Commentaries

Unknowing Researcher's Vulnerability: Re-searching Inequality on an Uneven Playing Field

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Abstract

This article engages in critical reflexivity to investigate the researcher's own sense of vulnerability when conducting research on social inequality. Using a disruptive experience in an immersive theatrical storytelling performance as a catalyst to deconstruct and raise consciousness about the author's privilege and her own role in research, this article seeks to unpack the politics at play in qualitative research in social and political psychology. The extent to which our privileged role and our identity as researchers are nested in history, in systems, and in structures is explored, and the risk that this shields us from being able to truly understand the reality, or epistemology, of the vulnerable groups we are seeking to investigate, is examined. The notion of unknowing the researcher's vulnerability in research is discussed, along with the ways in which systems and structures have allowed researchers to maintain emotional control and dominance in knowledge production. Moreover, through othering vulnerable emotions and legitimising a researcher's position as emotion-free, value-free, neutral, and objective, we may continue to engender epistemological injustice. Finally, the author emphasizes the importance of reflexivity and re-searching researchers' humility as ways to address this challenge.

Keywords: reflexivity, unknowing, knowledge, power, research

"The police are here!" A man yelled out at the front. "We all have to leave this building right now! We have to hide somewhere… Quick! Out the back!"

Someone directed us to the rear exit door.

The atmosphere was tense. In fact, everyone was tense. I grabbed the hands of my two young sons, one year old Liam and four year old Ryan to make sure they were following me closely. It was the first time I had ever put myself and my children in this kind of situation and I could feel my heart in my mouth. A million thoughts went through my mind. Before I knew what was happening, we were in the middle of

human chaos; all of the group flooding toward the only exit door at the rear of the building. I felt the pressure of people pushing behind me to move forward. It was frightening and horrible.

"Please watch out for my little children!" I yelled at the person behind me.

Our eyes met and she gave me an awkward smile and a nod. I held Liam tightly in my arms and gripped one of Ryan's hands. I had never been to this building before—what was the outside like? Where should we hide?

The police raiding the site were armed with handguns. Their actions were intimidating. Poor Liam was so scared he started to cry. A man near us was trying to hide.

"Shhhh…" he whispered to Liam.

I felt a sense of helplessness. There were about 50 of us squatting under a blue tarpaulin. It was like being in a camp. The sky must have empathised as it started to rain. I crouched lower and lower so my boys wouldn't get wet…

The description above describes my experience when my two children and I participated in a scene from a theatrical performance. The scene, 'Asylum Seeking', was part of *Chronicles: Searching for Songlines* (hereafter 'Chronicles'), devised and performed by a group of young peacebuilders, some of whom were asylum seekers. It was through this re-telling of their story that they engaged the general public with critical socio-political issues.

My involvement in the *Chronicles* theatre performance was part of a larger research project at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia that explored the ways young people construct and undertake peace work. While some of the broader findings have been discussed in publications I have written with colleagues (e.g. Law, Sonn, & Mackenzie, 2014; Sonn, Quayle, Mackenzie, & Law, 2014), this article is a further contribution to the literature and practice of critical research in qualitative methodologies.

An unexpected outcome of my participation in the *Chronicles* theatrical storytelling gave rise to this article. Hence, this article is not crafted to report on the interview findings, nor on the methodological implications of using theatrical story-telling as a research method. Rather, it aims to focus on the way that participation in theatrical storytelling became a platform for my own personal critical reflection on the identity, role, and politics of the researcher.

Chronicles as a Catalyst for Making the Unknown Visible

Participating in the *Chronicles* performance was a catalyst for my surprising experience that I felt helpless, pressured, powerless, worried, and vulnerable being one of 'them'. My body felt the emotions; I sensed my heart was racing, I was worried about whether my children would be frightened, and I was uncertain what would happen to us next. In other words, I experienced the sense of powerlessness and vulnerability that I had failed to capture during my initial method of inquiry which involved one-on-one interviews with participants. My embodied experience as one of the participants in *Chronicle* made me realise the critical absence of emotional involvement—in particular with our own vulnerable emotions—in much of academic research, even in post-positivist, constructivist and critical research paradigms.

