

# The politics and ethics of representation in qualitative research: Addressing moments of discomfort

The Critical Methodologies Collective (Eds.)  
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The Critical Methodologies Collective consists of nine, early-career feminist researchers. Their shared interest is in critical research, and they come from various disciplines with diverse roots in Denmark, Finland, India, Iran, Poland, Sweden Turkey and the United Kingdom.

I was attracted to this title because, as a qualitative researcher, I experience many “moments of discomfort”, even with most of my own research being with professional participants. As qualitative researchers, we shape our research from our own standpoint and we need to acknowledge our positionality in choosing our subjects, the participants we involve and the *why*, *when*, *where* and *how* decisions in any study reflect our perceptions. There are political and ethical dimensions to these choices and, for social work researchers, many sensitivities. There is a growing literature on the exploration of issues of access, consent, and representation in social work research. (See, for example, Kara et al., 2022; Leigh et al., 2022; Nordstedt et al., 2022.) This book is a very valuable contribution to the literature and will be of interest to social work postgraduate students and researchers. As a bonus, this book is available open access at [Taylorfrancis.com](https://www.taylorfrancis.com)

This edited book contains chapters on a wide range of issues on qualitative research: Exploring potentials for affective reflexivity in critical intersex studies (Tove Lundberg); Negotiations of the ethical practice of informed consent during the research

process (Johanna Sixtensson); Creating knowledge through community theatre

(Emma Söderman); Ethnographic research (Pankhuri Agarwal); Middle-classness: Research object and fieldwork performance (Katrine Scott); Representation in a study of social workers (Vanna Nordling); The ethics of renaming: On challenges and dilemmas of anonymization in a study of anti-Muslim racism (Marta Kolankiewicz), and Caring encounters in ethnographic research (Eda Hatice Farsakoglu and Pouran Djampour). Space permits me to discuss only two of these chapters, but those selected will offer a window into what is contained in the collection.

In Chapter 6, Varna Nordling writes about social workers working within the Swedish welfare state but who actively supported young people to avoid deportation. She explores the tensions present in working within a powerful system while acting out a form of resistance to aspects of that system that would forcefully exclude. Her chapter focuses on her own reflections on the social workers in her study and the choices she made. An interesting observation is that, while she analyses their practice, in her efforts to anonymise participants, their diversity as people was erased. She notes that professional titles are “associated with neutrality as well as whiteness” (p. 96), but her social worker participants were diverse—many themselves were migrants and (presumably) not all white. Nordling focuses on concern that, in presenting her

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participants with minimal information about who they were, they became disembodied, separated from their various identities. This may have created the “image of social workers as distant from the social worlds of their clients” (p. 101) and assumed to be white and neutral as no counter-image was provided. Nordling goes on to discuss, in detail, the decisions she made in focusing her analysis. Her interest was in the ambivalence of social work actions simultaneously working within the status quo but acting against the rules to assist young people to avoid the power of the state system to deport them. Had she focused more on the social workers themselves, the richness of those accounts would have changed her study’s central aim, which was to understand the limits of acts of resistance in terms of social transformation. These acts temporarily destabilise the status quo but the powerful systems are left intact.

Chapter 8, by Eda Hatice Farsakoglu and Poursan Djampour, addresses the challenging aspects of doing ethnographic research. The chapter reflects on caring encounters that occurred during the conduct of their ethnographic PhD studies with different groups of people experiencing migration and asylum seeking. The authors collaborated on the writing by sharing ideas and experiences in a series of focused conversations. This is a fascinating chapter as the two researchers explore moments during their studies when they were challenged to share with participants more of who they themselves were. They note that the care and empathy in these encounters challenges their sense of themselves as ethnographers. Doing ethnography is hard work, requiring relationship building through the establishment of rapport and trust. There is a balance between blending in and being able to observe natural social

phenomena while always being mindful of the dynamics of power and positionality. The authors explore how they had thought themselves to have rejected positivist notions of objectivity and detachment and to have built authentic relationships with their research participants. The experience they shared in their collaborative conversations, however, suggested that they were still maintaining distance. In this exploration, they pose the question “could it be that we had internalised some of the main pillars of the migration and border regimes such as the radical dichotomy between ‘us and them’ and the internal hierarchies... reflected in myriad distinctions” (p. 134). This is a powerful chapter, provoking deeper reflection on research privilege and positional perceptions.

This is a great set of readings to challenge us to think deeply about representation in qualitative research, taking us beyond the common issues of whether or not to use pseudonyms and how much information to provide about participants. I would strongly recommend it to those undertaking qualitative studies and to academic supervisors. I will include this book in the readings for teaching research methods in future.

## References

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