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# Uncloaking the Researcher: Boundaries in Qualitative Research

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**Abstract** Qualitative researchers are expected to engage in reflexivity, whereby they consider the impact of their own social locations and biases on the research process. Part of this practice involves the consideration of boundaries between the researcher and the participant, including the extent to which the researcher may be considered an insider or an outsider with respect to the area of study. This article explores the three different processes by which boundaries are made and deconstructed, and the ethical complexities of this boundary making/(un)making process. This paper examines the strengths and limitations of three specific scenarios: 1) when the researcher is fully cloaked and hiding their positionalities; 2) when there is strategic undressing to reveal some positionalities; 3) when there is no cloak, and all positionalities are shared or revealed. This paper argues that it is insufficient to be reflexive about boundaries through acknowledgement, and instead advocates reflexivity that directly examines the processes by which social locations are shared and hidden during the research process.

**Keywords** Reflexivity; Qualitative Research; Social Locations; Positionalities; Ethics; Insider/Outsider

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For qualitative researchers, reflexivity is a process that is not only encouraged, but is often expected. In working with the social world, it is inevitable that the researcher will leave their footprint behind—thus altering the landscape, and perhaps unintentionally, manipulating the outcomes. As such, qualitative researchers have taken to deconstructing how their own positionalities or social locations, and how their own biases or preferences are impacting how they do research, where they do research, and with whom they do research (e.g., Finlay 2002; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Dowling 2006; Sultana 2007; Riach 2009). Reflexivity, therefore, is "the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher's positionality, as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger 2015:220).

Being reflexive about the methodology and the process of being *and* becoming transparent about the methodologies can also strengthen the credibility of the research (Cutcliffe 2003; Day 2012; Bridges-Rhoads, Van Cleave, and Hughes 2016). Being reflexive also helps to ensure that the relationship between the researcher and participant is ethical, in which the researcher's social locations and worldview and how they affect the findings are monitored (e.g., Josselson 2007; Berger 2015). However, while reflexivity serves many functions, it is not without its limitations.

Although reflexivity may allow the researcher to take greater account of how they are influencing the research, and therefore be more cognizant about how they share the stories of others, some scholars have critiqued the self-indulgent nature of this process, and have argued that it offers nothing newly valuable to the research itself. As Michael Lynch (2000:47) claimed, "in a world without gods or absolutes, attempting to *be* reflexive takes one no closer to a central source of illumination than attempting to *be* objective." Daphne Patai (1994:64) called it "the new methodological self-absorption"—a form of navel gazing that ultimately does not lead to better research, but instead perhaps only allows the researcher to play a more central role in their own research.

However, a primary function of the process of reflexivity is not simply to examine one's own self—which perhaps *can* become self-indulgent—but instead, to consider the power differentials between the participant and the researcher, and how power is being perpetuated and challenged during the research process. For example, how does the researcher utilize their position of authority? How does the participant articulate their narratives in spaces in which there may seem to be a power imbalance? How can the researcher help the participant reclaim their agency in this space? Which positionalities of the participant are interacting with which positionalities of the researcher?

While these questions are important, they have become so *customary* among qualitative researchers that there is now fear that their meaning may have become lost, and instead their purpose has shifted to once again be about the researcher, rather than the data. Wanda Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity done in these ways is meant to help absolve the researcher of any feelings of guilt because they have "confessed" to these acts. Reflexivity "can in this way perform a modernist seduction—promising release from your tension, voyeurism, and ethnocentrism—release you from your discomfort with the problematics of representation through transcendent clarity" (Pillow 2003:187).

Pillow (2003) agrees that this form of reflexivity may confirm Patai's (1994) suspicion that this process is about the researcher and does not lead to better research. Therefore, she calls for "reflexivities of discomfort." This form of reflexivity is one that would be "interrupting comfortable reflexivity," in which researchers are "rendering the knowing of their selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable" (Pillow 2003:188). It is a practice that would push the researcher even further out of their comfort zones to examine questions of power and positionalities from new and, very often, messy perspectives. Scrutinizing the ways in which we participate in the research process, and how these forms of researcher participation impact the nature of the work, as well as the outcomes of the work, are also reflexive (Cataldi 2014). Silvia Cataldi calls for the use of a "dialogical participation model," in which the researcher-participant relationship is co-constructed, which requires the researcher to be able to engage openly and actively with the participant in the implementation of the research project.

