

### Writeup of Alcoff (1995)

Alcoff, L. M. (1995). The problem of speaking for others. In J. Roof & R. Wiegman (Eds.), *Who can speak? Authority and critical identity* (pp. 97-119). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

#### Summary

In this chapter, Alcoff (1995) discussed issues surrounding researchers speaking for or about people other than themselves, explaining the problem, some proposed suggestions for alleviating it, and her own feelings on how it can best be addressed. She began by introducing “the range of current practices of speaking for others in our society” (p. 97), noting “a growing awareness that where an individual speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what she says” (p. 98) and that “certain privileged [social] locations”—from which a researcher speaks—“are discursively dangerous” (p. 99). She argued that researchers must question the legitimacy of their authority and ask “what ... the criteria for legitimacy” are (p. 99). However, not “all instances of speaking for should be condemned,” since some are necessary and helpful for given populations (p. 100). Next, Alcoff conceptualized the problem in the context of discourse and Foucault’s “rituals of speaking”: “discursive practices of speaking or writing that involve not only the text or utterance but also [the speaker or writer’s] position within a social space that includes the persons involved in, acting upon, and/or affected by the words” (p. 102). Alcoff argued that interpretation was necessary and that truth was “emergent” and “converging,” rather than an absolute (p. 104). She stated two premises (p. 104): first, that “the ‘ritual of speaking’ ... always bears on meaning and truth” in such a way that “positionality, location, [and] context” are always relevant “to content”; and second, that “all contexts and locations are differentially related in complex ways to structures of oppression ... [and] will produce epistemic differences as well.” These, she noted, mean that speakers lose some control and accountability over their discourse, but only partially; they are still accountable for what they say about and for others. Alcoff thus did not agree with those that (a) reduced the problem to simply “read[ing] off the truth and meaning of *what* we say straight from the discursive context” (p. 106), (b) argued for “retreat[ing] from all practices of speaking for” (p. 107), or (c) believed one must retreat from those practices within one’s own community. Instead, she agreed with Spivak’s argument that “we should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking *with and to* rather than speaking *for* others [emphasis added]” (pp. 110-111). To that

end she presented “four sets of interrogatory practices,” not intended as “an algorithm” but instead as guides (p. 111):

- “the *impetus to speak*”—which Alcoff considered “a desire for mastery and domination”—“must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics), fought against” (p. 111);
- the “*bearing of our location and context* on what we are saying ... should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice in which we engage” (p. 112);
- “accountability and responsibility” must always be accepted by speakers (p. 112); and
- what Alcoff terms her “central point”, that “we need to analyze the *probable or actual effects of the* [written or spoken] *words on the discursive and material context*” (p. 113).

### **Analysis**

Alcoff’s view came from much the same theoretical direction as that taken in some forms of discourse analysis (see Budd, 2006; Frohmann, 1994), an emergent view of authority also mentioned by Clifford (1988). Similar to Frohmann’s conception of discourse analysis, she drew from Foucault to argue for the importance of situating discourse—and those that speak and write it—in social and cultural contexts that include those being written or talked about, for, or to, as well as any others affected by the writing or speaking. While this consideration of context is present in many forms of qualitative research, Alcoff’s stressing of its ethical implications and the considerations it means researchers must keep ever-present in their minds—especially while writing up research findings and presenting them—is both necessary and important for those conducting all forms of qualitative research to consider. There is a degree of bias in her article towards an interpretive, postmodern view, also drawing heavily on feminism. I do not feel this bias diminishes the persuasiveness of her arguments; while readers cannot be passive and must actively think through what Alcoff is saying in her article, if they do so they will find a very important, insightful, and useful chapter that I would certainly recommend to beginning and established qualitative researchers.