For a while, I pondered why I was so surprised by that experience. Through discussing my sense of surprise with various people, I realised it came from the way I identified myself in the positionality of the subaltern. Like many

of the participants in *Chronicles*, I am not from the dominant local culture. I am a female migrant, of Chinese ethnicity and Malaysian background. English is not my first language. I am a long-term resident in the relatively marginalised, lower socio-economic, working class western suburbs of Melbourne. In my research, I trusted that my identity, language and culture automatically gave me a unique epistemology which would, or at least could, be shared with the research participants, most of whom were either Indigenous or from non-English speaking backgrounds such as newly arrived migrants or refugees. Considering my background, I assumed I would be able to capture, understand, and interpret the perspectives of those who were excluded and those who had suffered discrimination.

The embodied experience in *Chronicles* surprised me because it exposed the type of unconscious privileges that we continually need to remind ourselves about in the field. The privilege and invulnerability I had taken for granted had protected me from truly capturing the reality of many newly arrived immigrants. In particular, my surprise largely arose from the recognition of my implicit privilege; that I was an educated, employed, able-bodied, middle-class academic.

This complex intersectionality of these aspects of my researcher identity led me to reflect on the different roles and positionality of a social and political psychology researcher (Harré, 2004). The raw emotions I experienced shaped the interpretive lenses that I believed were critical when researching topics in a context of social inequality (Behar, 1996). These revelations motivated me to write this article.

In the following sections, I draw on my experience at the *Chronicles* event as a platform to theorise about power and privilege in the researcher's positioning. I discuss the importance of recognizing the researchers' own emotions—in particular the sense of powerlessness—as a critical phenomenon when researching social injustice. I draw on Geissler's (2013) notion of unknowing and non-knowing to deconstruct the politics of unknowing researchers' emotions, then discuss the implicit politics in the research structure and system. I explore the ways in which unknowing of the researcher's own feelings may be harmful, and how we as knowledge producers may contribute to epistemological injustice (de Sousa Santos, 2014). I then discuss the relevance of reflexivity and *re*-searching one's own positionality while researching issues of inequality and social injustice.

Contextual Background of Chronicles

Chronicles was produced by a Melbourne-based theatre group, Western Edge Youth Arts, in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Melbourne's West has traditionally been the home of the working class; a less affluent part of the city which is home to many refugees, migrants, and Indigenous people. The *Chronicles* project was led by a team of artists and created through improvisation by a group of young people, mainly of indigenous, migrant, and refugee backgrounds. Their stories were based on and reflected the reality of their lives (Sonn, Quayle, Mackenzie, & Law, 2014). The main aim of *Chronicles* was to bring people together to foster dialogue and understanding. Through improvisation, *Chronicles* inverted the role of the spectators from passive recipients to active participants. Through improvisation and co-performing, the blurring of the role boundaries established by conventional structures was made possible. *Chronicles* challenges the conventional theatrical approach which maintains unequal role relations between the active performers and the passive spectators.

The initial aim of the larger research project was to examine the ways in which young people of diverse socio-cultural and economic backgrounds negotiate identity and adopt diverse creative approaches in their peace-building activities. Social constructivism was used as our research methodology as it allowed greater space for a more personal, relational, and equal engagement between the researchers and the participants. Our initial research plan was to gather stories from the participants to discover the ways they connected with their personal family histories through theatrical representation in community performances of the *Chronicles*. I came into the research project as one of the principal researchers with a particular set of prescribed research expectations and the need to fulfil funding obligations. My participation in the *Chronicles* performance was not part of the research design nor was it planned. It happened when I responded to an invitation by the former artistic director of *Chronicles*. I felt that the experience would be useful to familiarise myself with the context and it also seemed like a good opportunity to build rapport with the research participants, so I accepted the invitation to take part in *Chronicles*.

The uniqueness of *Chronicles* was its immersive performance style, in which spectators actively participate in the drama. During the immersive co-performance, I realised the enormous epistemological gaps between my own experience and that of the participants. I felt challenged to fully capture and justify the reality of their experience even using social constructivist and critical methodologies. To some extent, the experience brought to mind some of the post-structural feminist theorists who insist that researchers are never able to fully capture and represent the world of lived experience (Behar, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2011). The later sections of this article will connect the relevance of these theories with my experience.

I learned something important from participating in *Chronicles*. I was intrigued by the notion that the bodily experience of vulnerability (or its absence) could potentially empower or disempower the work of a qualitative researcher in social and political psychology. It was a compelling and confronting experience to leave behind the safety net of being a researcher and to let go of my urge to control, to impose structure, to analyse and critique, as required in a researcher's role. I had to enter a new and unfamiliar space.