While Cataldi's proposal for a dialogical participation model is particularly relevant to those who are committed to public sociology, it can still be beneficial to any qualitative researcher who is working with human subjects—and needs to think of how research cannot be done in a vacuum, removed from the influence of others—and one's own self. As with Pillow's (2003) call for "reflexivities of discomfort," it becomes imperative for the researcher to ask the "hard" questions, and to examine themselves without the safety net of "absolution"—guilt may not be assuaged, and instead, a new, uncomfortable responsibility of ethical and unethical practices may need to be considered. They must examine the boundaries that exist between themselves as researchers and their participants, and how their social locations and positionalities are used to maintain or breakdown these boundaries.

This paper examines how the boundaries that exist between researchers and participants are often constructed through levels of dress and undress between them. The process by which the researcher determines the extent to which they will cloak themselves (and their social locations) or reveal themselves (and their positionalities) to the participants has significant ethical implications, and the practice of considering these ethicalities is argued in this paper as being a form of "reflexivity of discomfort" that is not only encouraged, but is required. This form of reflexivity ensures that questions of ethics and power and transparency of skin are deconstructed further.

## The Boundary between the Researcher and the Participant

The relationship that exists between the qualitative researcher and their participant is perhaps the most important to their work. Depending on the type of research they do, it is imperative that they cultivate a relationship with their participants in order for them to be able to gather the necessary data. While there has been much debate about the texture and form of the researcher-participant relationship, there is no doubt that the nature of this relationship has significant effects on the research and the outcome of this research.

The level of intimacy that is permissible between the researcher and the participant ranges depending on the school of thought. While there have historically been calls for objectivity among researchers, in which a distance is maintained between the researcher and the participant, and the researcher locks up their values and biases to decrease their contamination of the field, this level of objectivity has long been questioned for its feasibility. As Sandra Harding (1993:71) argues, the practice of objectivity is challenging because "it permits scientists and science institutions to be unconcerned with the origins or consequences of their problematics and practices or with the social values and interests that these problematics and practices support." Furthermore, such rigid distancing between the researcher and the participant, in which the researcher reveals no aspect of themselves to their participants will place limits on the depth and breadth of data that can be collected. The argument here is that trust can only develop when the boundaries become more permeable, and it is only when there *is* trust that researchers can know the "real" story. The question that emerges when taking this argument is whether the researcher can reveal their personal stories or their identities without sacrificing the research project, and if in the act of sharing themselves they compromise the "truth" of the participant's story. Such concern about the loss of essential data may lead researchers to reinforce their boundaries with their participants. Therefore, whether the researcher believes in firm boundaries or permeable boundaries (and whether the field is hostile or open to permeable boundaries), there is still a general expectation that some kind of boundary is still in place between the researcher and the participant. If there are no boundaries, then the integrity of the data is questioned, and there is often concern about the true motives and agenda of the researcher (e.g., Drake 2010).

One major type of boundary that has been the source of much methodological consideration has been the relatively subjective demarcation between insiders and outsiders. "Insiders" were those who shared positionalities or social locations with their participants, and therefore were believed to hold insider knowledge to the experiences of those they studied. "Outsiders," on the other hand, were categorized as those who did not share the positionalities or social locations of interest with their participants, and therefore were unable to utilize their own lived experiences to understand and translate the experiences of their participants. While it can be very easy to see the insider/outsider perspective through a strict binary view of identity, in which one can be *either* an insider or an outsider, scholars have illustrated the importance of viewing the insider/outsider identity as a spectrum and not as a dichotomy (e.g., Hellawell 2006; Couture, Zaidi, and Maticka-Tyndale 2012; Obasi 2014).

The merits and ethical considerations of insider/outsider research have long been debated, revealing both their advantages and their disadvantages (e.g., Daly 1992; Bott 2010; Drake 2010; Nencel 2014; Berger 2015). To study a group to which one belongs has raised many questions about the interplay between empathy and exploration in such research (e.g., Gair 2012). Scholarship examining insider/outsider research has primarily focused on three questions. First, did the researcher share a social location with the participant? Second, did the insider/outsider status of the researcher impact the research process? And third, was the researcher aware of this impact?

