Doubly Engaged Ethnography: Opportunities and Challenges When Working With Vulnerable Communities

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Abstract
Understanding the unique challenges facing vulnerable communities necessitates a scholarly approach that is profoundly embedded in the ethnographic tradition. Undertaking ethnographies of communities and populations facing huge degrees of inequality and abject poverty asks of the researcher to be able to think hard about issues of positionality (what are our multiple subjectivities as insider/outside, knowledge holder/learner, and so on when interacting with vulnerable subjects, and how does this influence the research?), issues of engagement versus exploitation (how can we meaningfully incentivize participation in our studies without being coercive/extractive, and can we expect vulnerable subjects to become deeply in research design/data collection, and so on when they are so overburdened already?), and representation (what are the ethics of representing violence, racism, and sexism as expressed by vulnerable respondents? What about the pictures we take and the stories we tell?). Through the discussion of our research on the behavioral patterns, socialization strategies, and garbage processing methods of informal waste pickers in Argentina and Mexico, we ask ourselves, and through this exercise, seek to shed light on the broader questions of how can we engage in ethnographies of vulnerable communities while maintaining a sense of objectivity and protecting our informants? Rather than attempting to provide a definite answer, we provide a starting point for scholars of resource governance interested in using ethnographic methods for their research. We highlight the challenges we’ve faced in studying cartoneros in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and pepenadores in León (Mexico) and engage in a self-reflective discussion of what can be learned from our struggle to provide meaningful, engaged scholarship while retaining and ensuring respect and care for the communities we study.

Keywords
informality, solid waste, governance, Latin America, ethnography, research methods

What Is Already Known?
Ethnography is a powerful qualitative method that helps us understand individual and community behaviour. Recently, ethnographers have been criticised regarding the ethics of studying marginalized populations. Our paper takes a critical approach to the application of ethnography to the study of communities and populations facing huge degrees of inequality and abject poverty. We build upon recent critiques on the use of ethnography as a research methodology, and the ethical conundrums facing researchers who are primarily ethnographers of vulnerable communities.

What This Paper Adds?
- positionality (what are our multiple subjectivities as insider/outside, knowledge holder/learner etc. when interacting with vulnerable subjects, and how does this influence the research?)
- engagement vs. exploitation (how can we meaningfully incentivize participation in our studies without being coercive/extractive, and can we expect vulnerable

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Introduction

While academics often pretend and aim to be objective, social science research offers a unique opportunity for scholars-activists. Undertaking doubly engaged social science research (Skocpol, 2003) requires researchers to be self-reflective, autocrical, and engaged with the needs of those communities that they are studying. Investigating the challenges facing vulnerable communities also demands the deployment of specific research methods that not only engage the scholar but also ensure that target populations are protected, both in their well-being and in their livelihood. In this article, we examine ethnography as a research methodology that may offer a unique opportunity to understand social phenomena in geographical sites where highly vulnerable individuals reside, while maintaining strong rigor in how the research is undertaken (McGranahan, 2014; Warren, 2014). We suggest that this specific model of research inquiry be named *doubly engaged ethnography*, and our analysis offers an exploration of the opportunities and challenges that it presents to those researchers who are interested in studying vulnerable communities.

Skocpol (2003) describes the potential for comparative historical analysis to serve as an engaged and socially responsible social science method, suggesting that such approaches can be “doubly engaged” with both real-world and academic questions. In extending this concept to ethnographic methods, we suggest that doubly engaged ethnography requires attention to the relationship between the researcher and their research community, and an acknowledgment of the power dynamics inherent in ethnographic research and writing. Such a methodological approach to ethnographic research allows the researcher to be engaged with the academic concerns of their discipline and the broader structural and cultural factors that perpetuate systems of inequality. Based on our readings of ethnographic scholarship and our own experiences in the field, we posit that doubly engaged ethnography centers the following ethical three issues: *positionality*, *engagement* versus *exploitation*, and *representation*. How is our research influenced by our multiple subjectivities as insider/outsider, knowledge holder/learner, and so on, when interacting with vulnerable subjects? How can we meaningfully incentivize participation in our studies without being coercive/extractive? Can we expect vulnerable subjects to become deeply engaged in data collection when they are already overburdened? What are the ethics of representing violence, racism, and sexism as expressed by vulnerable respondents? What about the pictures we take and the stories we tell? In this article, we shine an analytical light on methods, strategies, and best practices for responsibly studying vulnerable populations.

In the second section, we begin by providing context on the theoretical and methodological questions underlying this article. We explain the challenges that studying vulnerable populations entails and the reasons why we choose ethnography in our studies of informal waste picking. In the second section, we explain our research interests in informal waste pickers and their role in a complex network of garbage governance elements. In the third section, we illustrate our case studies and their peculiarities through the analytical framework we posit. For each of our case studies, we discuss the meaning of positionality, engagement versus exploitation, and representation in modern ethnographic work. Finally, in the fourth section, we conclude by summarizing our findings and insights.

Ethnography: A Doubly Engaged Social Science Research Method Suited to Vulnerable Populations?

