

Chapter 29. Embracing Tensions in Critical Qualitative Research: Letters from a Friend

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Dear Friend,

I'm writing this letter to you because I heard you are preparing a new research project but feel hesitation about how to engage in this process. I've been there before, so I'm writing to tell you about my own experience with research. More specifically, I want to share about the research I did with an organization that supports high school students that have experienced the foster care system, most of whom are Latinx. This organization offers a series of workshops, mentorship opportunities, and a residential summer program to empower students to see themselves in higher education. After working the inaugural residential summer program, I knew that my relationship with this organization and with the students would extend beyond the summer, however, I vowed to keep my involvement separate from my research. I didn't want my relationships to become work or the subject of study. Then, 2020 came and life as we knew it changed drastically.

People around the world were forced to adjust to a new life as we faced the threat of a virus that we knew very little about. As schools and businesses around the country began to shut down, the organization was forced to reimagine engagement with students. I was invited to collaborate with program staff to brainstorm different ways to engage students. Given my history with the organization, my doctoral studies in Communication, and my interest in pedagogy outside of the classroom, the Director of the organization encouraged me to consider doing my research here. I expressed my gratitude but declined citing concerns about how my role as a researcher would impact my relationships with the students. She asked again, urging me to use the tools I had gathered in my doctoral studies and the close relationships I had with the students to support their well-being. I remained skeptical but began to wonder the potential this context would offer all of us, and eventually accepted. In this project, I had the privilege of experiencing the possibilities of critical and liberatory pedagogies outside of the classroom through a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology called *pláticas*.

To say that I enjoyed doing this research project is an understatement. This was one of my favorite life experiences, and even though I defended my dissertation in 2023, this project continues to shape my understanding of research and

who I want to be in the world. And yet, I struggled *a lot*. I often found myself questioning whether I knew what I was doing, if I was causing harm to the students, and what the purpose of my project was. I felt lost, confused, and extremely skeptical. I share this with you because I know you might be feeling something similar. I want to share with you some of the challenges I experienced to let you know that it is okay to feel tension, and in fact, to emphasize that tension can be generative in research.

Choosing a culturally relevant research design that was critical and qualitative, I had the opportunity to spend time with the youth in many different contexts; virtually, outside of their homes, at community service events, during programming with the organization, and at a college campus. I loved this part of my work because it allowed me to continue building relationships with the youth, to learn about their lives, their hobbies, and who they are as people. I was also able to share with them who I am, the struggles I was experiencing as a graduate student, my favorite foods, and more serious things like my encounters with border patrol agents and the process of applying for a visa. Over a 15-month period, we engaged in numerous pláticas that allowed us to talk about power, oppression, resistance, and identity through our own embodied experiences. Our time together was unstructured but extremely generative, and because we shared a cultural background, we were able to connect on numerous points including lessons we learned growing up, comidas we love to eat, and different customs and traditions.

As our relationships continued to blossom, I started to feel tension which came up frequently in my field notes. This tension was about many aspects of my involvement with this organization but specifically focused on my role in this research project. I saw myself first and foremost as a mentor to these students, a role that mattered more to me than that of a researcher. But what did it mean for me to have power in the lives of these youths as a researcher? Power in terms of the role I played, in terms of what would be included or excluded in my dissertation, and how these youth would be portrayed. I struggled and frequently asked myself how I would make decisions. Because this tension was connected to ethical concerns in research, I felt like I couldn't write. Have you felt this, too?

Talk more soon,

Ana

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March 1, 2024

Hi again,

Last time I wrote, I was happy to share details about my research with you and the beginning of the tension I experienced. Today, I want to elaborate more on the tension that continued to animate my project. Each day my field notes had fewer thick descriptions and more questions; questions about my commitments to the

project and to the youth, about my role in their lives, and about the way I would report my findings. I was stuck, and I felt like I was making no progress. Frustrated and confused, I met with my advisor at our favorite coffee shop. Having an advisor who understood the vision of my work and the politic shaping it was essential. She encouraged me to sit in the tension that I was experiencing, rather than to turn away from it. To *feel it* and see what might come of it. So, I did just that. I intentionally wrote about this tension, specifically turning to performance studies to embrace embodied tension as a type of knowledge that was not only important in my experience but also critical in my research. I finally let myself feel. This process allowed me to shift my relationship to this tension and to understand it differently. In my research notes, I captured how this tension shifted for me.