The last question demands that the researcher practice reflexivity, and unpack their own experiences of the research process and further consider the impact of their own social locations and positionalities. However, there is insufficient attention paid to the progression by which these social locations are revealed or hidden to the participant, and the ethical concerns that are entrenched within this decision-making process. This process is further complicated by the fact that the insider/outsider boundary is subsumed within the often ill-defined boundary between the researcher and the participant. To what extent does being an insider negate the boundary between researcher and participant? And conversely, to what extent might outsiders fortify this same boundary? And does one form of boundary-building maintain stricter ethical control than the other?

This paper will examine three scenarios of boundary-building and breaking between the researcher and the participant, and the ethical considerations of this boundary-(un)making process. The first scenario is that of the "fully cloaked researcher" who attempts to build such a strong boundary between the researcher and the participant that they also refuse to share their positionalities and social locations—even if these are shared with the participant, making them "insiders." In the second scenario, the researcher practices a form of "strategic undressing" in which they disclose some social locations and hide others, thus building a boundary that is not uniform in thickness. The third scenario is that of the "naked" researcher—one who shares all their social locations and positionalities at all times, and who may not have any boundaries separating them from their participants.

Drawing on my experiences interviewing the second-generation members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Toronto, London, and Frankfurt, as well as the members of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, I will illustrate the challenges in being able to make consistent and uniform decisions about my own boundaries with participants. These challenges were highlighted by the fact that I would be considered as a member of the diasporic population that I interviewed. My ability to speak both English and Tamil allowed me to do all interviews myself—including the ones in Sri Lanka and the ones in Frankfurt. In each setting, depending on the population that I was interviewing, and the language in which I was conducting the interview, and the location in which I was doing the interview, I found myself constantly needing to re-evaluate my strategies of interactions with my participants—and the extent to which I wanted to maintain or deconstruct the boundary that separated me as insider from outsider, or as researcher from participant.

However, these very decision-making processes led to discomfort about how "truthful" I was being with my participants about who I was, and who I was to *them*. In reflecting on the experience of conducting interviews "in the field," it became apparent that there were three different strategies that researchers can employ in constructing their boundaries with their participants. These strategies speak to different levels of dress and undress that the researcher may take in front of the participant, and with each strategy, there is a myriad of ethical concerns that need to be considered.

It is important to note that just as boundaries can be rigid or porous, so too are the distinctions between the above three scenarios. Researchers seldom find themselves in positions where they are very clearly able to articulate the extent to which they are cloaked or uncloaked, as they are able to transition smoothly (and often unconsciously) through these different scenarios. However, for this paper, these scenarios are being intentionally separated to clearly address how each of these comes equipped with its own ethical challenges and the need for active reflexivity.

## The Fully Cloaked Researcher

I believe that in some ways researchers are like superheroes. We do not possess super-human strength or the ability to fly, but we are expected to wear a cloak—something that turns Clark Kent into Superman. And we are often encouraged to wear this cloak, and perform the feats that only a qualitative researcher can, while ensuring that the focus is on the participant without drawing attention to our own identities.

While the field of qualitative methods has mostly embraced the importance of reflexivity and paying attention to our own identities and social locations when doing research—there is not a consensus in terms of whether we should be revealing this reflexive process to our participants. Instead, this process occurs in private—when we are told to take our cloak off and to consider the impact of the cloak, and the impact of Clarke Kent's glasses, and to consider how these multiple identities that make up who we are influence our work. But, in public, the cloak stays on. We are the researchers—the superheroes, if you will—and our special skills lie in our ability to elicit information from our participants. In this scenario, the flow of information goes in the direction of participant to researcher, and the boundary is thick in terms of the flow of information in the opposite direction, from the researcher to the participant. There are several reasons why this approach may be utilized.

Firstly, such an approach encourages the spotlight to be placed solely on the participant during the data collection period. When the researcher is wearing their cloak, they can present themselves as being professional and well put-together. They do not need to share the spotlight. Instead, they are perfectly content being in the background, allowing the participants to stand center-stage and to reveal their "truths." The researcher's cloak allows them to take a seat as an audience member when needed.

Secondly, this approach allows the researcher to be perceived as "strong" and capable. To be able to hold the weight of participants' stories, and to be able to navigate through the complexities of their narratives, the researcher must possess the strength that comes from the cloak—they are strong because they, themselves, are not vulnerable during the interview. Instead, the participants are encouraged to be vulnerable—they are told that they do not need to wear a disguise and can unload their experiences and opinions and directives onto the researcher. Without the cloak, the researcher may suddenly seem fallible to the participant, and participants may find themselves in the position of feeling like they need to take care of the researcher—thus, perhaps causing them to filter and alter their stories, so that they do not harm the uncloaked researcher.