Undertaking robust and ethically sound scholarly research in the subfield of waste management (or any subfield, for that matter) requires that researchers take a principled stance on their approach to fieldwork. This is particularly relevant, given their communities likely live under precarious circumstances, not only related to their socioeconomic situation but also as a result of their inherited cultural contexts, built environments, and position within their own social and familial networks. Our approach to fieldwork has been largely driven by Canadian research’s minimal harm principle. However, depending on how this approach operates and is applied in practice, it may serve to further stigmatize vulnerable populations rather than empower them and provide them with visibility. In light of this reality, we follow a paradigm of doubly engaged social science (Skocpol, 2003). We not only seek to understand the sociopolitical dynamics and the human and health dimensions of informality in garbage management from a theoretical and analytical perspective but we also investigate this topic to seek solutions to real-world problems (Steinberg & Vandeveer, 2013).

Doubly engaged social science is the underlying epistemological paradigm of several methodological approaches; a researcher may be able to provide robust analyses and establish multiple causal pathways for urban poverty using quantitative methodologies, panel data or cross-sectional large-\(N\) studies, and field experiments. Another scholar may opt for qualitative approaches including participant observation, focus groups, ethnographic immersion, and one-on-one structured interviews. Regardless of the method, the philosophy of doubly engaged social science remains a powerful reminder of the need to bridge rigorous social science scholarship with a pursuit of practical applications for real-world issues. Our own work follows the same philosophy because we study extremely vulnerable communities. Producing rigorous research that has practical implications and can help improve the welfare of highly marginalized populations is a model of doubly engaged
social science and one that we seek to reproduce and infuse into our scholarship.

Ethnography as a method is suitable for use in doubly engaged social science research because of one important feature: Researchers must embed themselves in the communities they study, and this immersive approach gives scholars a better, clearer, and more in-depth view of the particular policy challenges facing those populations. While structured and semi-structured interviews may provide some insight into how these challenges may be better tackled, it is profound, engaged, and immersive ethnographic research that facilitates a deeper understanding of how communities work; how social relations are created, maintained, restored, and eroded; and how institutions evolve (Billo & Mountz, 2015; McCauley, 2014; Meuleman & Boushel, 2013). Given that ethnography as a method was built around (and precisely for) understanding culture, it follows that we must attempt to use as immersive a technique as is realistic (McGranahan, 2014). Much of the scholarship that we have reviewed in the field of governance of informal waste has been primarily ethnographic (Brehbül, 2011; Calafate-Faria, 2013; Moreno-Sánchez & Maldonado, 2006; Ruiz-Restrepo & Barnes, 2010; Sasaki, Araki, Tambunan, & Prasadja, 2014; Scheinberg & Anschutz, 2006). Following are the key traits of what we propose as a doubly engaged ethnographic approach.

**Positionality**

A central aspect of an ethnographer's positionality is their relationship to the research community: are they an insider, and outsider, both, or neither? (Mullings, 1999). Wolf (1996) argues that there are potential benefits and drawbacks to different researcher positionalities and that perceived intimacy and sameness can lead to either sharing or silence on different issues. Differences between the researcher and research community can cause barriers to communication, but can also encourage respondents to articulate social dynamics that might be assumed as understood by an insider researcher. Furthermore, a researcher can be an insider and outsider at the same time: Positionality is multifaceted and changes depending on who we are working with and under what circumstances (Merriam et al., 2001).

The researcher’s positionality vis-à-vis their research community is impacted by the power dynamics that are inherent to most social relationships and certainly to research relationships (Buch & Staller, 2007). While ethnographers who “study up” may find themselves dealing with respondents who wield power over them, it is often the case that researchers are in a position of power themselves. As described by Muhammad et al. (2015),

Academic researchers represent centers of power, privilege, and status within their formal institutions, as well as within the production of scientific knowledge itself. Researchers also may have power and privilege from their class, education, racial/ethnic backgrounds, or other identity positions. (p. 1046)

We posit that reflexivity is particularly important when undertaking doubly engaged ethnography as we define it here, because it enables researchers to engage with their surroundings, the community under study, and their own understanding of the way in which the knowledge produced can or will be harnessed by the scholars themselves or policy makers with an interest in the research and the community. As indicated by McGranahan, cultivating ethnographic sensibilities in young, up-and-coming scholars requires us to teach them how to critically examine their relationship to the issue and the community (McGranahan, 2014)—as a result, ethnographic researchers become reflexive.

Positionality is particularly relevant because maintaining a robust understanding of the scholar’s own position adds rigor and analytical leverage (Katz, 1994; Sultana, 2007). We argue that positions are fundamentally relevant in doubly engaged ethnography because they locate the researcher, subjects, and research site all within a system of knowledge production where there is a cohesive understanding of the need for scholarly engagement that actually benefits the community under study. As note by Bourke (2014), thoughtful consideration of one’s positionality can enhance the researcher’s ability to act as an advocate and ally and open spaces for underrepresented voices to be heard.