Researching Inequality on an Uneven Playing Field

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowing reality (Guba, 1990). In many traditional psychology research methodologies that are rooted in realist epistemologies and positivist approaches (e.g. Finley, 2005), it is generally assumed that empirical researchers possess greater interpretive and analytical expertise and maintain a superior level of knowledge than their research participants (Kleinsasser, 2000). Many post-positivist and social constructivist researchers believe that they can empower participants through collecting data and publishing research findings as a way to amplify participants' voices (Rappaport, 1990; Stein & Mankowski, 2004). As constructivism is a theoretical framework that emphasizes the idea that reality is socially constructed, social constructivist and critical research paradigms have provided much needed space for transformative research methodologies (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gergen & Gergen, 2011; Mertens, 2015), including the use of participatory action research (e.g. Lykes, 2013) and 'critical' hermeneutics (e.g. Dilthey, 1985) which aim to empower participants to reach the level of their researchers. Other methods, including auto-ethnography, researcher reflexivity, and personal narrative have provided a forum for researchers to personally and deliberately enter into the research process.

Notwithstanding the utility of these methods, the notion that constructivist researchers continue to conduct research on an uneven playing field is neglected. History, systems, structures, and institutions continue to position researchers

as socially privileged and powerful. As researchers, if we do not reflect on our own history, research traditions, our concept of self and of others, then inadvertently our work may contribute to interpretive bias, epistemological injustice, and other forms of harm.

Little attention has been given to addressing the epistemological issues between the researchers and the researched (Teo, 2010). Mainstream literature has largely focused on the technicality of addressing inequality when undertaking research, for example, elevating participants to the level of the researcher during the period of study and in the context of the research. Credit should be given to progressive and innovative research methods in recent decades. Yet without denying the utility of these methodological moves, the extent to which social and political psychologists are prepared to, or are even able to experience powerlessness and vulnerability to the same degree as that felt by participants, remains.

de Sousa Santos (2014) relates epistemological inequality in terms of a "cognitive dimension of social injustice" (p. ix). He argues that "there is no social justice without cognitive justice" (p. ix). When researching the role of the subaltern, he reveals that researchers were unable to fully comprehend certain perspectives as these perspectives were rendered invisible to them. He names this phenomenon "epistemological blindness" (p. ix); blindness that is associated with the positionality of an individual. This positionality is shaped by a researcher's historical, cultural, systemic, and structural background which simply renders certain 'things' invisible. For instance, the history of colonization, the system of neoliberalism, and a Eurocentric structure makes certain kinds of inequality invisible. Inequality becomes normalized, hence invisible, if unquestioned.

This notion is linked to the Foucauldian concept of politics and power, as Foucault (1982) asserts that people of privileged and powerful positions often do not realise the oppressive nature and processes of their own beliefs and actions on the powerless. While harmful consequences persist, social scientists are usually immune from being responsible for contributing to epistemological violence.

Teo (2010) uses the term epistemological violence to refer "to the interpretation of social-scientific data on the Other … produced when empirical data are interpreted as showing the inferiority of or problematizes the Other, even when data allow for equally viable alternative interpretations" (p. 295). The researcher who adopts a constructivist approach to research believes that "research is a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them" (Mertens, 2015, p. 16). If the interpretation of data is conducted with a "lack of hermeneutic awareness about what goes into an interpretation" (Teo, 2010, p. 296), as researchers, we can potentially produce knowledge that is harmful to participants. Like de Sousa Santos, Teo asserts that although epistemological violence is invisible, and does not result in blood or injuries, this form of violence can lead to significant implications. Epistemological violence can be found, for example, in the colonialist interpretation of history which led to the justification of the superiority of one race over another (Connell, 2007; Hegarty & Bruckmüller, 2013; Murove, 2012).

Researchers Contribution to Epistemological Injustice

To illustrate my point about the relationship between research and epistemological injustice, I focus on the issue of powerless feelings and the notion that researchers either do not feel, or do not report on their own vulnerable emotions in their research. As human beings, we are capable of a whole spectrum of feelings so inevitably, as researchers, we can also feel vulnerable and powerless.

