulnerability emerged at the end of my doctoral research. Although my doctoral journey was a rather long and drawn-out affair, the conflict I examined turned out to be even more drawn-out. As noted above, the arbitrated decision that ruled against the project was rendered almost four years after the completion of my dissertation. Research participants explicitly requested that details of the case study not be published prior to the date of the arbitrated decision, given their concerns that publications of dissertation findings might affect the dispute outcome. Many of the research participants have invested a decade of volunteer time, and in addition, the group has raised (and spent) significant amounts of money on this struggle.

I agreed to this request not to publish – on ethical grounds – although it does put me in an awkward position. Less so because I have chosen to pursue a non-academic career path, and as such, I do not face the same pressure to create publications from my dissertation as do recent graduates seeking academic employment. Regardless, it seems clear to me that not publishing these findings in the short-term is the only ethical choice, given the nature of the request. My choice is mitigated somewhat by the fact that I have publishable dissertation material that is not specific to the case study. However, for novice researchers undertaking case study research, particularly on politically contentious issues, it seems critical to raise questions about ethical publication of research findings early in the research process, and highlight any potential challenges to publication early on in the research process.

Working with non-marginalized participants. Any research project entails judgment calls and case study research comes with a set of inherent challenges as noted previously. But conducting research involving a group of highly competent and largely affluent individuals, situated within a generally prosperous geographic area, had its own challenges. Two particular issues stand out, in part because both were unexpected. The first centres around negative comments received from other researchers about the choice of case study site; the second centres around the dynamics of conducting doctoral research within the context of a well-resourced and well-connected resistance group.

One unexpected point of vulnerability came from the reactions of other academic researchers to my choice of case study site. The particular concern expressed throughout these conversations was around the appropriateness of conducting research related to

environmental justice issues through the study of an elite community. The main message in these comments – expressed subtly in some cases and blatantly in others – was that those living in a prosperous area could take care of themselves, while academic researchers, due to their privileged position, had a moral imperative to work alongside, or at the very least, on behalf of marginalized populations. I had no objection to challenging the departmental status quo on this issue, but did worry that going against the dominant ideological perspective in my department left me vulnerable to ideologically-based challenges (e.g., in candidacy and dissertation examinations) that would not have been an issue otherwise.

Emerging from largely leftist roots, much attention in social science has been paid to researching the experience of the *Other*, comprising, in essence, a body of research from the margins. It is hardly surprising then that within more progressive fields of social science research extensive emphasis has been placed on highlighting the "privileged relation" (Rose, 1997, p. 307) of academic researchers in the research process, and consequent exploration of the implications of researcher positionality for social science knowledge production. Without wanting to take issue with this highly interesting body of research, I would posit that a methodological gap exists with respect to the use of such critical social science approaches when working with non-marginalized populations.

This gap became apparent when I began to look for methodological guidance for working with non-marginalized groups. The lack of attention to issues of researcher vulnerability forced me to take a more critical look at this body of research, and its underlying assumptions about research. What became obvious was an (unarticulated) assumption that the researcher is always the dominant partner in a research relationship. This assumption presents two important methodological implications. First, when employing critical social science approaches, researchers must seek ways to mitigate their dominance over research participants and to create more parity in this relationship. On a related note, it is then assumed that due to their dominant role, researchers can bring something to the process that participants in a social struggle lack. For example, their value may be associated with the particular expertise they bring to the research process, or their social positioning, or their ability to convey legitimacy or to attract media attention to a particular issue. In this way, the research process becomes understood as a mutually beneficial relationship, in which each partner possesses something of value to the other.