Thirdly, wearing the cloak is believed not only to protect participants, but it also shields the researcher. The cloak is symbolic of their responsibilities as researchers, and in wearing it, they are constantly being reminded of their roles in the field, and their relationships to participants. Furthermore, in being able to take the cloak off when they leave the field—in being able to move from Superman to Clarke Kent—they are also able to maintain lives that are separate from research. As such, the cloak protects them from losing themselves to the research itself, and ensures that they can maintain some emotional distance from their participants as well.

There is certainly merit to these arguments. The cloak to the qualitative researcher is perhaps what a uniform is to a soldier—they are symbolic of something bigger than themselves, and a constant reminder of what their roles and responsibilities are. However, cloaked superheroes are rarely left unquestioned. The stronger the cloak, the more impenetrable it seems, and the more questions it may draw from participants: *Who are you behind the cloak? What will you do when you take the cloak off with the stories I told you? Can I trust you without your cloak? Show me what you look like when you're not a superhero, and let me decide whether I would still want to share my life, my narratives, and my thoughts with you.* These questions and demands of the researcher are heavily affected by the extent to which the participant is expected to reveal their own uncloaked selves. If they are participating in research where they are meant to be stripped of their cloaks to share difficult, traumatic, and intensely personal stories, their requests for an uncloaked research can become even more pronounced.

In my research, these kinds of questions were not uncommon. Participants would try to get behind the researcher's cloak by asking my opinions on the subject matter. In studying how second-generation members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora negotiated their political identities and loyalties, and being a member of this community myself, I would often be invited to share my own thoughts on the very questions I would pose to them. They wanted to know what my thoughts on the Tamil Tigers were, and how I felt about the end of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. They were curious about my views on the diaspora and identity and loyalty. They wanted to know what I had to say. At times these questions were asked at the forefront—like an audition to determine whether they could trust who I was behind the cloak—and at other times, the questions were asked at the end, perhaps to reassure themselves that they were not alone, or to discern how I may have heard or interpreted their views.

When faced with these questions, I would, at first, pull the cloak tighter around my body. Shielding my own views, and instead, allowing the superhero to speak. I would say that I was still forming my own thoughts, and that was part of the reason for this research project—I wanted to hear more from them in their own words. And while this cloaked answer was at times sufficient, it often was not. Participants would become suspicious. What was I hiding? Why was I afraid to answer? Who exactly was I behind the cloak?

The fully cloaked researcher is one who maintains such a thick and rigid boundary between themselves and the participant that they are committed to hiding as many social locations as possible—even if they are shared with the participant. In this scenario, the focus is on boundary building and strengthening, rather than on boundary breaking. There are certainly ethical concerns to wearing the cloak and the *insistence* of wearing the cloak and maintaining boundaries. On the one hand, there have been arguments made for removing one's personal self from the field to protect the participant from having to "take care" of the researcher. On the other hand, when the participant is keen to know the person behind the cloak—when they have guessed that you are wearing your secret identity—is it ethical to deny their requests? Are we imposing psychological or emotional distress on the participant in denying the existence of something that they know *does* exist? Often in the moments when the participant demands an answer, or when we are faced with their skepticism, with their wariness, with their reservation, perhaps it is then that we decide the most ethical thing to do would be to loosen our grip on the cloak. And yet, this loosening of the cloak, where we find the disguise slipping, and where there is a strategic "undressing" is not necessarily done to maintain an ethical practice in our work, but rather so that we could ward off the suspicion in order to continue fostering trust with our participants—a trust that is not necessarily being built on mutual honesty.

## Strategic "Undressing": Fostering Trust and Accord with Participants

The literature on qualitative research has articulated the debate with respect to insider/outsider research. This dichotomy is no longer seen as an accurate reflection of the various positionalities of the researcher and their relationship with the positionalities of the participant. Researchers are often both insiders and outsiders, experiencing a spectrum in which their roles shift based on the situation—and over time (e.g., Couture, Zaidi, and Maticka-Tyndale 2012). This shift from outsider to insider can also occur through a strategic "undressing" on the part of the researcher, where they demonstrate their similarities to help foster trust and accord with their participants.