Moreover, there is a difference between a lack of awareness and a conscious omission of the researcher's own sense of vulnerability when undertaking research. Geissler (2013) uses the terms 'unknowing' and 'not knowing' to distinguish this phenomenon. 'Not knowing' refers to ignorance or absence of a specific kind of knowledge, while 'unknowing' involves the conscious effort and active process of suppressing a certain experience or kind of knowledge. Geissler (2013) introduced the idea of unknowing to refer to a suppression of knowledge, such as an awareness of material inequality in the context of medical research in Africa, that researchers have suppressed in their conduct and reporting of research. I contend that this concept can also be applied to refer to an intangible construct such as a sense of vulnerability which researchers may or may not experience when conducting post-positivist, social constructivist, and critical research. For example, there is a distinction between 'I do not know about researcher vulnerability' (not knowing) and 'I know about researcher vulnerability, but I choose not to include this in my consciousness, my analysis, and my reporting' (unknowing).

Using the *Chronicles* example, I experienced both notions of unknowing and non-knowing. Firstly, as I was not trained to deeply engage with my emotions when doing research, there was an element of non-knowing. While I see myself as a qualitative researcher who is passionate about emancipatory and participatory research, it was not in my immediate mental realm that I could and was allowed to engage with my deepest emotions when conducting research in psychology. Most of the research training I have received largely emphasized the management aspects of research, such as risk and time management. Hence, my surprise encounter in the *Chronicle* was partly due to my ignorance; my non-knowing.

Secondly, to some extent, my training and experience has facilitated my conscious effort in omitting documenting and reporting on my own sense of vulnerability; my unknowing. My positionality as a psychology researcher in scientific psychological research is influenced by the notion that the emotional responses of a researcher are not legitimate data (Leitko & Peterson, 1982). Our emotions could call into question objective research observations. This makes researcher's emotions deviate from objectivity and threaten reliability. To deal with these illegitimate reactions, the conventions of research practice require that as researchers, we should unknow the emotional responses either through conscious acts of denial or habitual practice and training. That is, I had learned to switch off my emotional mode when switching on my researcher's mode. By "switching between known and unknown according to situation an interlocutor maintains relations necessary to conduct clinical research" (p. x, Geissler, 2013) and thus our behaviours are active, conscious and rational (unknowing).

As Geissler (2013) contends, "those involved in advancing important scientific knowledge know certain aspects of the reality they work on and in and yet do not know, do not want to know, should not know, or actively unknow them by way of oversight, ignorance, discursive conventions, and alternative terminology" (p. 13).

Considering that the process of knowledge making as truth-seeking is a central activity in our work, it is arguable that our rational and active effort of making certain experience and meanings known and unknown is political.

At *Chronicles*, I had the privilege of being in the role of a researcher where I was able to select and switch between different identities in research situations and encounters in order to produce the types of knowledge needed for the project. I could enter the research as a subordinate and exit the research context as an expert; I could act as a project manager and ensure that I met certain administrative goals. Such rational, calculative switching of identities is, to some extent, pragmatic and strategic—something necessary to 'do my job'. I was able to use my multiple identities to my advantage, but the participants in the research did not have such a privilege. Even in social constructivist and critical research projects, the participants may continue to remain, represent, and be re-

framed in a positionality of the powerless and vulnerable long after the research is complete. Moreover, the costs of this move are borne not only by participants; I can see this pragmatic switching of identities has cost me too. It has shielded me from deeply engaging with participants and caused me to suppress my feelings of vulnerability in my powerful role as a researcher undertaking work in contexts of inequality. Most importantly, such a stance also costs the general public who are prevented from acquiring knowledge that represents the actual and embodied truth. The *Chronicles* experience led me to question the extent to which my researcher privilege has contributed to socially unjust research. To what degree has my unknowing—my self-censoring of my vulnerability while producing knowledge—contributed to maintaining a politically salient division (Geissler, 2013)?

Politically Salient Division

To answer the above question, I now examine the relationship between my role as a researcher within the broader research culture, system, and politics. Increasingly, research is conducted within systems and structures of neoliberalism with institutional incentives and disincentives placed to encourage us, the researchers, to engage in research practices that involve a conscious, deliberate process of framing knowledge in certain ways to advance important scientific knowledge. In settings where knowledge can be owned, patented, traded, protected, and manipulated, people in a powerful position have substantial influence on knowledge production processes and outcomes (Leitko & Peterson, 1982, pp. 447-448). This influence also exists for those striving to work within social constructivist and critical paradigms (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Through ranking systems, funding and academic promotion structures, many researchers are bound to produce the types of knowledge desired and defined by the more powerful. Moreover, heavy academic workload has forced many academic researchers to be strategic, vigilant, and very focussed to manage various research projects and ensure the projects were completed within planned schedules.