One example of this presumption of researcher status is found in Burawoy's (2000) discussion of methods in global ethnography, where the first dimension noted refers to the need to get researchers into the field in order to mitigate the unevenness of the researcher/participant relationship, and "the relation of *domination*, which distorts the mutuality of exchange" (p. 27). In other words, for Burawoy, it is the responsibility of the researcher to take steps to minimize the natural dominating effect of his/her social positioning vis-à-vis those being researched. Another example emerges from England's (1994) discussion of research reflexivity, in a compilation of strategies for redistributing power in research relationships [e.g., "by shifting a lot of power over to the researched" (Rose, 1997, p. 310)].   Buried in these statements is the (seemingly self-evident) assumption that the researcher is the more powerful partner in the research relationship. I would argue, based on my experience, that this is not always the case, and that power and dominance in research relationships is a much more complex issue than sometimes

assumed. Working with a non-marginalized group, who largely perceived me as representing more risk than benefit to their group, left me in a potentially highly vulnerable position. It was always a possibility in the back of my mind that the group might decide to withdraw from the research process midway through my dissertation research, and had they done so, it would have been very awkward in terms of dissertation completion.

The second methodological implication of assuming research dominance is buried within the (again) unarticulated presumption that critical research should be focused on marginalized populations as a means of mitigating current forms of social injustice. I would argue that questions related to researcher vulnerability are under-researched due to the flawed assumption of research dominance, and the (unarticulated) assumption within critical research that marginalized/vulnerable populations constitute the most valid point for critical social science research. If marginalized populations are to be the only legitimate entry point for critical social science research, then the question of researcher dominance is valid, as is the perception that researchers can also be *of use* to research participants. However, these presumptions need to be critically examined with respect to undertaking critical social research with non-marginalized groups.

Attempts to make research participatory. I originally designed my research with the intent of conducting participatory/action research in collaboration with a community-based initiative. On a personal level, the deliberate attempt to use this approach grew out of feelings of dissatisfaction with non-participatory approaches, and out of my own discomfort and previous experiences with more conventional research methods. Over the span of my involvement in several different research projects, I consistently felt that I took far more away than I ever gave back to those being researched.

In the early days of this research, I intentionally chose a methodological approach designed to make the research process as visible, participatory, and action-oriented as possible. To accomplish this, I sought participation in all aspects of the research process, attempting to engage members of the local resistance group to work with me on the research and analysis. Methodologically, this was an explicit attempt to "democratize the research process between the researcher and local interested parties" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 4). In spite of many attempts on my part to encourage a participatory approach, this offer was met with little enthusiasm and even less uptake.

Although it was never stated directly to me, I am quite sure that at least a few of the group's members were less than comfortable with being part of a research project, and felt that the risks outweighed any tangible benefits that might accrue. Certainly, some members of the group were supportive of my involvement, while others found it tolerable. But overall their participation was understood as a favour to me rather than some type of mutually beneficial relationship. Consequently, my intended participatory research design had to be significantly adapted, and, in the end, became a much more conventional research project. As a doctoral candidate, this required ongoing negotiation with my committee to explain the gap between the proposed methodological design and the actual methodological implementation.

In hindsight I have far more conflicted feelings about attempting to employ an action-oriented approach than I did at the beginning of this research. Participatory and

action research methodologies emerged in response to more traditional approaches in which the researcher was clearly the dominant partner in the relationship, and emphasized the importance of sharing research responsibilities and decision-making between researchers and participants. I would argue these methodologies are also premised on the assumption that the researcher is bringing something of perceived value to the research relationship that would not otherwise be available. As such, one goal of participatory/action research methodologies is to design research in a way that is beneficial to both partners.

Attempting to employ participatory methodologies in working with a non-marginalized group presented new challenges. In this particular research project, mitigating my dominance over research participants was really the least of my worries. Instead, I found myself in the vulnerable position of using an extended case study method (and attempting to use participatory research methods) in a research relationship that did not fit within the mutually beneficial research framework I originally envisioned. The risks of not being able to successfully complete this dissertation [in part based on flawed, and perhaps naïve, assumptions about the nature of the possible research relationship(s) between myself and the case study participants] felt unacceptably high at times, and the options for re-starting the research on a different methodological path were quite limited.

