MAINTAINING PERSPECTIVE DURING TROUBLING RESEARCH INTERVIEWS: A RECEPTION STUDY WITH THREE CONVICTED MURDERERS

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PART III

Lay Bare the Heart: Credibility and the Final Report

The goal of constructivist, qualitative research is to uncover and detail a participant’s emergent, emic constructions. Though the emic is the focus, one should be reminded that this “insider” perspective is tapped through the hermeneutical—through collaborative, dialogic interactions between researcher and participant. Hence, the emic and the etic unite to elicit deepened insights into a participant’s multiple realities. This means that, although the researcher is positioned to learn from the participant, the researcher’s own inquiry aims, interests, values, opinions, and a priori knowledge, too, have bearing on the research process. Recognizing and affirming such a transactional relationship, the constructivist paradigm presumes a subjectivist epistemology. According to Guba and Lincoln, it is the knowledgeable, thoughtful “pristine mind” of the researcher that is prized during inquiry, as “empty-headedness [. . .] is not tantamount to open-mindedness.”¹ Thus, the dilemma becomes, not if the researcher holds opinions, but how that subjectivity manifests itself during the final report.

Early on in our interview encounter, Sylvester talked in some detail about how he regrets getting involved with the other four boys that fateful night. He repeatedly talked of how he should not have gone along for the ride, as he knew trouble was ahead. Sylvester even wrote a short story for me to read to young boys about having the strength to say “no” to peer pressure. I was impressed by Sylvester’s maturity and his willingness to help others stay out of trouble. In several letters, Sylvester offered thick description about that tragic night’s events, always expressing his regret about being a spectator who did not try to stop the shooting of Fiorentini. Sylvester even wrote that he is not ever going to appeal his life sentence because, given the terrible things that transpired over the course of that night, he got off very easy with a life sentence, thereby avoiding the death penalty. As I read Sylvester’s letters, I recall thinking that his punishment seemed quite severe given his limited role in the crimes. However, I also recalled Caryon writing “[i]t was a media pump up which got some of us alot of time.” Still, Sylvester had originally faced the death penalty. Again, Caryon’s letters seemed to contain the answer: he wrote, “[the media coverage] can get a man or a woman hung or executed.”

As discussed earlier, triangulation is a data collection and analysis tool that enables the researcher to get at a deeper, approximatable reality. The trick is to use multiple sources to get a better sense of the events so that you may better make sense of participants’ reactions to those events. For me, Caryon’s explanations notwithstanding, Sylvester’s sentence did not jibe with his level of involvement. I became curious. I continued to dig deeper into the case—reviewing documents and asking questions of multiple persons familiar with the case, until I discovered two key facts that were not widely documented, and which Sylvester omitted in his letters. Sylvester had been apprised of the Pearson murder before he left with the four. He did not innocently go along for a ride as he led me to believe. More, it was Sylvester who handed Stephen a gun and urged him to shoot Fiorentini when they encountered Fiorentini at the side of the road.
I was furious with myself for allowing myself to be duped and, ultimately, privileging Sylvester in my mind as one of the near-good guys in this tragedy. He was not an innocent who had simply been at the wrong place at the wrong time. I was disappointed in Sylvester for writing that he was owning up to his responsibility in the events by, specifically, not stopping the shooting, when in fact he failed to mention how his actions directly led to the attempted murder of Fiorentini.

My job as a researcher is to describe a participant’s emic constructions of his world—that is, his realities, be they around the social, the familiar, or even the filmic. My (etic) presence, even my emotional presence, which includes moments of intrigue, disgust, and optimism, in this transactional encounter, however, cannot be suddenly excised. “At the same time,” writes Fetterman, “the [researcher] should not dominate [. . .], nor should [his or her] signature be in every word or on every page.” To resolve this dilemma, and to thereby bring credibility to the final report, a record of researcher presence in the form of a “field log” is necessary. This record makes clear to the reader of the final report how closely the researcher was to the participants and the data. Such a record also acts as a tool for quality control—it keeps the researcher honest—by forcing him or her to document the kinds and degrees of values, a priori assumptions, emotions, inferences, and beliefs he or she introduced to the study. Thus, when the final report is compiled, creeping contamination of, say, anger and displeasure can be identified.

But in several letters Sylvester explains in his own words how the central character in *Menace II Society*, Caine, takes responsibility for all the wrong he has done, stating, “I have done too much [. . .].” Sylvester writes that he closely identifies with this character and this moment in the film. He writes of “regretting” and of sorrow over “getting in the car that night.” Sylvester connects with Caine on another level. Despite Caine’s coming to terms with his behavior and expressing remorse, the character has “done too much to go on” and must pay with his life. Sylvester, too, believes he is remorseful and that he is paying with his life (sentence). Sylvester offers that people who are remorseful, like Caine, “should get a second chance.”