**Keywords:** ethics, speaking for others, speaking, writing, speech, text, meaning, location, truth, privileged, social, context, authority, legitimacy, Foucault, discourse analysis, discourse, oppression, accountability, speaking with and to others, effects of speaking

### Writeup of Christians (2008)

Christians, C. G. (2008). Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 185-220). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

#### Summary

Christians (2008) discussed the philosophical history behind ethical, moral, and political issues in qualitative research, examining both traditional and new approaches to these dilemmas. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century Enlightenment period was typified by the belief of “a pervasive autonomy” in human beings (p. 185), “individual self-determination stand[ing] as the centerpiece” and values and morals being “push[ed] ... to the fringe” (p. 186). Neutrality of values and separation of morals from social science were seen as “necessary in order to promote autonomy” (Root, 1993, pp. 12-13, as cited in Christians, 2008, p. 187) by both John Stuart Mill and Max Weber. While Weber was not a positivist and allowed values some entry into “the discovery phase” of research, he still believed they had no place in presentation of results or in teaching (p. 189). Both Weber and Mill believed in focusing on objective facts and means, rather than moral values and ends. Christians termed such an approach to ethics “utilitarian,” solving “moral disputes” through “autonomous reason” (p. 191). He next reviewed the main tenets of codes of ethics based on such views: informed consent, lack of deception, maintaining privacy and confidentiality, and ensuring accurate data; in each case he briefly noted practical problems and disputes that can occur. He also discussed institutional review boards (IRBs) and how they enforce “value-neutral experimentalism” and the principles of utilitarian ethics: “individual autonomy, maximum benefits with minimal risks, and ethical ends exterior to scientific means” (p. 195). Because of their “dominat[ion]” by “medical and behavioral scientists under the aegis of value-free neutrality” (p. 195) and numerous “charges of fraud, plagiarism, and misrepresentation” on large and small scales (p. 196), Christians argued IRBs do not serve social science research well.

As an alternative, he reviewed “feminist communitarianism” as a “social and feminist” approach to ethics, “a philosophical approach that situates the moral domain within the general purposes of human life that people share contextually and across cultural, racial, and historical boundaries” (p. 198). It focuses on the dialogic negotiation of values, morals, and meanings, arguing that social science research should “open up the social world in all its dynamic dimensions” (p. 202), allowing people to “empower themselves” (p. 207), “enabl[ing]

community life to prosper ... [and] people to come to mutually held conclusions” (p. 201). Participants in such a model “have a say” in planning and conducting research (p. 201) in the hope of said research “represent[ing] multiple voices, enhanc[ing] moral discernment, and promot[ing] social transformation” (p. 202). Christians further discussed issues of “cross-cultural representation” (pp. 202-205) and “moral discernment” (pp. 205-207) at some length, claiming “reverence for life on Earth [to be] a pretheoretical given that makes the moral order possible” (p. 206). To these ends, Christians argued fervently that “the IRB regime” should be restricted “to medical, biological, and clinical studies, and the positivist and postpositivist social science that is epistemologically identical to them” (p. 209). Participatory and dialogical research of a qualitative nature should not require IRB oversight, he believed, nor direct consideration of the tenets of informed consent, confidentiality, and deception; a researcher should be “responsible not to a removed discipline (or institution), but to those he or she studies” (Denzin, 2003, p. 258, as cited in Christians, 2008, p. 210).

### **Analysis**

Personally, I am of two minds about Christians’s chapter. There is definitely a need for new thinking when it comes to the ethics and morals of non-positivistic qualitative research, and feminist communitarianism as presented by Christians can certainly provide that, helping to change IRBs to be more understanding and accepting of research that does not follow traditional positivist scientific philosophies, epistemologies, and methodologies. In providing a look at both this new approach to ethics and the traditional view, Christians’s chapter certainly succeeded. On the negative side, however, his writing and presentation style tended towards overelaboration, particularly when explaining feminist communitarianism; while he did use subheadings in this section, the literature and content placed under each of them did not always make perfect sense to me and as such the subheadings were confusing rather than helpful. I think he could have stated the main points of feminist communitarianism more succinctly, organizing them better and making them easier to follow; the chapter would have been much better for it. I also do not completely agree with Christians’s conclusion that much qualitative social science research should not have to go through an IRB or directly consider elements such as informed consent and confidentiality. I think such research still needs to go through some kind of approval process to ensure participants are treated ethically and morally, no matter the epistemological, philosophical, theoretical, or methodological viewpoint taken by the researchers. Maybe

informed consent and/or confidentiality will not be necessary in all cases, but even in those where it is not there is still a need for oversight to ensure the reasons behind this are well-explained and make sense, from at least one epistemological viewpoint. I would recommend Christians's chapter, albeit with some hesitation, since it provides a useful overview of two different philosophies to ethical, moral, and political issues in qualitative research. However, I strongly feel it should be placed in the context of other readings (including those of Alcoff and Forsythe), of discussion with others at multiple career stages, and of careful reflection on the perspectives taken and conclusions drawn by Christians and others.