Access to key informants. As with Ballamingie's research discussed above, ensuring the availability of informants for research interviews was also a challenge. During the course of my research there were certain key informants who were always unavailable when I requested interviews. While no one refused outright to participate in the interview process, there were individuals I eventually gave up on after several unsuccessful attempts at scheduling an interview. Because other members of the same group had agreed to participate in interviews, the impacts of non-participation were somewhat mitigated. It should be noted that I never assumed I was entitled to access these participants. However, the powerlessness I felt in this situation exacerbated my feelings of vulnerability as a researcher, and highlighted the importance of key informants to case study research – without their direct participation, the research project becomes difficult, if not impossible, to complete successfully. Certainly, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain guarantees of research participation prior to starting the research process, given the need to develop relationships of trust with participants prior to in-depth interviews.

Common Points of Vulnerability

The first section of this paper identified the key issue we faced during our doctoral research experiences: an unanticipated degree of professional vulnerability as researchers – vulnerability with potentially long-term implications: not only in terms of the timely completion of our degrees, but also in terms of the successful development of our academic careers. Although our individual case studies evoked different points of vulnerability, there were certain commonalties due to our doctoral status, and shared choice of a critical, feminist, and engaged approach to scholarship.

First, we both chose to use a type of qualitative inquiry relying heavily on the participation of identified key informants in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews.

While the interviews we conducted added both depth and analytical richness to our case study research, our heavy reliance on the willingness of participants to make their time and insights available at appropriate points in our research timelines left us vulnerable when some chose not to participate for all the reasons identified previously in this paper. Had others not been as generous with their time and insights, the quality of our doctoral dissertations would have been seriously compromised.

Non-participation of key informants remains an ongoing point of vulnerability (and clearly, a natural constraint in many research endeavors) since this challenge represents a real limitation to the scope of engagement achieved. In qualitative research, the quality of research results first and foremost from the willingness of key informants to participate thoughtfully and constructively in the research process. In research projects such as the ones we were dealing with, that is, involving conflicts over land use, it is critical to have access to key informants representing all the primary stakeholders in the conflict. Without this, the quality of the research can be severely compromised, if not rendered irrelevant. Losing even one key stakeholder group can skew the data collection significantly, and correspondingly, skew the results in particular ways, depending on which voice(s) are lost.

In addition to non-participation, there is also the risk of limited participation, with participants agreeing only grudgingly to the interview process, and the impact of this on the quality of the interview data. There are also risks of interviewees actively trying to subvert the research process, agreeing to interviews yet responding in ways intended to skew the data, or positing a particular perspective for political or other reasons. Participants may also choose to retract statements midway through the research process, or opt out of the research process at critical times.

We both perceived limited participation and/or non-participation to be closely tied to ways in which the interviewees themselves constructed each of us as researchers. To this end, Ballamingie perceived herself to be constructed as *Other* by First Nation participants, whereby her motivations and interests were assumed to be at odds with the community in question. Moreover, she felt as if she unwittingly (and unfairly) represented the history of White, cultural appropriation, and previous research abuses. Similarly, Johnson felt that at least some potential interviewees perceived that her involvement presented numerous risks for the group, and offered few tangible benefits. As such, this limited the amount of information she was able to collect during the interviewing phase of the research project. Fortunately, in both cases, the ability to triangulate data across sources (and not rely solely on participant access) mitigated the risk associated with non-participation of some key respondents.

Second, we both selected topical, politically contentious topics for dissertation research – analysis of which seems to hold inherently more risk. Both research environments involved hotly contested issues, with a diverse range of social actors putting forward multiple, competing interests, with significant social and ecological ramifications. While these types of topics provide fertile ground for a critical approach to scholarship, there are also many implications to making this type of research the centre of one's doctoral work. For Ballamingie, one aspect of perceived vulnerability (that caused some psychological distress) arose from her desire not to further enrage existing political tensions in the context of the research project and dissemination of findings. This speaks to the inherent challenges of trying to make research meaningful, advocating when an

injustice is perceived and/or uncovered, without inadvertently exacerbating an already difficult situation. For Johnson, the case study she researched remains contested, with the final arbitrated decision not expected prior to 2010, almost four years after the completion of her dissertation. Ultimately, the protracted length of the dispute was anticipated neither by the researcher nor by any of the research subjects. The ongoing nature of the dispute has raised many ethical issues around the publication of dissertation findings, particularly in light of research participant requests that much of the detailed analysis remain unpublished until the dispute has concluded.