We see reflexivity on one’s positionality as methodological praxis, rather than an a priori statement of researcher privilege. Following from feminist methodological traditions, we propose that doubly engaged ethnography focuses on the intersubjectivity of knowledge that is perpetually created in the interactions between researchers and research community members. From this perspective, fieldwork is “a dialogical process which is structured by the researcher and the participants” (England, 1994, p. 80). A doubly engaged approach requires ongoing methodological reflexivity as articulated by Carstensen-Egwuom (2014): “This means that an awareness of a (privileged) position before entering the field may be helpful, but a reflection upon experiences during fieldwork can show how such a position is negotiated, questioned, or challenged” (p. 269).

**Engagement Versus Exploitation**

Research can be inherently exploitative due to the power differentials between researchers and their research communities (Wolf, 1996); this is particularly the case when conducting ethnographies of vulnerable communities. Stacey (1988) draws attention to “the irony that ethnographic methods also subject research subjects to greater risk of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher than does much positivist research” (p. 21). The responsibility for ethical methodology when conducting ethnographic research is therefore high.

The central ethical tension when conducting ethnographies with research communities is how to balance the researcher’s desire to gain access to socially important information while maintaining trust and confidentiality with research community members. We suggest that doubly engaged ethnography does so by developing and maintaining authentic rapport with community members and by considering the ways in which vulnerable communities are most susceptible to exploitation. In the
case of our research projects, we noted that our research activities could have been exploitative in terms of the time and energy requested of low-income respondents who would have been burdened by requests for extensive involvement with our projects (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). We sought to address this concern by designing projects that were guided by research community priorities (i.e., by conducting preliminary interviews with research community members and having conversations with key informants who work closely with research communities), without requiring ongoing research design input from already burdened participants.

Another potentially exploitative dimension of researching vulnerable communities is the question of remuneration. We argue that it can be unethical to ask low-income workers to interrupt their work to participate in research activities without compensating them for their time. However, Wong (1998) notes the ethical conundrums associated with paying stipends to low-income people in exchange for their stories: Would they choose to share so much about their lives if they were not in desperate financial situations? We engage with these issues in our case studies below.

**Politics of Representation**

The ways ethnographers represent research communities in their writing can be exploitative if researchers are not thoughtful about how they use their interpretive authority (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). The issue of representation is particularly complicated when ethnographers work with marginalized communities (Ansell, 2001; Wolf, 1993).

Some ethnographers who return to their research communities have been charged with misrepresenting the social dynamics of their study locale or of only telling part of the story (e.g., Scheper-Hughes, 2000); outsider and native scholars alike face questions about how faithful their representations are (as detailed in Brettell’s [1996] edited volume). Even when interactions with community members have been dutifully recorded by ethnographers, the sharing of private and potentially stigmatizing information can also cause harm and feelings of betrayal among research communities (e.g., Ellis, 1995). Furthermore, as Murphy and Dingwall (2001) note, “However careful researchers may be in their own writing, they cannot guarantee it will not be used to produce offensive characterizations of participants or settings” (p. 3). Concerns about the misuse of ethnographic data further impel researcher engagement with the social context of their research sites: If a researcher is explicit about the implications of their results for policy and cultural change, it is less likely that their accounts will be appropriated and misinterpreted by others. Finally, we listen to Sultana’s challenge to researchers to look at the insider–outsider dynamics and the politics of representation (Sultana, 2007). As scholars who were educated at Canadian universities, we recognize our differences from the members of the communities we study. We recognize our privilege and, at the same time, challenge ourselves to use it to tell the stories of those underprivileged people whose practices and lived experiences we study, analyze, and portray. Our insider–outsider relationship is also deeply and tightly connected with our positionality. To navigate the shifting dynamics of insider/outside dynamics, we must pay attention to the power differences inherent in our relationships with respondents, and particularly the ways we choose to represent them in our writing (Merriam et al., 2001). Doubly engaged ethnography makes the researcher visible in the process of data collection and so allows for the possibility of different interpretations from other researcher positionalities (see Murphy & Dingwall, 2001).

We read our differences within and from the communities we study (Crossa, 2014) and seek to represent and give a voice to those who aren’t heard, but at the same time to maintain a healthy distance that enables us to critically examine phenomena occurring within the community under examination. This stance also allows us to work with research communities to communicate their primary concerns across lines of difference.

**What Does a Doubly Engaged Ethnographic Approach Add to Contemporary Scholarship?**

In highlighting critiques of ethnographic work, our analytical approach showcases how we challenge traditional views, models, and implementations of ethnographic inquiry and how we respond to such commentaries. We assert that doubly engaged ethnography is a more robust model of investigative analysis that works better by challenging researchers to engage in deep reflexivity, to question their own positionality, and to probe their own politics of representation by critiquing the insider/outsider dynamics in which they operate.

We see critical ethnography as a parallel tradition that is concerned with challenging the structures that undergird the power dynamics of a society. This paradigm sees ideology as the key source of social inequality and seeks to change the structures it examines (May, 1997; Thomas, 1993). However, in this approach, the focus is on the theoretical lens that an ethnographer uses to interrogate systems of power. In contrast, we propose that doubly engaged ethnography centers the relationship between the ethnographer and their research community as a methodological concern rather than an a priori commitment to a particular theoretical lens.