Through every stage of this project, I have come to find pages inundated with tension. Tension about the limits of what I can do, about my inability to change the material realities of the teens I care deeply about, tension about the harm I might accidentally cause, or the possibility of misrepresenting the beauty that I witnessed. I have learned to understand this tension as my trusty companion, she who will never leave my side and who shows up when I need her most. The one whose presence reminds me to proceed with care, to refuse to tell the stories that don't belong to me, to shift my commitment from the academy to the community. She reminds me that hope in a different future lies not in the walls of the ivory tower, or the minutes spent presenting my work at a conference; but rather in the relationships we build outside of it, in the commitments we make to show up for each other, and in the everyday acts of care we choose

Rather than seeing tension as my enemy, it became a critical part of how I made decisions throughout the research process. I felt tension about the personal stories the teens would share with me, and whether I should include them in my research. I chose not to. I share this with you because I truly believe that sitting with and feeling that tension in our bodies can be extremely generative and can help us decide how we want to proceed. Rather than turning away from it, I encourage you to lean in, to feel it, and to let it guide and shape the decision you make. Don't be afraid to write it down and include it in your research, after all, there are likely others who, just like you, are trying to decide what to do with their own tension. I hope that my choice to share the tension I experienced gives you permission to sit in yours, too.

Take care, saludos!

Ana

April 2, 2024

Hola friend,

I'm grateful for the space you're offering me as I share my struggles with research. While my hope was to offer you support, you're doing the same for me. I'm glad to know that hearing about tensions in my work is helping you figure out yours. The tension I want to tell you about today is failure. Because my project was situated in the critical paradigm, it was imperative for me to pay attention to my positionality, to understand how power was ebbing and flowing in different contexts, and to center the voices and experiences of the youth. Many of my research notes and the conversations I had with friends and colleagues were focused on this, and what it meant to conduct my research through a politic that was humanizing, intersectional, and that placed community over the academy. In focusing on these politics, it was also critical for me to acknowledge my social position and the way it shaped my project.

As a Mexican immigrant, I have spent time thinking about the ways that I am both privileged and marginalized simultaneously, depending on the context in which I find myself. Most scholars committed to projects in the critical paradigm will emphasize this, so I was careful in paying attention to my positionality, taking notes, and talking with close friends and colleagues. The youth and I also talked about this, specifically the way that ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality were taught to us at an early age and continue to be reinforced in everyday interactions. We discussed the importance of unlearning these ideas so that we could be intentional in how we navigate the world. I felt confident that I was being critically reflexive and understood how my positionality was shaping my project and how I made sense of what I was observing.

In November of 2021, however, I had a critical realization about the way I was perceiving the caretakers in the lives of the youth. I had just returned home after visiting some of the youth at their homes. Because the COVID-19 pandemic was impacting the organization's programming and engagement with the students, I began doing home visits with some of the program staff as a way to create additional touchpoints with the students, where we could check in, connect, and provide support. On this night, I came home and realized how I was feeling. Rather than describing it to you, I want to share another excerpt from my research notes.