For both researchers, the politically contentious nature of their case study research raised several questions, particularly with respect to the dissemination of research findings. For example, if the issue remains contentious beyond the completion of the dissertation, who might use these findings, and to what effect? In other words, are findings liable to manipulation (i.e., can they be subverted and/or co-opted to reach other political ends?) Conversely, what are the professional implications of not publishing dissertation results, or publishing years after the completion of study? If key actors request that part or all of the research not be published, or published only after final decisions have been made, what are the ethical and professional obligations of doctoral researchers, in which both volume and timing of publications matter greatly? What are the career implications of delaying publications, particularly if one is seeking academic employment and future research funding, both of which are heavily dependent on one's publication record? Clearly, delayed publication of research likely results in fewer job opportunities and less recognition for potentially valuable scholarly contributions.

In light of the issues raised above, we felt at times we were placed in a position of professional vulnerability where we constantly needed to "work the hyphens" (Fine, 1994, p. 70) between conducting ethical, critical qualitative research and developing viable academic careers, especially during times when the two goals seemed in opposition. Within academia, professional credibility is developed largely vis-à-vis scholarly publications. However, release of research findings (and analysis of these findings) may conflict with ethical approaches to research, or, may exacerbate existing political tensions. For example, what is a fair and ethical response when key participants request the researcher *not* to use or publish certain findings? And how would this affect the researcher's post-doctoral career trajectory? At the very least, this points to possible tensions between building an academic career and the ethical demands of qualitative research drawing largely on key informants.

Similarly, if a doctoral candidate opts to pursue a non-academic career, he/she may face a different set of professional challenges. Critically examining and writing about the engagement of multiple social actors (including representatives from key environmental groups, government, and industry) in a politically contentious situation may well preclude future employment in any of these sectors – at least in the area where the case study research was conducted. In an uncertain and highly competitive job market, the critical nature of research and/or findings may have an impact on one's ability to secure meaningful employment in one's area of expertise.

Mitigating Researcher Vulnerability

Situations of researcher vulnerability are often difficult to anticipate, and must be confronted as they occur in the course of actually engaging in research and seeing the results – likely more of a challenge for inexperienced researchers. Doctoral research projects must be developed with sufficient flexibility to be able to adapt to challenges as they emerge, while keeping the research going in a way that is ethical, responsive, and credible enough to be examined. However, all of these ethical challenges are amplified by uncertainty. As Foucault states: "We know what we do. We know why we do what we do. What we don't know is what what we do does." (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187).

While power remains fluid and shifting, clearly, researchers (and especially doctoral candidates) may in fact be vulnerable throughout the research encounter. Research projects that presume access to research participants – particularly in the case of topical and politically sensitive issues – may encounter significant challenges, and these may pose a very real risk to the successful completion of the proposed research. Researchers should think critically and reflexively about the risk(s) their project may pose to their own personal and professional goals, in addition to the risks these projects might entail for research participants. If the research will be of mutual benefit, researchers may well need to convince participants of this at the outset, in order to ensure they remain committed to the project.

Key social actors may deny researchers access for a variety of reasons. Community access may be limited based on unethical practices of previous researchers. Research projects in which this is a possibility ought to be investigated prior to research proposal development and addressed at the outset of the research process. A *Letter of Commitment* stating one's positionality, detailing promises to return findings to the community, and highlighting other potential ways in which the research relationship might be reciprocal to the research participants – and possibly the community more broadly – may help to facilitate access. Of course, participants may not perceive much value in the contribution and offer of reciprocity of a doctoral candidate (who, as a junior scholar, has not likely developed much prestige in the field or public reputation). In addition, participants may construct the researcher as *Other*, which may preclude access or skew the data presented. Devoting adequate time to relationship building and being *in community* can only help to more adequately nuance a researcher's complex social identity, and thus limit vulnerability in this regard. However, if fieldwork is not possible, due to familial obligations or financial constraints, the triangulation of data (amongst public records, popular press, and archival materials) will help to address this limitation.