In my field log, after my discoveries through triangulation, I jotted the following candid notes: "never took responsibility for Matt shooting; self-righteous about others’ involvement/remorse; lied—no guilty men in prison (like they said in Shawshank Redemption)."

Having documented my “emotional presence,” and thereby made myself aware of how closely tied these feelings could become to the analysis of these data, I was able to ask myself, “what other interpretations of these data can be had?” A second log entry read, in part:

*Sly continues to struggle with his role in murders—overlooking his participation. Other times prizes those (in film) who can face their actions [. . .] Still looks to film for cues on how to feel about murders. Uses film to prove he’s a victim of injustice—no redemption/2nd chance. Sly=Caine 6 years later [. . .]*

Thus, the field log served a self-reflexive function that enabled me to examine my own (im)partialities and gaps, and to deepen my own analysis of these data. By taking this step of recording and documenting my emotional presence, I was able to evidence the value or credibility of my analysis, and, ultimately, the final report.

The field log should not be thought of as simply a diary for a researcher’s feelings and emotions. Rather, the field log serves as a detailed accounting of the research process, and it works on a number of fronts—as a tool for peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, confirmability, and dependability—to bolster the final report’s accuracy and, ultimately, the reader’s confidence in the report.

**Peer debriefing**
Peer debriefing calls for the researcher to engage in a series of extensive discussions (held throughout the duration of the project) about one’s emerging analyses and conclusions, as well as any stresses—much like what surfaced around Sylvester. These repeated, extended discussions should be had with someone who is generally “disinterested” in the study, who has no “contractual interest,” and who can pose “searching questions in order to help the [researcher] understand his or her own posture and values and their role in inquiry.” Most importantly, the peer debriefer should be steeped in the adopted methodological approach.

I have several peer debriefers. One I describe as a constructivist purist. It was this individual I found most useful when I was faced with the ethical dilemma of using the participants’ names versus pseudonyms. Satisfying the concerns of this strict, constructivist ethicist helped me to make an informed, cautious decision about confidentiality in this study. When I began to feel angst and disappointment over Sylvester’s direct involvement in the shooting of Fiorentini, I called upon three debriefers (two met with me at one time, the “purist” helped me over the telephone) to talk through my reactions and to discuss how I should proceed with this study. The debriefers strongly urged me to keep an account in my field log. More, they reviewed my analyses of Sylvester’s data with an eye toward findings that may be more reflective of my visceral response rather than rooted in his constructions.

Progressive subjectivity

Qualitative, constructivist researchers must be diligently cognizant of their a priori assumptions and how those assumptions may color the inquiry process and, subsequently, the final report. Progressive subjectivity describes the process of the researcher scrutinizing and contemplating his or her prior and emerging assumptions and interpretations in relation to the project. Thus, the researcher records in his or her field log initial assumptions as well as what he or she expects to find during the process. If, during analysis, too much privilege is afforded to these expectations and assumptions, the researcher is too focused on imposing her or his own assumptions and values, and not on attending to the constructions. If this contamination is not checked, the final report will reflect only what the researcher expected to find, not the realities uncovered from the participants. When this occurs, the study’s credibility is severely compromised. It was during this process of monitoring my subjectivity that I realized I had placed an emphasis on a participant’s growth and rehabilitation (or re-assimilation into norms of law-abiding citizens). In my mind, Kunta seemed to be farthest away from the standard of civility I was imposing. It seemed that Caryon could, as I noted in my field log, go “either way”—meaning, he could redeem himself and become a useful, contributing citizen, or, given the hostile environment he was confined to, he could slip further into anti-social behavior. Sylvester seemed most promising. He was highly literate, he prized higher education, and he was working to disassociate himself from the kinds of media that proved problematic for him. Freedom Song, a civil rights epic, replaced Menace II Society. Balladeers like Luther Vandross were preferred, while gangsta’ rap was never mentioned. My subjectivity became “actualized” when, reviewing the field log, I came to acknowledge that I was affording too much privilege to behaviors and traits that I found valuable, such as those displayed by Sylvester. Though I am most pleased with Sylvester’s growth since 1994, I work daily, by writing in my field log, to ensure that my own beliefs and assumptions of what are acceptable life relationships and behaviors are not overly emphasized.