The process of unknowing occurs beyond the researcher's roles and extends to the actual research context as well as during the stage of data interpretation. Unknowing also occurs at the stages of writing, peer review, editing, and publishing. This phenomenon is as much about exclusion and the maintenance of the boundaries which legitimate the types of knowledge that can be accepted and included in scientific publications, as it is about the inclusion, in social practice, of other invisible, silent, or practical ways of knowing, and about the shifts and interactions between these two ways of knowing.

With the privilege and power we have as knowledge producers, we need to be prepared to highlight and discuss the issue of knowledge exclusion in the literature of social and political psychology. In particular, the researcher's own vulnerable emotions and feelings in the research context are critically absent from publications in scientific research journals (Behar, 1996). Although researchers inevitably experience human emotions and feelings, psychologists study human emotions, thoughts and behaviour as their professional focus, and even though research psychologists conduct their research with members of the community who are oppressed and marginalised; unknowing about researcher emotions persists.

The Rejection of 'Weak' Emotions in a Masculine and Patriarchal Research Culture

The researcher's identity is consciously or unconsciously embedded in notions of superiority or expertise. Levin and Greenwood (2011) argue that many social scientists have a tendency to "conduct themselves … personally and professionally as if they were suprasocial and supracultural individualists whose behaviour is not subject to their own theories and analytical methods" (p. 32). This is in line with feminist critiques of science, which maintains

that traditional empirical research reflects a masculine culture that embeds patriarchal power relations and implies that the researcher role is superior to, and of a higher status, than that of participants (McIntyre & Lykes, 1998; Spivak, 1988). Many feminist scholars have written about the dominant academic and scientific culture in the western world that maintains a masculine and paternalistic ethos (Bandeira, 2008). This is a culture which implies that research scientists should demonstrate strength and influence through careful maintenance of emotional neutrality and objectivity, particularly in the positivist research sphere (Bandeira, 2008). Feelings are constructs that are often associated with subordinate characteristics such as being childish, feminine, irrational, or lacking masculinity and control.

Conventional scientists deem that the emotions of the researcher introduce overly subjective elements that threaten to contaminate research data. Researchers' emotions are thus discounted and rejected by many mainstream research and publishing institutions. The persistence of this concern even in post-positivist research underlies the motivation for researchers to unknow our vulnerability. However, if emotions begin to be treated as an aspect of science, or as a form of knowledge, then their value may be appreciated.

Depersonalization of Vulnerable Emotions

In psychology, research has generally framed vulnerability in ways that are disconnected from the role of the researcher. As emotions have been increasingly intellectualised as a phenomenon in academic research, emotions are treated as 'knowledge' rather than in their own form or emotional understanding. In other words, the divide between the head and the heart is well defined in academia. Intellectual knowledge is defined as a controlled substance because knowledge is objective and "authoritative" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106).

When writing about vulnerability, few academic writers use the first person. For example, Hoffmaster (2006) deferred to the dictionary definition and observed:

> One meaning of 'vulnerable' is to be susceptible to something, a bad something naturally, such as disease or infection… A second meaning of 'vulnerable' is to be capable of being physically or emotionally wounded… A third meaning of 'vulnerable' is to be capable of being persuaded or tempted… And a fourth meaning is to be liable to increased penalties… (p. 38).

Academic writing is depersonalized, and usually, the researcher's own emotions, and sense of vulnerability, are not revealed in writing.

Othering Vulnerability

Research systems and structures are normally set up to ensure that researchers actively and systematically design research that will prevent and avoid any chance that the researcher may be exposed to situations where they will be powerless and vulnerable. This process productively links to the expectations set by institutions and maintains the status quo.

By focusing on producing knowledge about the vulnerability of Others but not of ourselves, researchers selectively act "in a manner that appears objective, rational and fair" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, p. 2) and avoid the ambivalence and discomfort of entering the space of our own emotions in our research. Othering of vulnerability prevents researchers away from problematizing our own systems and the structures that support and enable the research industry.