We build on and contribute to a burgeoning literature on decolonization of scholarship. Our modest contribution is related to the work of Lincoln and Guba on the ethics of positivist science and that of Linda Tuhiwai Smith on researching the native (Lincoln & Guba, 1988; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005). These pieces on ethics and nontraditional, vulnerable communities situate our discussion as a contribution to our shared understanding of ethnography in highly marginalized and disenfranchised environments. We would suggest that much of the literature on postcolonial/decolonial ethnographies epitomizes the values that we characterize as doubly engaged ethnographic work (e.g., Jacobs-Huey, 2008; the work of Linda Tuhiwai-Smith and Farhana Sultana, especially Sultana, 2007, but also see her excellent and groundbreaking feminist ethnography and emotional geographies work in Bangladesh).
We’ve been cautious not to engage in disengaged research processes because we believe one of our fundamental duties as researchers is to make sure our work has a positive impact on society. We argue that disengaged scholarship becomes extraneous, in that it only seeks to answer important scholarly questions without much regard for the potential negative impacts of said scholarship. Our shared philosophy is also what inspired this article and our approach to doubly engaged ethnography. We spent extended periods of time in both cities where we studied informal recyclers, and we were very careful to ensure that we understood the local culture and socioeconomic and political context. We were also self-aware, in that we regularly checked in with the local community to ensure that we were representing their views accurately and avoiding implicit bias distortion.

Our critical view of disengaged research processes includes a misunderstanding of the basic rules of full consent and a limited or nonexistent engagement with the broader issues of appropriate and legitimate representation, protection of individuals’ rights, and the implementation of proper recording and data management practices. A disengaged research process shows a lack of interest in protecting the vulnerable. This is particularly visible when scholars and interviewers fail to ensure that there is no identifiable data in photographs, field notes, and video recordings. Moreover, this type of investigation concerns itself in a very limited way with protecting waste pickers’ right to fair representation and a livelihood. The literature on right to the city is quite useful here, because a disengaged researcher does not frequently (or at all) consider the potential damage that intervening in a particular community can have. Moreover, interviewing informal recyclers without ensuring their full privacy carries the potential of increasing marginalization not only on the part of policy makers but even by society at large. The abovementioned risks are quite real and thus we propose that doubly engaged ethnography be applied in all circumstances where there is even the minimum concern that populations under study can be quite vulnerable. We ought to be careful not to intervene and engage in careless, disengaged field research within the sites where these communities are located, as these activities can potentially have disastrous consequences for individuals, families, and society at large.

**Studying Informal Waste Pickers: Informal Approaches to Garbage Governance**

Vulnerability is an inherent feature of informal recycling work. For example, Hird discusses vulnerability from a relational materiality perspective, arguing that there is an asymmetric relationship between humans and the biological components within waste, where humans are vulnerable to processes that occur within the landfill (Hird, 2013). Highlighting the relational nature of human-waste interaction and humans’ vulnerability to health outcomes that arise from interacting with refuse is a necessary component of understanding the potential risks facing informal waste pickers, but it does not tell the whole story.

Mitchell (2009) notes that it is inherently difficult to study the work and lives of urban informal recyclers because they are a transient population, they occupy a precarious place vis-à-vis the state due to the informal nature of their work, and they are often maligned and misunderstood by other occupants of the urban sphere. She contends that researchers must respond to these challenges by maintaining high ethical standards in their work and by paying careful attention to their methodological choices. This point is also quite aptly made by Duneier with his classic work on street African American microscale entrepreneurs (street vendors) in Greenwich Village in New York. Duneier’s choice of methodology (spending 5 years on the street) required him to constantly question the legitimacy and ethics of observing a community that is highly vulnerable, racialized, and discriminated against (Duneier, 2000).

Single-case study ethnographic research into informal waste picking has been undertaken in multiple countries. Mitchell (2009) observed waste intermediaries in Hanoi, examining the effects of the economic restructuring of Vietnam on its informal activity. Yigit (2015) conducted a 1-year ethnography of waste paper pickers in Istanbul, examining the reasons why this type of economic activity continued across generations and demonstrating that waste pickers’ behavior varies by how they work and what they extract for recycling. Whitson (2007, 2011) demonstrated that defining waste picking as an activity that adds no value to the refuse management system further marginalizes informal recyclers in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Parizeau (2011, 2015) investigated cartoneros’ environmental health outcomes and coping strategies in Buenos Aires as well, demonstrating that informal recyclers have actually earned a substantial degree of agency in spite of their marginalized status, a finding that seems to mirror Gutberlet’s Brazilian studies (Gutberlet, 2008; Gutberlet & Baeder, 2008). Canadian case studies also confirm a broad range of strategies that binners use to cope with marginalization, as Tremblay and Wittmer demonstrate with the Vancouver case (Tremblay, 2007; Wittmer, 2014) and Gutberlet, Tremblay, Taylor, and Divakaranmair do with the Victoria case (Gutberlet, Tremblay, Taylor, & Divakaranmair, 2009).