Confirmability

Confirmability can be viewed as the desired outcome of the progressive subjectivity process. As a criterion of quality research methods, confirmability is concerned with evidencing that the researcher’s interpretations of participants’ constructions are rooted in the participants’ constructions. Reliant upon field log recordings and the body of data, confirmability is established if the researcher’s interpretations
can be traced back to the original constructions. This process not only ensures the quality of the final report, but also shows that the information presented is “not a figment of the [researcher’s] imagination.”

Quite simply, a check for confirmability on the researcher’s part and on the part of the peer debriefer is an added assurance that a priori assumptions have not been privileged, and, therefore, that data analysis and the resulting final report creation can be verified as reflective of and grounded in the participants’ constructions.

**Dependability**

Finally dependability, similar to and interconnected with confirmability, calls for the entire research process (e.g., emotional presence, a priori assumptions, adjustments based on participants’ constructions, shifts in research emphases due to greater insight, follow-up interviews, decisions to exclude a participant, stresses, etc.), as it matures, and with all its shifts and changes, to be meticulously documented in the field log. Here, the goal is to confirm that the research process can be evaluated satisfactorily so that there is confidence in the final report. Dependability involves holding the researcher to details such as peer debriefing, progressive subjectivity, field log recording, and the like. Overall, without these steps, I believe that this project would have been susceptible to error and, ultimately, failure, at a number of different moments. Hence, these are quality assurances that cannot be compromised.

**As for that Happy Ending: Catalytic and Tactical Authenticity**

Earlier in this article, I positioned myself as a person and as a researcher through my researcher autobiography. I have detailed here my epistemological orientations (principled, God-fearing, tolerant, etc.), and talked about how this project called my beliefs into question. In the end, I am certain that I have changed during this process. Given my encounter with these participants, I know that I am not the same person. I believe that I am asking myself new and interesting questions about the justice system, the incarceration of youthful offenders, funding for prisoner education, victim advocacy, and, most importantly, the role of media education in our society. However, my growth is of less importance than that of the participants.

According to Lincoln and Guba, there are several ways to gauge the success of qualitative research. Two of them are “catalytic authenticity” and “tactical authenticity.” The former criterion describes the extent to which action is promoted by the research process. That is, having offered up deepened, sophisticated constructions, can the participants now be moved to some form of action or decision-making about themselves or their world? Simply, if the goals of research are to educate and, ideally, affect change, so too should these be the goals for the participants. As for the latter, tactical authenticity is based on the assumption that wanting to make a decision or undertake action is notable, but actually consummating the process is supreme. As Lincoln and Guba observe, “it is quite possible to want, and even to need, to act, but to lack the power to do so in any meaningful way.” Thus, participants who not only learn and come to understand the importance of change, but are also empowered to act, are best to evidence the participatory, educative nature of such research efforts. Sylvester and Caryon are already exhibiting how this research meets the catalytic and tactical authenticity criteria.

I began this essay quite dramatically, and just a bit facetiously, by equating qualitative research efforts with the good works, on behalf of humanity, of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Though I stand by my belief that this kind of research can be educative, affect change, and serve the citizenry, I am not holding my breath for a Nobel Prize for my research.
On September 1, 2000, I did get the greatest of rewards in the form of a letter from Sylvester Berry. I had not heard from Sylvester for a few weeks, and his silence made me fear the worse for him. Thankfully, Sylvester’s fate did not resemble a grotesque episode of HBO’s OZ. Rather, he had been very busy writing a series of appeals to his warden and wanted to hold off on writing to me again until he could share a story of success. Interestingly, Sylvester was not appealing his sentence for a reduction in time, or asking for more privileges; instead, he was appealing a “mailroom decision” about inmates “not getting books.”

It seems that prisons try to monitor the content of media inmates are sent from the outside. If there is content that may prove to promote an unhealthy prison environment, that medium or its messages are off limits to inmates. For example, if media such as cassette tapes or compact discs of speeches or music, magazines, or books that are unfamiliar to the (inmate) mailroom censors are sent to the prisoners, no one bothers to read or listen to the content to evaluate their suitability. The content is simply barred from prisoner access.

At least that is what is supposed to happen. I am truly surprised at what the incarcerated have access to. Interestingly enough, Playboy magazine is made available to inmates. In case you are wondering, its prurient content is a helpful tool for maintaining, shall we say “civility” among inmates who long for female companionship. The prison mailroom also has no problem with popular entertainment magazines such as Source, XXL, Ebony, or Jet.