A Need for Control: An Agenda of the Privileged and Powerful

On rare occasions when a researcher chooses to articulate their vulnerability in the literature, it is usually associated with problems in research settings (Jamieson, 2000; Warr, 2004) that require further and more careful control and management so researchers can avoid or overcome risky or dangerous situations. Institutions usually devote attention to risk management, such as closer research supervision and training, or more stringent ethics approval and policies to 'protect' researchers from potentially being emotionally at risk. Increasingly researchers are coerced into and trained to maintain emotional neutrality, while some researchers report the experience of learned 'desensitization' (i.e. not being affected by accounts of tragic life events told by the participants) (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the dominant focus of ethics regulations is to protect institutions, rather than individuals (Christians, 2011). However, the regulations can be counter-productive (Smith, 2005) or even harmful to the subaltern (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For example, a university ethics committee, operating in an increasingly risk-averse culture, often constructs a series of scenarios around research participants of subaltern status assuming they are difficult, uncooperative, and even deviant (Jamieson, 2000). Such assumptions often lead to stringent research protocols that could set barriers to genuine engagement and interactions with the participants. As Kidman (2007) asserts, "it is this kind of paternalistic attitude which creates problems when members of ethics committees apply ethical templates to qualitative social research projects without due regard for the way in which their own personal prejudices and biases can influence the approval process" (p. 78).

The need for control extends even to the concept that psychologists have come to assume a quasi-religious role. Rappaport even once alluded to the function of mainstream psychologists as like "theologians and priests" (p.18). As psychology researchers, we could be seen to interpret theology into everyday knowledge. Based on our "religious beliefs" (ontology and epistemology) and "ritual" (methods), we give rise to "knowledge" (science) (Rappaport, 1990, p. 19). Yet, although we gain power through research, our form of knowledge appears as though we were "not present, or as if we hover above our participants, watching and recording but not interacting" (Langhout, 2006, p. 273). We choose to adopt an ordained stance, separated from the laity whom we observe.

Maintenance of Privilege Disciplinary Power

Through ignoring and rejecting weak emotions, depersonalizing vulnerable emotions, othering vulnerability, and imposing stringent control in research processes, we are protecting the fortress of our discipline in subtle but systemic ways. Hegarty and Bruckmüller (2013) assert that psychology research discourse, accounts, and interpretations of evidences often marginalised the minority by skewing toward selectively privileged members alike the researchers themselves. We do that by making lower-status groups the 'figure' (e.g. gay and lesbians, indigenous) and the dominant higher-status groups (e.g. European, English speaking, men, heterosexuals, nuclear family) the 'background' of research when explain group differences. These cognitive asymmetries when explaining social groups bear on the form of power that Foucault (1982) called disciplinary power.

These elusive but systemic detachments of researchers' own vulnerable emotions are political. "Because [researchers] are in a position to control the flow of information, power holders are also better able to manage the impressions others have of them… they can establish their own legitimacy… the possession of power is associated with an increased reliance on stereotypes and the derogation of subordinates, both of which help to keep the powerless in their place and to reinforce the hierarchical status quo" (van der Toorn et al., 2015, p. 2). While the system of privilege has continued to frame and govern much research (de Sousa Santos, 2014), it creates a cycle of privilege as influential researchers articulate, theorize, intellectualize, and name powerlessness but choose

not to feel it, or live with it. By keeping vulnerable participants in their place, the researcher is able to maintain the status quo and continue to benefit from conducting research on an oppressive subject matter, and about oppressed subjects (Kidman, 2007; Putt, 2013).

Reflecting on my own experiences during the asylum seeking scene in *Chronicles* forced me to unpack my role as researcher as well as to examine the way that research is typically carried out. The research process is usually carefully managed and controlled so a series of expectations and responsibilities are handled. My experience surprised me with an intense realisation of the implication of maintaining an emotionally neutral, objective and impartial attitude to the types of knowledge I produce, in comparison with emotionally engaged work. The surprise also revealed what is frequently taken for granted—the socio-political advantages and power inherent in the role of a scholar researching issues of social disadvantage, diversity, and pluralities of identity and culture.

However, writing about the researcher from a deeply experienced moment of insight, provided for an intensely destabilizing clarity. Normally, I do not have to go through the intense discomfort of talking about my own place of oppression, of the vulnerability of being a migrant, or the ways in which my identity-construction can be contra-dictory and inconsistent. Yet, these are questions that I regularly pose to my research subjects. I am privileged to ask, but not to answer. I am privileged to construct the questions, rather than being constrained to respond to them. I choose whom I interview, and when, and how. I have reflected on all these areas of privilege that my role as a researcher accords me. As a researcher, I realize I have grown comfortable with prescribed ways of researching Others, including conducting observations and interviews. Yet my experience with *Chronicles* stimulated a sense that I may risk inflicting epistemological injustice while researching and writing about the vulnerability of Others.