Hotly contested environmental problems involving a range of diverse and competing social actors may place the researcher in a difficult political position. The selection of a comparative, rather than extended, case study mitigates the risks associated with limited access (or requests for delayed disclosure). Similarly, it is worth thinking strategically about how to publish material from a doctoral dissertation that does not disclose specific details associated with a case study. All of these strategies represent concrete ways in which researcher vulnerability can be mitigated, and ought to be considered not just by the candidate but also his/her thesis or dissertation committee to ensure successful completion of his/her degree and subsequent professional advancement.

In each case, the adoption of such strategies will also ensure more ethical treatment of research participants.

Conclusions

In this article we reflect on our scholarly engagements with issues related to conducting ethical fieldwork, and the personal and professional challenges we encountered in doing critical, community-based doctoral research employing key tenets of feminist methodology. More specifically, we explore points of commonality in researcher vulnerability experienced by doctoral candidates in two different settings. Specific unforeseen issues arose around limited participant access, the politically contentious nature of both case studies, difficulties around the publication of findings, and the separate (but distinct) challenges of working with marginalized and non-marginalized (élite) populations. None of this is intended to dissuade doctoral researchers from selecting contentious environmental case studies as their focus, however fraught with professional vulnerability they may prove to be. Difficult research relationships that force a researcher to confront his/her own vulnerability while still engaging ethically with participants will undoubtedly render rich insights, complementing traditional textual analysis and literature reviews.

Throughout, it is argued that doctoral candidates, as relatively young and/or inexperienced researchers, face these challenges quite acutely (and in ways for which they are generally unprepared). The assumption that researchers are the dominant partners in qualitative research relationships is deeply embedded, as is the assumption that if there is a vulnerable partner, it will be the researched, not the researcher. Consequently, most methodological guidance for qualitative research is directed towards mitigation of the researcher's power *over* the researched. Researcher vulnerability has been explored largely in the context of career advancement and timely completion of one's doctoral thesis, but also in terms of psychological distress, fear of criticism, and liability to manipulation. However, we suggest quite a number of ways in which researcher vulnerability might also be mitigated, and the case studies elucidated illustrate the importance of drawing attention to issues of professional vulnerability faced by doctoral researchers. Moreover, they bring to the fore a more nuanced understanding of power in the research relationship, in which power shifts and circulates.

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (1993). Introduction. In L. Abu-Lughod (Ed.), *Writing women's worlds: Bedouin stories* (pp. 1-42). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Ballamingie, P. (2006). *Paradoxes of power: The lands for life public consultations.* Doctoral dissertation, Carleton University, Ontario.
Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart.* Boston, MA: Beacon.
Bingham, N. (2003). Writing reflexively. In M. Pryke, G. Rose, & S. Whatmore (Eds.), *Using social theory: Thinking through research* (pp. 89-104). London, UK: Sage.

Birch, M., & Miller, T. (2002). Encouraging participation: Ethics and responsibilities. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 91-106). London, UK: Sage.

Birch, M., Miller, T., Mauthner, M., & Jessop, J. (2002). Introduction. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 1-13). London, UK: Sage.

Burawoy, M. (2000). Introduction: Reaching for the global. In M. Burawoy, J. A., Blum, S. George, Z. Gille, M. Thayer, T. Gowan, et al. (Eds.), *Global ethnography: Forces, connections, and imaginations in a post-modern world* (pp. 1-40). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cotterill, P. (1992). Interviewing women: Issues of friendship, vulnerability and power. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *15*(5/6), 593-606.