In Mexico, much of the work on informal waste recycling has been carried out by a handful of authors: Medina (2005) set out the overall analysis, Castillo-Berthier (2003) examined pepenadores anthropologically, Bernache (2003) studied garbage management in Guadalajara, Moore found strong activism by local pepenadores in Oaxaca de Juarez, and Ojeda-Benítez, Armijo-de-Vega, and their group carried out the Baja California case study (Armijo-de-Vega, Ojeda-Benítez, & Ramírez-Barreto, 2003; Ojeda-Benitez, 2000). Medina’s (2001) study of informal recycling across the U.S.–Mexico border is a comparative case study, though he primarily focused on Nuevo Laredo. More recent work by O’Neill and Pacheco-Vega (2014) finds that informal e-waste recycling work in the United States and Mexico may indeed have specific nuances that are context dependent and therefore country specific.
Scholars have only recently observed waste pickers’ behavior using ethnographies across countries. This is most likely because of the large investment in resources needed to embed oneself in many different contexts. Pacheco-Vega’s (2015) comparative work on the global politics of informal waste picking has shown the varied models of relationships between municipal governments and dumpster divers using ethnographies in various locations. While each field visit may not have been deep enough to facilitate grand claims about the examined communities, it is possible to observe the same type of phenomenon across different cultures and socioeconomic and political contexts.

Multisited ethnographies pose an interesting ethical conundrum, given that there is ample variation in ethical frameworks within different cultural contexts. What is ethical in one country (e.g., interviewing and chatting with a cartonero in Buenos Aires) may not be considered within the realm of proper ethical behavior in Canada (e.g., furtively observing can binners in Vancouver without their consent). This combined challenge of varying cultural contexts and diverse ethical framings and scopes of fieldwork makes single-case studies challenging; multisited ethnographies offer an additional layer of analysis because individual ethical challenges can be further compounded by cross-national, cross-regional, and subnational variations in cultural contexts and ethical framings.

Our Research Sites: Cartoneros in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Pepenadores in León (Mexico)

Cartoneros in Buenos Aires

Informal recyclers in Buenos Aires open curbside trash to find reusable items and materials that they can sell (including cardboard, paper, metals, plastics, and glass). Most work five or six nights a week, collecting material from commercial and residential waste streams. The highest density of cartoneros is in the most affluent areas of the city where higher value items and materials can be found in the trash. The municipal government has taken different political positions vis-à-vis informal recyclers, at times rhetorically and logistically supporting their activities, sometimes representing them as symbols of urban disorder in need of discipline and regulation, and recently attempting to formalize their efforts as part of waste diversion initiatives in the city. Overall, these workers are relatively low-income earners, are often exposed to hazards in the waste streams, are socially marginalized and stigmatized, and often find themselves in politically precarious situations.

Between 2006 and 2011, Parizeau spent approximately 14 months in Buenos Aires over four visits for doctoral and postdoctoral research (Parizeau 2011), observed the living and working environments of the city’s cartoneros over this time, and spoke with a number of key informants involved in regulating, studying, or supporting informal recyclers’ livelihoods. While data collection included ethnographic observation, Parizeau also carried out a survey of recyclers and a series of semistructured interviews. Initial research questions addressed the environmental health implications of informal recycling work, the ways that cartoneros exercise agency in addressing the multiple challenges they face, and the changing role of informal recyclers in the urban politics of Buenos Aires. Subsequent research visits explored themes of gender and social difference and collectivization of informal recycling work.

Pepenadores in León

For 4 years starting in the summer of 2012, Pacheco-Vega engaged in ethnographic fieldwork on Mexican sites as well as a few international ones, conducting semistructured interviews with waste pickers who undertake location-based recollection (e.g., who pick their trash either at the household level or at the neighborhood level, from containers). León is an interesting case study because the municipal governments have had evolving approaches to informal waste picking. Much like the Buenos Aires case, at times, the local authorities have been relatively lax in their regulatory approach to scrapping and household-level collection. But in the grander scheme of things, the governments of León have seen trash as a treasure and have decided to preclude pepenadores from working in landfills (arguing health concerns) and offering rich contracts to private companies who are interested in providing this public service for a very handsome profit.

Doing Ethnography of Informal Waste Pickers in Latin America: Analytical Challenges and On-the-Ground Practicalities

In this section, we apply the doubly engaged ethnography framework we developed in second section to analyze and discuss the challenges we have faced in studying cartoneros and pepenadores, their behaviors, practices, and strategies. We use our three-pronged framework—positionality, engagement versus exploitation, and representation—to explain how these challenges made us reflect and question our role as privileged researchers studying populations with a high degree of vulnerability. To undertake this analysis, we each wrote up the main findings and insights we gained from our case studies. We then engaged in a written dialogue, whereby we discussed differences and similarities across cases. Finally, we synthesized the results of our dialogue, which we present in the below sections.