The idea that I could contribute to epistemological injustice was utterly unsettling. Nonetheless, how do we even know whether we have a cognitive blind spot (de Sousa Santos, 2014)? How do we know what is in this cognitive blind spot? And what is it that blinds us?

Implications for Future Research Relationships and Knowledge Construction in Psychology

I do not have empirical answers for the questions I pose, however, I aim to open a space for dialogue on this topic. In the following section, I reflect on two ideas: reflexivity and *re*-searching for future research on relationships and knowledge co-construction.

As researchers, we cannot eliminate epistemological inequality with sophisticated research technologies and measurements without a deep reflection on the ways the intersectionality of our identities plays out in the framing, design and interpretation of research (Behar, 1996; Kleinsasser, 2000; McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). Reflexivity refers to the idea of critically examining oneself and one's surroundings. It suggests the importance of unpacking our multilayered identities as researchers, and to understand and acknowledge that every individual carries a spectrum of oppressed identities and experiences of privilege that are fluid, situated, and contextual. It is relevant to re-searchers in social and political psychology, as we need to be both aware of and able to acknowledge our multiple lenses (epistemologies), our positionality, and our roles in research.

My participation in *Chronicles* gave me an insider understanding (Alston, 2013) which could complement the understanding I could glean in my role as an outsider researcher. From my insider perspective in the asylum-seeking scene, I felt frustrated, misjudged and forced to move when pushed to the back of the room. I was concerned for my children's safety and wellbeing in the scene with police officers, and I was worried that my children would be frightened by the sound of loud gunshots. I could feel my heart racing. I was afraid that we were the slowest and would be the last to get out of the building. I was also concerned about trivial things such as getting wet in the rain. These spontaneous, sensitive, and personal experiences would be difficult, if not impossible, to capture in interviews conducted by a detached observer/researcher. The immersive co-performance brought me closer to the level of the researched, and this experience far exceeded my expectation of simply interviewing participants. In the case of the asylum seeker scenario, my privileged middle-class, able-bodied, educated, researcher 'self' not only shaped my epistemology but represented the experience. In short, the notion of reflexivity in which researchers seek to explicitly recognize their positionality as being grounded in culture, space and history (Behar, 1996; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Hertz, 1997; Kleinsasser, 2000; McIntyre & Lykes, 1998) assumes greater significance in a project which challenges identity construction and the felt experience of identity (Rudmin, 2010).

We could reflect more explicitly on our own deep emotions and feelings when undertaking constructivist and critical research in psychology. The emotional engagement offered by *Chronicles* introduced another layer of understanding that contributed to my awareness of being a researcher who is able to conduct research with empathy, emotional integrity and humility. Humility is connected to questions of power—it is about lowering one's own sense of entitlement and status quo. Humility implies holding a modest view of one's own importance and rank. It is an element of reflexivity that is critical and relevant in psychology, especially for researchers who conduct qualitative studies with marginalised communities on sensitive topics. Being humble in a research setting that involves 'participants' who may be in marginalized positions means researchers may experience various emotional difficulties (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). Humility may lead to different epistemological relationships with the participants and a different interpretation of the data. As human being we cannot selectively numb certain emotions and not others (Brown, 2012). Having a humble attitude allows us to accept our own imperfections and powerlessness. Through un-numbing our emotions, we are more likely to feel a whole spectrum of emotions, including joys, gratitude and happiness, and produce knowledge that better represents the truth, and engage in transformative social research (Brown, 2012). It opens the door to a more equal foundation of power within a relationship between researchers and participants. My experience of powerlessness occurred as a genuine surprise in spite of my understanding that the true spirit of critical and qualitative research positions the role of the researcher in the research process itself.

To be reflexive, we need to *re*-search. *Re*-searching refers to the practices of ongoing questioning and self-questioning about our own privilege and power long after the data collection phase. *Re*-searching includes being pro-active in inquiring in creative and innovative ways that acknowledge and engage in the co-creative process of knowledge-making with participants throughout research processes (Alcoff, 1991). We can *re*-search by asking questions beyond the obvious; we can unlearn to relearn. We *re*-search by flipping the power relations between the researchers and the researched. We *re*-search by putting ourselves in the participants' shoes. Through *re*-searching the implications of the intersectionality of our multiple social positioning, we are made aware of the ways in which our identities frame our understanding and interpretations (Kleinsasser, 2000; Parker, 2005). *Re*-searching can enable us to 'see' that the spectrum of our epistemology of inequality differs between, for example, a European woman and an Indigenous man and that both individuals experience inequality in ways that are both similar and very different.