Sometimes the strategic removal of the cloak is brief, and provides the participant with a momentary glimpse at what lies beneath for the researcher. It is a tantalizing promise that the researcher is a person who is like them, and that they can be trusted with these stories. Such a strategy would be in effect when a researcher proclaims after the participant shares their love for spicy Sri Lankan food that they *too* love spicy Sri Lankan food. Here, the researcher is demonstrating that while they are cloaked researchers, there is a person behind the cloak that is "just like them." And if the researcher is just like them with respect to their love for spicy food, then perhaps it is possible that they will be just like them with respect to other things—maybe views on gender or politics or religion.

The "undressing" of the researcher is strategic because the researcher chooses when to share what is behind the cloak, and how much they will reveal, further illustrating the disparity in power between the researcher and the participant. When faced with a wary or reticent participant, researchers must determine whether clinging to their cloak and wrapping it around themselves to maintain distance from the participant would be the best strategy to create a safe space for discussion. Or whether sharing how they are insiders with the participant may be the better alternative. There is a conscious decision-making process that occurs here, where the researcher needs to rethink their original strategy in soliciting information from their participants. While they may have originally planned on being fully cloaked, and presenting their "superhero researcher" persona to their participants, this strategy is ineffective if the researcher is unable to gather the necessary data. At this juncture then, the researcher must determine whether clinging to the cloak is more important than the data—and the research. And perhaps, faced with these risks, strategic undressing becomes a necessity.

I found myself needing to make this decision on several occasions when doing interviews. At times, the participant would turn to me and ask me a question (which directly demands that I remove the cloak), or make a comment requiring affirmation or denial (which indirectly demands the removal of the cloak). One such example occurred during an interview conducted with a second-generation member of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Frankfurt. Part way through the interview she made a comment about Tamils going to the temple. There was an underlying assumption that Tamils were Hindu, and while I sensed that she knew that there were Tamils who were *not*, I also gathered that she was trying to determine how I identified. In other situations like this, I would have been able to use the cloak to justify not answering the question as it would impact the data, but in this moment, I recognized the "test." If I did not tell her I was Hindu, she would not speak about the aspects of her ethnic identity that were heavily wrapped in religion—and considering that religion was integral for her, I did not want to lose out on these stories. Therefore, I allowed the cloak to slip, and I admitted that I had not visited the Hindu temple in Frankfurt yet, but I had plans to go to my favorite one in Toronto upon my return. Her reaction was immediate—she rewarded me for showing her what lay behind the cloak by expanding on her original response in significant ways.

Sometimes this strategy occurs accidentally. A momentary lapse when the cloak slips and the researcher finds themselves revealing more than they had planned. But, if this moment leads to the participant becoming less taciturn, and more forthcoming with their behaviors and stories, then the researcher may find themselves becoming more intentional about dropping the cloak in pivotal moments. The researcher's ability to be vulnerable with participants—whether strategically done or not—can help to reassure the participant that their own vulnerability will be safe-guarded during the research process. However, at other times, the glimpses of the researcher behind the cloak that the participant believes they see may not be beneficial to the researcher, as the participant sees something unsavory that may impact their ability to trust or be at ease during the research process. Cameron Whitley (2015:67) speaks to this experience when they point out the different ways they are perceived as a transgender man, and how this has affected their research:

> I have been labeled as a lesbian, gay man, straight female, and straight male. With each label, I have been granted access to some spaces and experiences, while ef-

fectively being excluded from others, causing my sense of place and space to simultaneously change with my outward presentation and perception of others.

Strategic undressing is the most challenging approach for researchers to use, as the ethics of this practice can become blurry. If the researcher is only allowing the cloak to slip at pivotal moments to reveal positionalities that might be considered critical to the research project, then is this not a form of manipulation? It can be perceived as a very dishonest strategy that is meant to elicit more honesty from the participant. The difficulty in using this approach for the researcher is that only they know whether the "skin" they are showing as they allow the cloak to slip is their "real" skin. Faced with the promise of gaining access to important data and crucial stories, researchers may find themselves in a situation in which they present themselves as "insiders" when they are not—or put forward a vulnerability that is not necessarily accurate.

For my own research, these moments of strategic undressing were common anytime my participants wanted to know about my political views. Questions about the Sri Lankan Tamil identity inevitably raise questions about the Tamil Tigers, secession, and terrorism. These topics are minefields and I needed to be careful not to sway my participants to share an opinion simply because of my views; but I also realized that in not sharing my perspectives, it may then be perceived as if I was protecting myself—without trying to protect them. One very powerful example of needing to slip off the cloak momentarily occurred while I was doing an interview in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. The participant wanted to know whether I believed that Prabhakaran (the leader of the Tamil Tigers who was believed to have been killed by the Sri Lankan army) was truly dead.