**Keywords:** ethics, morals, politics, Enlightenment, autonomy, values, Mill, Weber, positivism, objective, means, ends, utilitarian ethics, informed consent, deception, privacy, confidentiality, accuracy, IRBs, feminist communitarianism, dialogue, negotiation, empowerment, participatory

### **Writeup of de Laine (2000)**

de Laine, M. (2000). Ethical dilemmas: The demands and expectations of various audiences. In *Fieldwork, participation, and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research* (pp. 120-145). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

#### **Summary**

De Laine (2000) discussed the “power relations and the expectations and demands of various parties” (p. 144) that are interested in a research project, examining how these can cause ethical, moral, and political dilemmas. She began by noting qualitative research “rests on a foundation of negotiations with various parties” (p. 120), and “conflict[s] of interests can arise between the researcher and one or more” of these (p. 121). She argued that “it may be unwise ... to conduct research ... where [one is] already employed” (p. 121) because of the “expectations and demands” such would raise, but even where one has “no prior status” there is still plenty of scope for the researcher to feel “moral pressure” (p. 122) to “take sides” (p. 123) in ongoing organizational, cultural, and social conflicts. She felt, however, that ignoring “the personal and emotional” could cause its own moral and ethical issues (p. 123). Next, de Laine discussed how gatekeepers and sponsors could cause ethical and moral dilemmas; since they have power over potential participants and can control funding and access, researchers should carefully negotiate what they need and ensure gatekeepers and sponsors are informed, agreeing as best as possible to a course of action that is ethical, moral, and acceptable for all. Of course, participants’ rights must also be considered; if gatekeepers push for actions that are unethical or unmoral the researcher should not follow them blindly (as de Laine argued Goffman did in deceiving the mentally ill). In academia, de Laine particularly noted seniority differences and lack of training in ethics as issues that were troublesome. Academic gatekeepers, she wrote, “can exert a powerful moral force that has compromising consequences for both the researcher and subjects” (p. 129); more experienced researchers should train their students and mentees in how to handle these conflicts and ensure to raise “issue[s] of compatibility of personality” with their students and mentees (p. 131). She also suggested mediation “from other senior members”—possibly even across departments—should be used in particularly difficult situations (p. 131). Next, de Laine covered the ethical and moral responsibilities researchers have to participants, focusing on the issues of relationships and emotional attachment which may conflict with anonymity, confidentiality, or the focus of research. She provided two examples where research had veered

off track because (a) participants construed focus group sessions as therapy sessions instead, and (b) participants being interviewed wanted to talk about other topics of some related interest, but still not of much use to the researcher. De Laine felt researchers need to ensure they do not ‘go native,’ should maintain control over their research, and could keep different types of field notes to separate private “feelings and emotions” from analysis and theory building (p. 141). She also noted researchers should be careful to manage relationships when deciding to leave the field (which may not always be when saturation is reached). She concluded with a brief section on the researcher’s responsibility to themselves—to always act, and reflect on acting, ethically and morally—and with a brief summary stating that researchers should be guided not just by ethical “codes and guidelines,” but also by “values, ideals, and interests, including theoretical and philosophical preferences, intuition and emotions” (p. 145).

### **Analysis**

This was a difficult chapter to summarize, unfortunately. The overall organization was not the problem; de Laine focused in turn on each major group of stakeholders in a research project—gatekeepers and sponsors, academic gatekeepers, colleagues, participants, and the researcher themselves—and included some extra sections on important issues along the way. Unfortunately, within each of these sections the writing is not as well organized; while lessons are extractable with careful reading the author does not make it easy to understand the main points one needs to take away from the article. I felt the overall idea—to ensure one acts ethically and morally towards all stakeholders, particularly in cases where power and emotion are factors—was only well crystallized in the last couple of pages. There was also, in my view, a small degree of bias throughout the article in favor of feminism; de Laine often cited the views of scholars in that field on conducting ethical and moral research. Alcoff (1995) had a similar bias and, overall, a similar argument; although she focused on “speaking for others” rather than ethical and moral dilemmas in general, her chapter provoked more thought and understanding for me—and likely would for others—than de Laine’s. Christians (2008), while perhaps having somewhat of an extreme conclusion and viewpoint, was still a little easier to follow than de Laine and provided useful philosophical background which is missing from the latter’s presentation. As such, I don’t think I could really recommend de Laine’s chapter to other researchers, or require reading it of students; there are more useful readings on ethics in qualitative research which would serve researchers and students better.