Positionality

Conducting research in the Global South raises important issues of researcher positionality (Katz, 1994; Miratíab, 2004). Aside from the obvious differences between Parizeau (a foreign White woman) and research participants in terms of affluence, linguistic and cross-cultural misunderstandings can occur when conducting foreign research, necessitating a careful and well-researched process of translation and cultural interpretation (Lopez et al., 2008).
When a researcher who is healthy enough to work asks respondents questions about their own health, it is possible that respondents will assume that they are perceived as unhealthy (Radley & Billig, 1996). For example, the following interplay between a research assistant working with Parizeau and a participant demonstrates the potential judgment implied in investigating the health of marginalized workers:

Interviewer: In general, do you have any health problems?
Respondent: Uy, you think I look bad? (21-year-old man)

The interview question implied that the researchers assumed the respondent was in ill health, potentially further stigmatizing informal recycling work as unhealthy.

These issues speak to the importance of careful interpretation of the information provided by respondents as well as the necessity of reading the research results as representations. These types of representations include those of the respondents themselves as well as their understanding of their society and the forces at play in their world. As Dyck and Kearns (1995) note, there is great responsibility inherent in sharing others’ realities: “We need to be mindful of the effects our representations of subordinated groups have...so as explorers of difference, we are also its creators” (p. 144).

Pacheco-Vega’s fieldwork clearly reflects this, as he often made a concerted effort to hide any differences when making ethnographic observations. In Pacheco-Vega’s case, he approached pepenadores from as much of an equalizing position as possible. Given his native fluency in Spanish, it was easy to build rapport. Since much of the household-level recollection occurs at night, staying in León for several days at a time made sense, and he would often come out to chat with waste pickers on an informal basis. This enabled Pacheco-Vega to build a rapport that then facilitated questions about how waste pickers saw their relationship with the municipal government. Pacheco-Vega made a concerted effort to inquire about the best way to represent the pepenadores’ opinion throughout the conversations.

Pacheco-Vega was thus both an insider and an outsider: He was fluent in the waste pickers’ language and of the same ethnicity so he could hold fluid conversations with them. His choice of words was deliberately colloquial and at times he used slang and swear words to establish a semblance of similarity. Although Pacheco-Vega was an outsider because he didn’t engage in waste picking, he was also an insider by being given access to their modus vivendi.

Pacheco-Vega undertook participant observation in each of the cities studied for a week for periods lasting between 1 and 3 hr at a time, observing waste pickers’ behavior at various times throughout the day and taking detailed notes of their waste picking practices and the time of day at which they performed garbage extraction, sorting, classification, and collection. He also had informal conversations with numerous waste pickers who showed an interest in the study. Given the consideration of waste pickers as part of a vulnerable population, Pacheco-Vega did not want to go ahead with a formal interview protocol as such but requested consent to quote brief, anonymized portions of conversations to provide anecdotal context. First, light skin tone, male appearance, and presentation are all often perceived as establishing a power differential. Pacheco-Vega was seen as a “güero” (blonde kid). Seemingly, his youthful appearance might have operated to his advantage. Senior waste pickers would talk to me as though he was their grandson, offering insight that I might use at some point.

Our doubly engaged ethnography approach calls for researchers to revisit their own positionality and to remain alert to the possibility of increased attachment to the research site and to subjects. While it is not viable or ethical for researchers to distance themselves from a vulnerable community in doubly engaged ethnography, we suggest that they attempt to study subjects in a more engaged way. This can be done by providing information about the research project, its objectives, and the policy rationale underlying the investigations.

While both authors had good access to informants, our approaches were different because of the physicality of our work. Much as Ceron-Anaya (2017) has implicated in his use of Bourdieu in an ethnography of elite, affluent Mexican golfers in Mexico City, the physical characteristics of both authors A and B influenced individual perceptions of them within the target communities. However, in trying to reach out to and ask for help from our own participants, we were able to position ourselves within the same environment and create a level engagement field.

We also feel that our positionality was sometimes at odds with our desire to protect and help the individuals whose informal waste picking behavior we were studying. As other scholars have pointed out, we may be at the same time insider and outsider (Katz, 1994; Merriam et al., 2001). In delineating our research field sites and creating these artificially bounded spaces, we include and at the same time exclude. But in attempting to reach into these vulnerable communities, we also tried (and were able) to transgress the boundaries of our own exclusionary selves. By virtue of being educated (with a doctorate) and visibly affluent, our physical appearance and presentation of self would have created barriers to engaging with the community. But the efforts we describe above enabled us to deeply involve our participants in the research we produced, while minimizing as much as possible any potential discomfort/disadvantage. With regard to this last point, we explain how we engaged with the community and at the same time tried to avoid burdening them with our project.

However, there are limitations to addressing our positionality within our research projects. As Rose (1997) notes, there are limits to reflexivity. All knowledge is partial and situated, and acknowledging our positionality allows us to contextualize the limits of the knowledge we produce. However, we must also acknowledge that we cannot fully reflexively know our positions/relationships to others, and an awareness of this uncertainty (as we attempt to reflect in our accounts of our fieldwork here) is itself an ethical act. Furthermore, we cannot redress the differentials between the researcher and their research community, but we can at least acknowledge these
Engagement Versus Exploitation

For researchers who are concerned about producing work that contributes to the well-being of their respondents, there is often a tension around using the personal details of others’ lives as fodder for publications that advance our careers and standing within academia (Huisman, 2008; Langellier, 1994). Despite our aims of reciprocity, relationships with study participants may feel exploitative.