I was already able to ascertain that my participant held strong views in support of the Tigers, and held out hope for a resurgence of the separatist movement. I knew that if I shrugged off the question, and used the cloak to shield me, this participant would not be pleased—and perhaps would become offended and end the interview prematurely. I also knew that if I told him the truth—that I believed that Prabhakaran had been killed—this may lead to my participant no longer being as candid with me, and altering his responses. As such, I replied that since they had not found a body, how could we declare him to be dead. It was a philosophical question, but I knew that in using these words in that moment I was practicing a form of strategic undressing, but where the skin I showed was one that had been covered up with cosmetics.

While strategic undressing places much agency on the researcher, asking them to consider the extent to which they feel comfortable in revealing their "skin" to the participant, it would be incorrect to state that the researcher has full agency in this process. At times, the participant may think that they have managed to see behind the cloak, indicating to the researcher that they "know" them beyond the researcher. And while it may be true that the participant has managed to see behind the cloak, which could be due to an accidental undressing on the part of the participant, what if what they see is not the truth? For example, participants often make conclusions about the researcher's class, ethnicity, religion, and marital status—and the conclusions they make may enable them to feel comfortable in sharing their own stories. When the researcher is unaware of these conclusions, they can continue to feel as if they are still wearing the cloak. However, what if the participant reveals their conclusions and these conclusions are false? Does the researcher correct them? Or does the researcher allow the participant to believe they have seen an uncloaked researcher, when in fact they are seeing an *alternate* researcher?

This experience, once recognized, can be jarring. For example, the study of identity politics is contentious, particularly when participants are being asked about whether they practice boundary-making around ethnic groups, and how these boundaries are defined. Participants will voice opinions that can be perceived as being discriminatory against other groups for a host of reasons. And perhaps because I have been identified as being a part of the diasporic community, and as a scholar who is interested in studying these identity politics, they, at times, assume that they *know* my own attitudes regarding ethnic groups and boundaries. If they do not make their opinion clear to me, then perhaps I cannot be accused of deceiving my participants—but what happens when they do? I recall, for instance, a participant who would make some severe claims about the Sinhalese population, and would then follow it up with the phrase "you know." For some, this is simply a verbal filler—something that they add on to every comment they make as a way to add a pause—but, in this case, I became increasingly aware that the participant was assuming that I *did* know because I shared their perspective. Except I did not.

I remember the discomfort I felt in this moment. Do I correct them? Do I challenge them? Do I educate them on how these prejudiced views may be impacting group dynamics? Or do I say nothing, and hide behind the idea that because I did not say anything to *affirm* their perspective, it is not then my fault if they believe that they have seen something behind the cloak that does not actually exist. Except that in *not* saying anything, I was practicing an unethical form of "strategic undressing"—in which I do not correct them about the person that they thought they saw behind the cloak. This is a form of strategic undressing, but is the most dangerous of all—because the researcher is not removing their cloak to show something "authentic," but instead the researcher pretends to remove their cloak only to show the participant a disguise—something false and untrue. In this form of strategic undressing, the researcher cannot deny the lack of ethics in their behavior—even if they do not cause any harm to the participant.

Beyond the obvious ethical concerns of researchers appearing to strategically undress only to present a different cloaked disguise to the participant, there is also the risk of shattering the existing trust the participant has with the researcher. If the researcher indicates they are an insider, and the participant tests this positionality in some way—perhaps seeking similarities of experiences or validation—the researcher may very well fail the test, causing the participant to shut down, drawing into question the integrity and ethical practices of the researcher, and the project itself.

This second scenario of the state of researcher undress and cloaking is the most dynamic in terms of boundary making and boundary breaking. The researcher is both strengthening parts of the boundary that separates them from the participant, where they hide their social locations and positionalities, while simultaneously weakening other parts of the boundary to reveal seemingly shared social locations. This dynamic boundary making and breaking process is the one that is fraught with the most ethical concerns, and requires extensive engagement in "reflexivities of discomfort" on the part of the researcher.