And for a long time, Sylvester was happy with what he was given access to: celebrity magazines, the music of rap artist Scar Face and rhythm and blues singers Brian McKnight and Johnny Gill, the science fiction film The Matrix, and television programs like The Fresh Prince of Bel Air and Family Matters. And then one day I decided to send Sylvester an article from a scholarly journal. He wanted to see what one looked like since, in the end, he was contributing data for one. I was able to get an article through to him because its loose, printed pages looked more like a letter, than (horrors) a book. Sylvester was most intrigued with the journal article. He wanted more of this kind of educative material. I decided to send him reading materials that I was certain would be familiar to the censors (because known books do get through, especially books with a filmic tie like The Hurricane.) Being the teacher that I am, I created also an assignment. He would write a book report on the books that I had carefully chosen for him (and with the censors in mind). The “classic” books included: Native Son, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Bluest Eye, and Go Tell it on the Mountain. My plan was to later mail him reviews or commentary on the books (favorable and unfavorable), and in an effort to develop his critical thinking and writing skills, he would write a second book report addressing the critiques he had been provided. Did he agree, or disagree? What would he say to the authors of the reviews, if they were there, about the book? How would he frame a persuasive argument?

There was just one problem: the mailroom censors would not allow him access to any of the books. As he wrote: “You would think that [they] would applaud the fact I wish to further my education by reading an educating book rather than a Playboy.”

Sylvester shared with me that his concern over access to educational reading materials was not just a selfish one. He suddenly seemed to take issue with the fact that no one had access to non-entertainment media, or worse, did not know that such resources were available and useful. As he laments: “Being locked up in Kentucky, there is only so much education a person can obtain.” In the meantime, Sylvester asked for me to send him as much “loose” reading materials, no bindings, just pages (so the book will look like a very long, typed letter) as I could, including a copy of the New York Regents Competency Test (he read about it in an article I once sent him) to use as a diagnostic tool for him and other prisoners. Sylvester, drawing on his G.E.D. and college-level sociology course, hopes to work as a tutor/mentor for inmates who have no opportunity to complete their education.
Sylvester’s letter of September 1, 2000, indicated that his appeal of mailroom policy on books might result in only a partial victory. He reported that prison administrators were considering his appeal, which would affect all inmates and the reading materials to which they had access (the policy is that what you do for one, you must do for all). In the meantime, Sylvester could have only the Richard Wright classic *Native Son*.

Little did Sylvester know, Caryon Johnson, isolated from everyone and everything as he entered his 200th day in solitary confinement, mailed me a letter a few days after Sylvester’s arrived. Caryon’s was notably different from the previous correspondence I received from him. It was his most thoughtful and mature as he spoke about faith, the Bible, and finding spirituality from within. He writes:

> I wanna live my life [. . .] through my heavenly father, and his only begotten son, Mrs. Coleman. If we are God’s children, and we have been reborn of our spiritual nature [. . .] and we drop our old ways of sin. Please check this out Mrs. Coleman: John 10:34-35 and Psalm 82:6 (the holy writings). The word of God cannot be put aside.

In subsequent letters, Caryon wrote of his new desire to gain a better understanding of the world, “If it’s not a problem could you please send me some history stuff about Egypt. I’m looking for the untold story.” This was the first of these sort of requests for educational material, and from such a more tranquil and inquisitive Caryon.

Returning to Lincoln and Guba, another criterion for “good” research is that of “ontological authenticity.” Ontological authenticity describes an elevating of consciousness—the moment when a participant has “improved, matured, expanded.” Lincoln and Guba continue, citing their own previous research of 1986, by writing: “It is literally improvement in the individual’s (or group’s) conscious experiencing of the world.” Such growth was manifest in Caryon’s continually emerging constructions and in his day-to-day musings.

Insight into this evolved Caryon, as well as Sylvester, can in part be attributed to the presence of catalytic and tactical authenticity in this study. Maybe each would have grown as a result of any contact with a professor or teacher. However, they display growth around their selection of media, which I believe has much to do with their participation in this study.

Most interesting, credit for Caryon’s growth may also be rooted in Sylvester’s comeuppance. If you will recall, Sylvester wrote of a small victory in that he was given the book *Native Son*. Also recall that one inmate usually cannot have a special privilege that is not available to all others. Recently, Caryon sent one of his thoughtful, mature letters with the following post-script: “P.S.—I got that book The Little Yellow Dog. Thank you.”

No, thank you, Sylvester Berry.

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**ENDNOTES**


3 Lincoln and Guba, “Ethics” 237.


5 Lincoln and Guba, “Ethics” 250.