One means of addressing a potentially exploitative research relationship is to acknowledge the value of the knowledge that is held by research communities in the data collection process. An approach of supplication positions the researcher as a learner and the research respondents as knowledge holders with expertise on their own social realities. England (1994) notes that “the appeal of supplication lies in its potential for dealing with asymmetrical and potentially exploitative power relations by shifting a lot of power over to the researched” (p. 82).

Parizeau entered into conversation with research respondents in a position of implicit power (in terms of the affluence, health status, and level of education implied by her appearance and the nature of research work) but with an explicit demeanor of supplication. Interview transcripts record Parizeau’s frequent appeals to the expert status of respondents with respect to their work and their realities. For example, when a respondent would say that they didn’t know the answer to an interview question about their work or the local political context, Parizeau would often tell them that there was no right answer and that any thoughts they had were valuable to the research. The question of remuneration also raises ethical concerns. While it is important to recognize the value of respondents’ time and contributions to our research, inappropriate levels of remuneration can be either coercive or extractive (Paradis, 2000). Determining the appropriate level of compensation can be particularly difficult for researchers working internationally or across class boundaries. In a similar vein, attempts to actively engage participants in research design and data collection can sometimes require more time or attention than they are able to commit; this can be problematic when working with vulnerable populations who are most likely to benefit from participatory research but are already heavily burdened with other responsibilities (Huisman, 2008).

Although we can’t say whether this would be perceived as condescending, we decided to talk to waste pickers while they were engaging in their work activities so they wouldn’t feel their time was being wasted. Gowen (2010) makes this point rather explicitly in her analysis of homelessness in San Francisco, looking for ways to ensure that her ethnographic approach wasn’t one that could be perceived as extractive.

At times, power differentials between the interviewer and the research participant become apparent in a way that highlights the insufficiency of token payments, as evident in this exchange between Parizeau and a research participant:

There are always things [in the trash]. We don’t buy clothes, see? You yourself might say, “This clothing, no…. I’m going to change my wardrobe, I have money, and so I’ll change it.” (50-year-old man)

The respondent is alluding to Parizeau’s economic status in reference to his work: He needs to look for clothing in the trash, but the interviewer is the kind of person who is affluent enough to place wearable items in the trash for others to find. This comment highlights the persistence of the inequality between informal recyclers and others in society, and particularly Parizeau. If the economic gulf between the researcher and respondent is so fundamental, is a token payment in acknowledgment of the respondent’s time meaningful? While such payment may allow for the respondent to meet some daily needs, it will not transform the underlying structures that contribute to the vulnerability of low-income recyclers.

Pacheco-Vega went to great pains to ensure that his informants wouldn’t feel uncomfortable when sharing their experiences of recycling materials and collecting trash, wondering whether offering payment as a form of retribution for their time and expertise about the subject might be considered offensive. He took a conversational approach intended to make them feel as though we were just having a conversation rather than making them feel he was interviewing them. This approach has inherent risks as it can be interpreted as exploitative.

As shown in this section, we asked ourselves how we can meaningfully incentivize participation in our studies without being coercive/extractive. We also questioned whether we can expect vulnerable subjects to become deeply engaged in research design and data collection when they are so overburdened already. Our dialogue demonstrates that we don’t have a definite answer. We both either attempted to provide compensation (Parizeau) or ensured that no extraction was taking place while conversing with our subjects (Pacheco-Vega).

We remain concerned about the potential risks to subjects when they belong to vulnerable populations, resulting not from the type of questions being asked but from the fact that they are impoverished and marginalized. Researchers must attempt to mitigate any potential value extraction by engaging subjects in a two-way conversation to minimize power imbalances. Monetary compensation is one potential avenue to avoid extraction,
but researchers should be cognizant also about the potential for implicit coercion/manipulation.

**Representation**

Ethnographic methods can provide researchers with access to research participants’ intimate thoughts and behaviors. We therefore bear responsibility for stewarding the sensitive data that might emerge in our investigations and for properly contextualizing some of the less flattering moments that we may observe. Mah (2014) argues that there is potential for social justice when “outsider” researchers studying “dereliction” bear witness to the lives of vulnerable subjects, although we must also guard against exploitative dynamics that may result from such accounts.