Strategic undressing is arguably the most difficult strategy for a researcher to use. They must be cognizant about when they are allowing the cloak to slip, and the impact of revealing their "skin." They also need to ensure that this process is honest, and is not being used as an instrument to gain the trust of the participant while simultaneously presenting a dishonest front (or, in this case, dishonest *skin*) to the participant. Strategic undressing requires the researcher to be reflexive through the entirety of the process. They must deconstruct when and why they are clinging to their cloak, and when and why they are allowing the cloak to slip. Perhaps it would be easier to simply keep the cloak on, and remain fully cloaked through the entire research process. Or, conversely, perhaps it would be easier to be "naked" in the field, leaving the cloak completely behind.

## Being "Naked" in the Field

In many ways, researchers expect participants to be naked in the field. We hope that they are being honest and forthright, and that they are willing to be vulnerable, and to show us their scars and their blemishes. We want to see the stretch marks on their skin from those sudden, unexpected growth spurts. We want to see the scars left behind from the trauma, and the heartache. We want to see the tattoos that they have chosen to adorn their skin with, and we want to understand what they mean, and why.

As researchers, we reassure them that they can trust us without their own cloaks. We speak of confidentiality and consent, and we talk about all the ways in which their data will be kept secure. And in telling them this, we hope that it will help them feel comfortable taking off their cloaks of distrust, and instead, to sit there with us in their own skin. And yet, we know that participants do not ever reveal their complete selves to researchers. We know that they screen how they behave when they are being watched, and they articulate themselves differently when they are being heard. We hope that they are showing us their skin, and we can try different methodological tools to try to triangulate and confirm and validate our findings—but, ultimately, only the participant knows the degree to which they are "naked" at the time of the interview.

As such, perhaps it is unreasonable for anyone to expect the researcher to be naked in the field. But, the question is not so much one about reason, as much as it is one about ability. *Can* researchers be naked in the field? What would it mean to be so completely vulnerable in front of our participants? How would that impact the research process and the data? And, if researchers can prove that they are, in fact, uncloaked in the field, would it impact participants' behaviors and their own dress code?

The idea of stripping off our cloaks is akin to Superman being Clarke Kent. He may have that power still, but he is also now "just" Clarke. There is fragility here and awkwardness, and room for judgment. There is no longer the cloak of protection to act as a symbol of strength. Instead, there is someone who stumbles over words, and who can be anxious. As researchers, this level of nakedness can be very difficult. We are used to being prepared, and trying to consider contingencies, and to put forth our most professional selves. Even when we "dress down" in the field, we do this with intentionality, often driven by our perspectives regarding what would allow for rich data collection.

Therefore, it is very difficult to imagine the naked researcher. How would the interview look if the researcher is completely uncloaked? Arguably, it would be significantly more intimate. The researcher would be willing to share all of themselves, and will not be strategically undressing to show their insider positionalities. Instead, the researcher would also be revealing their outsider positionalities, and the ways in which they are different from the participant—perhaps even the ways in which they are opposed to the participant.

The naked researcher would also find it difficult to follow a script. Without the cloak, they could not hide their reactions to the participant's words—and therefore would find it challenging to stay on script without coming across as false or insincere. In showing their willingness to be fluid and flexible, and in demonstrating that they are not hiding their thoughts and reactions from the participant, the uncloaked researcher may be able to entice the participant to also be vulnerable. The participant may realize that the words about confidentiality and trust are not to be taken lightly because they are not the only ones who are at risk—the researcher has put themselves equally at risk by taking off their cloak. There is now a situation in which mutual trust and faith is required, which may allow the participant to show more of their own skin.

Researchers who do prolonged ethnographies often are reminded about the dangers of "going native," a term that refers to researchers who have been so immersed in the field that they become the very subjects that they are studying (e.g., O'Reilly 2009). In becoming so engrossed in their research, and in wanting to gain candid responses from their participants, researchers may find themselves shedding their cloaks in their entirety, and adapting the behaviors or practices of their participants. While this form of research may have been popular historically, especially among researchers conducting ethnographies, it has long been critiqued. Nevertheless, the practice itself can be difficult to avoid, especially when the researcher feels the cloak might be getting in the way of establishing rapport and gaining valuable data.