**Keywords:** ethics, morals, power, power relations, stakeholders, negotiation, conflicts of interests, pressure, conflicts, personal, emotions, gatekeepers, sponsors, academia, academic, students, seniority, mediation, participants, relationships

### Writeup of Forsythe (2001)

Forsythe, D. E. (2001). Ethics and politics of studying up in technoscience. In *Studying those who study us: An anthropologist in the world of artificial intelligence* (pp. 119-131). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

#### Summary

Forsythe (2001) provided an overview and discussion of how recent changes in anthropological and ethnographic research in turn change the ethical and especially political considerations that go into conducting and publishing such work. To start, she noted a large increase in study of “Western industrial societies” (p. 119), a process Nader (1972, as cited in Forsythe, 2001, p. 119) called “studying up.” She next presented a comparison between traditional methods of fieldwork (the “old story”; p. 121) and the new method of studying up (the “new story”; p. 122). In the former, fieldwork takes place in a distant, unconnected social world where informants have relatively little power and “do work quite different ... [to] that of the anthropologist” (p. 121); it is time-bounded and the researcher remains an observer and visitor. In the latter, in contrast, fieldwork takes place “geographically and culturally close to home,” with “the social worlds of fieldworker and informants ... overlap[ping] considerably” (p. 122). Participants and informants often have a great deal of power over the fieldworker and are much more interested in the researcher’s data, findings, and conclusions. A “new story” fieldworker is often a co-worker (or acting as so) of informants; is supported not by an anthropology department but by other departments, agencies, or corporations; and may continue to conduct “fieldwork” and/or not leave the “field” even “when the research is finished” (p. 123). Unfortunately, “a host of personal and professional dilemmas for the anthropologist” may cause political squabbles and ethical issues (p. 125). Forsythe discussed four of these in detail:

- Participants may react to how they are represented in (informally or formally) published reports, articles, and books, and may disagree with findings and conclusions. This “may affect [the researcher’s] career”—especially if they are dependent on the informants for promotion or tenure—and they may have to accept “some awkward trade-offs” (p. 126).
- Competition between researcher and participants may occur for limited funds, resources, attention and access, especially within corporations, research departments and laboratory facilities.

- Data ownership can be an issue, particularly when those being studied are researchers themselves; they may feel that they have free use of data gathered by the anthropologist, while the latter is more protective of it and does not agree.
- There may be something perceived to be or actually “owed” to informants and participants when “critiques of their practice” (p. 129) are to be published. Forsythe considered the question of whether powerful informants should be allowed to read articles prior to publication, to ensure there is no damage to them or their organization.

Unfortunately—but probably as expected—Forsythe offered no quick and easy answers for these dilemmas. However, she did argue that researchers should continue to think reflexively, teach students in the “new narratives” rather than the old ones, (p. 130) “reaffirm that” they simply bring a different—relativistic—philosophical perspective to the table, and be aware of the risks of “studying up” and the different ethical and political issues such an approach raises (p. 131).

### **Analysis**

Forsythe’s chapter is relatively useful, although as noted above it is unfortunate there is not much direct practical advice on how to lessen the effects of the ethical and political issues she discussed. However, this is broadly true of Christians (2008) and de Laine (2000) as well; only Alcott (1995) makes specific suggestions. Forsythe did go further than de Laine, in my view, in making some suggestions near the end of her chapter. I also think her points on the “new narratives” that have taken hold in ethnography, anthropology, and related research areas were well-stated and important, particularly for library and information science (LIS) researchers who are unlikely to conduct traditional anthropology. Combined with Christians’s philosophical background and Alcott’s treatise on speaking for others, I would certainly recommend Forsythe’s discussion of the political and ethical issues raised in studying up to other qualitative researchers and students in the LIS field, particularly those interested in ethnography and observation methods.

**Keywords:** ethics, politics, anthropology, ethnography, “studying up,” fieldwork, informants, participants, researcher, relationships, power, corporations, representations, disagreements, trade-offs, competition, data ownership, reflexivity, teaching, philosophy