I just walked into my home from doing a home visit and I feel like I'm trying to find my grounding. I feel sad, or confused? From what I can remember, the last time I saw this student was for a home visit in March, about 8 months ago. Last week, his caretaker finally responded saying we could do a home visit, that he was still enrolled in school, and that he was struggling with depression. We quickly arranged for a home visit today. Seeing him today was exciting. He was even wearing his program

apparel and had a big smile on his face. He shared with us how bored he has been at school, which was no surprise to me since this is online, and I know how he feels about virtual learning. One of his family members came out, he was playing with her curly hair while telling us how smart she is; that although she is only two, she is already potty training. He speaks of her like she is his own and I see him prioritizing her over everything else. I sometimes wonder if he does this so that she can have a different childhood than he did. I know he loves her so much. It is in moments like this that I struggle being judgmental. I see the way the state functions, the way it is racialized, gendered, anti-Black, and the way it targets low-income families. And yet, in this context, I feel myself judging his caretakers. I feel angry at them for not making him the priority, for not stepping in and allowing him to focus on school and having a childhood. I catch myself judging without actually knowing them or the specifics of their situation. I know I don't know everything, and yet I have strong feelings towards them. I claim to be a humanizing scholar, and yet I am actively dehumanizing them. Guess there are limits to the way I embrace this approach. It's a process, and not a place at which one arrives. Well, I'm in the process. I need to revisit the work of scholars that I respect, pedagogues, qualitative researchers, and philosophers who don't shy away from a realization like this. What does reflexivity look like in this scenario? Rather, how have my assumptions and values shaped the way I engage this project generally, and the individual students and caretakers specifically? How are these values and assumptions reflecting those of the state? I am failing.

This was difficult to share, gracias for the space.

Ana

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May 12, 2024

Hello dear amigx,

How are you? Last time I wrote and shared the excerpt from my research notes, I was reminded of the shame I felt after writing about this failure. How did I not realize that my perceptions were helping maintain systems of oppression? By making assumptions about the youth's caretakers, I ignored the way that structures of oppression shape people's experiences and choices and instead individualized the situation. I felt tension, except this time, it was manifested as failure; failure to account for my position as someone who has not experienced

the foster care system, failure to live up to the politic I was claiming, and failure to acknowledge my complicity in the oppression of others as they exercise agency when navigating systems of oppression. To be honest, I still feel embarrassed to talk about this. At the same time, I do so because it is important to be transparent in the work that we do. I sat with this tension for weeks and thanks to my advisor Loretta LeMaster's work on failure I learned to see it as a series of structural constraints animated by oppressive ideologies. The embrace of failure then became an opportunity, a new point of departure to improvise new ways of being with one another. She taught me through her actions and her own work that failure serves as an opportunity to actualize change. This embrace deepened my understanding of structural inequality and the way everyday mundane communication upholds systems of oppression.

I share this because I want you to know that the research process is messy and complex. Often there are no right answers, but there will be instances where we encounter failure. This failure can be connected to the design of our projects, to our writing, to the way we collect data, and more. Rather than seeing failure as absolute, I learned to see it as an opportunity to continue refining what I do and how I do it. In moments where you feel like you are failing or have failed, I encourage you to embrace it as an opportunity.

I offer my thoughts and research notes humbly, not as a know-it-all expert in research but as a person who is committed to humanizing work, especially given the colonial roots of the academy. The research process is messy, uncomfortable, and always unfinished. For me, having clarity in the politic(s) that shape my work was instrumental, as I consistently turned back to these to see if my work was aligning with them. When I realized I wasn't living up to what I was claiming, I chose to lean into the tension. Rather than turning away, I was transparent and dedicated a chapter of my dissertation to the tensions I experienced, exploring the role of refusal, failure, and emotions in my project. In doing so, I hoped to create intentional space, both in my project and in the academy, to contend with the ethics of doing research with marginalized youth.

One of the most important lessons I have learned is to turn to my community, a community that you've become a part of. The research process can feel lonely and can cause significant uncertainty. While we are responsible for our own projects, finding a community shaped by critical care is imperative. Rather than facing tension alone, I had several people with whom I could sit. Their role wasn't to advise me or tell me what to do, instead they sat in the moment with me, offering space to listen and process what I was working through. I hope you are able to find those who will sit with you, too, and know that you can count on me. Lean into the mess, feel the tension, and sit with failure. You'll be better for it. Sending you my best,

Ana Isabel Terminel Iberri