As a methodological approach, it could be argued that the more "true" the researcher is to their authentic selves in the field and in their interactions with their participants, the more likely it would be that participants would mirror this behavior. This can be particularly beneficial when one is conducting an ethnography. When one considers in-depth ethnographies that unfold over an extensive period, it has been argued that the researcher is unable to sustain the practice of wearing the cloak anyway. They will inevitably let the cloak slip, slowly and intermittently at first, but gradually, the researcher will forget the cloak completely—especially as participants will have seen behind the cloak too often to reassert the protective barrier that the cloak is meant to provide.

There is warranted concern about the ethics of going naked in the field. Concern that in removing the cloak the researcher forgets that they are *researchers*. Without the cloak, the researchers may become the friends and advocates of those they study, and while this in and of itself is not a limitation, and can, in fact, be a benefit to the research—it can be crippling if the researcher forgets their reason for being in the field in the first place. And if they only remember intermittently, when they are forced to remember, then can any of the data they collect be used without worry? Perhaps then, the ethical concerns of going without the cloak far outweigh the ethical concerns that arise from the use of the cloak, which is why there has been a push for researchers to be more intentional of how their identities impact their research (e.g., Fuller 1999; Kanuha 2000).

Furthermore, being uncloaked may not necessarily allow for richer data collection—but, instead, in being uncloaked, the naked skin itself can become a barrier to trust. The participant may hold onto their own cloak more tightly after realizing that the stories written on the flesh of the researcher are not stories they want to hear, or ones they feel comfortable knowing. There is now an added weight to the participant to not judge or react or feel embarrassed. As such, the cloak they wear becomes even more important, and is wrapped even more firmly around their bodies—a protective barrier that would allow them to shield their skin from the gaze of the researcher.

## The Ethics of Dressing and Undressing the Researcher

Reflexivity is meant to be a tool for researchers to consider their impact in the research process. However, as Patai (1994) has mentioned, among qualitative researchers this process has turned into a confessional during which researchers state the "sins" they have committed, and in the act of claiming these sins, they become absolved so that they can continue to use their data and to complete their studies and publish their findings. Patai (1994) argues that it is not enough to simply practice reflexivity so that we can be absolved—as this then becomes so convenient and painless that it may as well not be done. What is the point in simply acknowledging that we may have affected the field with our ages? Or our vocabulary? Or the shoes that we chose to wear that day? Instead, as Pillow (2003) has recommended, we need to practice a form of reflexivity that is uncomfortable, and that makes us question the very ethics of our positionalities as researchers. As I argue in this paper, considering how we dress and undress in the field and in front of our participants is one very important way that we can practice this uncomfortable, yet imperative, type of reflexivity.

The boundaries that separate researchers from participants in these roles, as well as in the form of insiders and outsiders must continue to be critically examined. However, it is not enough to acknowledge the existence of these boundaries or their heights and depths (and security measures). Instead, we must also begin to be more intentional about the processes by which we decide to construct and deconstruct these boundaries, and how we determine which social locations are shown, and which ones are hidden. In further engaging with the process of boundary making and unmaking, we can become more cognizant about the cloak we are wearing, and how we choose to wear (or discard) this cloak.

This paper does not strive to suggest that there is only one way to be cloaked or uncloaked in the field. Nor does it make claims about which practice is best. Instead, it proposes that researchers begin to be reflexive about how they are dressing and undressing in the field, and how their various social locations may be impacting their participants. They must consider the ethicality of their methodologies. Researchers cannot practice reflexivity to alleviate their own misgivings and concerns, but instead should be willing to engage in reflexivity to actively and continually ensure they are being ethical as researchers in the field with their participants. This means that it is no longer enough to simply list out all the different social locations and positionalities as identified by the researcher, and to consider how these identities may invite or antagonize participants. Instead, researchers should also begin to think of how these identities are cloaked and uncloaked throughout the research process, and the ways in which we intentionally—and sometimes forcibly—make decisions about the extent to which we pull off our superhero disguises to reveal the everyday person behind the cloak.

Whether one chooses to be Clarke Kent who has confessed to being Superman, and is therefore in the ultimate state of undress; or whether one chooses to be Superman without any acknowledgment of the person behind the cloak; or whether one decides to allow the cloak to slip to reveal some skin, we must be aware that each of these decisions comes with its own advantages and limitations. And there is none that is without its own ethical concerns. Therefore, our tasks as qualitative researchers who have been given the privilege of hearing the stories of our participants is to be reflexive—not just the comfortable and safe form of reflexivity that we are often encouraged to do—but also the type of reflexivity that is jarring, and startling, and allows us to practice ethics as an active and ongoing aspect of our research.

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