Re-searching the researchers is not a new concept in fields beyond psychology.

Ruth Behar (1996), for example, is an anthropologist of Cuban-Jewish background who has written and published about her own emotions and vulnerability in research using first-person voice. By mixing personal subjectivity and ethnography, she emphasizes the importance of researching the truth that emerges from the sense of vulnerability she experienced as that moves beyond the truth gained purely from observation. By reconnecting to ethnographic empathy, her emotions become the catalyst for self-awareness and enable her to produce research with greater depth and meaning than the distanced and detached research of academic anthropology. Through writing about the tensions she feels when engaging in her work with those who were marginalised, Behar demonstrates the nuance of research methods that not only acknowledge her multiple roles and identities, but also blur the distinctions between the personal and theoretical. This is rare but high quality work which shows that a researcher can engage with vulnerable emotions in knowledge generation rather than holding them separate or ignoring one kind of knowledge at the expense of the other (Kleinsasser, 2000; see Behar, 1996).

Through acknowledging the power of humility and vulnerability in research, we are more likely to produce knowledge that better represents the truth, and engage in transformative social research. While traditional research practice requires and expects researchers to be the ones who hold knowledge, it might be our humility and our preparedness to feel uncertain, to show confusion, and to respect and appreciate the knowledge-holders (the so-called participants) that will allow us to navigate to spaces of greater truth where transformation and change may more easily take place.

Precisely by deconstructing the role of researchers as the experts in research, humility transforms researchers into *re*-searchers, who embrace the practices of ongoing questioning and self-questioning about their own privilege and power. Unlike traditional researchers who are comfortable to be in the role of experts, *re*-searchers welcome opportunities to be in spaces and places that position us in less controlled and less privileged roles. When we shift towards a less privileged position, we uncover both our unknowing and non-knowing such as aspects about ourselves, our relationships with other people and the ways we engage with others (Bretherton & Law, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Such embodiment in research is consistent with the critical feminist approach of understanding knowledge in which "knowledge is supposed to be based on experiences, and so different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environment" (Harding, 2004, p. 8).

Exploring the issues of researchers' privilege and power, identity and roles is directly relevant to social psychology, peace psychology, and political psychology, which purport to address structural violence and other forms of social exclusion (Christie, 2006; Christie, Wagner, & DuNaan Winter, 2001; McIntyre & Lykes, 1998). To a great extent, as knowledge producers, we work from an awareness of decolonizing methods that recognize power as a basis of all roles (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). To do so, we need to be able to embrace our own emotions of vulnerability and powerlessness (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) and to share the "commonalities of experience and aspirations for equality, justice and respect" (Glick Schiller, 2012, p. 520). These are not novel ideas. However, these ideas are uncomfortable, and difficult to apply in the real life situations of contemporary academia. Modern researchers are increasingly embedded within a politics of research that pressures us to operate within systems of competition and hierarchy where individual advancement is rewarded and objective, empirical knowledge gains credit (Grewal, Dearden, & Lilien, 2008; Shapin, 1996). Therefore, many of us may feel it is our responsibility to find the time and space and a critical group of colleagues to *re*-search; to uncover our cognitive blind spots; and to find ways to shift away from reproducing inequality.

Conclusion

To stimulate dialogue, I have opened this topic of researcher's privileged positioning and its implication on unknowing researcher's powerlessness and vulnerability. I have used my experience in *Chronicles* as a catalyst to explore and problematize the role and positionality of researchers in social constructivist research. I *re*-search whether my unknowing about my own emotions when undertaking research could contribute to epistemological injustice. Reflecting on the surprise I experienced as part of the *Chronicles* assisted me in the process of critical reflection on the multiple identities, roles and the politics of the researcher. I argue that we, the researchers in social and political psychology, can benefit from greater reflexivity about the ways our identity and roles intersect in research (hence *re*-search). These challenges and meta-challenges are of the utmost importance to social and political psychology researchers due to our role in advocating for social justice through research.

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