Davison, J. (2004). Dilemmas in research: Issues of vulnerability and disempowerment for the social worker/researcher. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *18*(3), 379-393.

De Vries, P. (1992). A research journey: On actors, concepts and the text. In N. Long & A. Long (Eds.), *Battlefields of knowledge* (pp. 47-84). New York, NY: Routledge.

Doucet, A., & Mauthner, N. (2002). Knowing responsibly: Linking ethics, research practice and epistemology. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 123-145). London, UK: Sage.

Dreyfus, H. L., & Rabinow, P. (1983). *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Duncombe, J., & Jessop, J. (2002). "Doing rapport" and the ethics of "faking friendship". In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 107-122). London, UK: Sage.

England, K. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality and feminist research. *Professional Geographer, 46*(1), 80-89.

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens, reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 70-82). London, UK: Sage.

Gillies, V., & Alldred, P. (2002). The ethics of intention: Research as a political tool. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 32-52). London, UK: Sage.

Greenwood, D., & Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Harding, S. (1987). Introduction: Is there a feminist method? In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and methodology: Social science issues* (pp. 1-14). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Hill, S. (2004). Doing collaborative research: Doing what feels right and makes sense. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *7*(2), 109-126.

Kidd, J., & Finlayson, M. (2006). Navigating uncharted water: Research ethics and emotional engagement in human inquiry. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, *13*, 423–428.

Kitchin, R., & Sidaway, J. D. (2006). Commentary – Geographies strategies. *The Professional Geographer*, *58*(4), 485-491.

Luff, D. (1999). Dialogue across the divides: "Moments of rapport" and power in feminist research with anti-feminist women. *Sociology, 33*(4), 687-703.

Martin, R. (2001). Geography and public policy: The case of the missing agenda. *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(2), 189-210.

Medical Research Council of Canada, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (1998). *Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans. Section 6: Research involving aboriginal peoples.* In Ottawa, Retrieved from
http://www.umanitoba.ca/research/media/TCPS_gov_canada_statement.pdf

Miller, T., & Bell, L. (2002). Consenting to what? Issues of access, gate-keeping and "informed" consent. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 53-69). London, UK: Sage.

Pratt, G. (2000). Participatory action research. In R. J. Johnston, D. Gregory, G. Pratt, & M. Watts (Eds.), *The dictionary of human geography* (4th ed., p. 574). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Limited.

Reay, D. (1996). Insider perspectives or stealing the words out of women's mouths: Interpretation in the research process. *Feminist Review, 53*, 57-73.

Rose, G. (1997). Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography, 21*(3), 305-320.

Scott, J. W. (1992). Experience. In J. Butler & J. W. Scott (Eds.), *Feminists theorize the political.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Author Note

Patricia Ballamingie is an assistant professor, cross-appointed to the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies and the Institute of Political Economy at Carleton University. Situated conceptually within the field of critical political ecology, her research interests include environmental conflict and democracy, engaged scholarship, sustainable community and urban agriculture. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to : Dr. Patricia Ballamingie, c/o Dept. of Geography & Environmental Studies, Loeb B349, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, ON, K1S 5B6; Phone: 613-824-8736 ; E-mail: Patricia_Ballamingie@carleton.ca

Sherrill Johnson is a principal at Colabora Consulting (www.colabora.ca) in Edmonton. She holds a Ph.D. in Geography and Environmental Studies from Carleton University. Her research interests are situated in the negotiated space between academic research and real world policy and practice. She is currently working on projects examining engaged scholarship (inside and outside the academy) and aging in suburbia. Correspondence can also be addressed to: Dr. Sherrill Johnson at E-mail: Sherrill@colabora.ca; Phone: 780-243-7904.

Article Citation

Ballamingie, P., & Johnson, S. (2011). The vulnerable researcher: Some unanticipated challenges of doctoral fieldwork. *The Qualitative Report*, *16*(3), 711-729. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-3/ballamingie.pdf