How can we ethically portray stigmatized behaviors that are of relevance to academic and policy concerns? For example, informal recyclers often rely on the waste stream as a source of subsistence goods, including building materials, household goods, clothing, and sometimes food. However, recyclers are aware of the stigma of eating food from the trash as well as the potential health risks. Many collect food regardless because of the economic constraints they face. In the following exchange documented in Parizeau’s field notes, informal recyclers raised the issue of eating from the trash when discussing the ethics of representation associated with journalistic coverage of informal recycling:

Group of people [recyclers] waiting outside train station…
[I talked with a] middle-aged woman, middle-aged man. [They] said people from TV came to film the worst of cartoneo—people eating food from the garbage, etc. The man admitted to eating a cheese tray from the trash once without getting sick. Woman said she never does—she’ll eat food the butcher, etc. gives her before throwing it out, but never anything from the trash. (Selection from field notes, March 5, 2007)

When the man told Parizeau about the pristine cheese tray he had found, he laughed sheepishly. The woman scolded him before telling Parizeau that it was important to only eat food that had stayed separate from the waste stream. Similarly, 61% of respondents to the survey in Buenos Aires claimed that they collected food as part of their work; what this statistic does not convey is the sense of unease exuded by many respondents in answering this question, nor the caveats they provided about the kinds of food they were willing to eat, or the circumstances under which they would receive food.

There are health and nutritional implications of informal recyclers’ high rates of reliance on food recovered from waste streams: This food may not be safe for them to eat, and the prevalence of the practice suggests high rates of food insecurity among recyclers. It is therefore important for us to share these findings as scholars concerned with social justice. However, researchers reporting on the statistical prevalence of such practices may reinforce the stigma associated with waste work and potentially misrepresent informal recyclers as ignorant or unsanitary individuals. Providing contextual description of the conversations and practices surrounding stigmatized behaviors can therefore mediate and inform the value-based judgments that audiences sometimes make.

Other silences may be more purposeful. For example, I [Parizeau] have chosen not to share the details of my experiences of sexual harassment by male research participants as well as observations of racist comments made by respondents. Such experiences were influential in framing my understandings of local dynamics of power and led me to learn more about these phenomena from local scholars and activists. However, I purposefully excluded accounts of these moments in publications because of the concern that such narratives would portray informal recyclers as sexist or racist, further stigmatizing these marginalized workers. I make this remark here, and only in passing, to highlight the potential risks that our choice of representations can cause for marginalized groups. This is an important and purposeful silence. It is not uncommon for low-income groups to be accused of oppressive behaviors (Wacquant, 2009), but selectively representing offensive acts by informal recyclers mischaracterizes these individuals as the problem rather than acknowledging that we all (informal recyclers in Argentina and me in the Global North) live in sexist and racist societies, and that identity-based oppression is rampant in diverse forms throughout these societies. In this case, I made the choice to not represent moments of oppression in order to focus instead on the systemic scale of interpersonal violations. As Enslin (1994) notes, “Some events, conflicts, debates, conversations, tragedies, and joys should be learned from and acted upon scene rather than being written about for the intellectual benefit or desires of Euro-American audiences” (p. 558).

As researchers, we also act as bridges between our research participants and the audiences of our work, including other academics, policy actors, and the broader public. For some of our participants, the choice to speak to us is an act of advocacy and an attempt to incite social change:

So we want…[the people of] some country to take us into consideration, and see what they are doing to us, to the poor. (49-year-old woman)

In this case, the interviewee is sharing her vision for how she and her story will be represented to foreign audiences. We recognized that this was a challenging issue because changes in cultural contexts could lead to wrongful framing. Parizeau dealt with this through an attempt to clearly depict the interviewee’s views in a culturally contextual way. The respondent’s concern reinforces our commitment to doubly engaged ethnography as a means for effecting social change and standing in solidarity with marginalized workers.

For Pacheco-Vega, ensuring fair, equitable, and appropriate representation of informal waste pickers in a policy context was extraordinarily important. Given the relevancy of doubly engaged ethnography’s stated goal of changing the conditions of recyclers’ work and improving their livelihoods, it is fundamental that researchers make a conscious and conscientious
effort to properly represent what waste pickers do. In interviews with policy makers from the local waste management system, the Sistema de Aseo Público de León (Public Sanitation System of León), Pacheco-Vega referred to informal waste pickers as trabajadores del reciclaje (recycling workers) rather than as pepenadores, the common Mexican Spanish term. In conversations with recyclers themselves, he ensured that his wording was explicit in that he considered picking through municipal refuse a job, often an ingrate one that informal waste pickers were willing to undertake. From their responses, he could paint a broader view for policy makers that enabled them to understand that recyclers have a positive environmental contribution to the governance of garbage in Mexican municipalities.

On the one hand, doubly engaged ethnography would require us to engage with the community and explain the kinds of representations we would portray and the stories we would tell. On the other hand, our ethical concerns within the doubly engaged ethnography framework also make us worried about the potential reproduction of stigma. We do not have a perfect answer for this particular question, but we suggest that researchers seek a two-way dialogue with subjects on the ways in which they prefer to be portrayed. Much like with the recent Waste Land movie documentaries (see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1268204/), we as researchers have stories to tell about informal recyclers, but we worry that we may end up causing more harm than good in the pursuit of deeper knowledge and understanding of vulnerable communities. We propose that researchers engage the community in a deep conversation about how they would like to be seen, and how they would like to be treated (including cultural change, policy recommendations, and strategies to improve their collective welfare).

Conclusions: Toward a Research Agenda for Ethnography of Vulnerable Populations

In this article, we set out to chart the challenges and opportunities of undertaking what Theda Skocpol named “doubly engaged social science” in the context of ethnographic research with vulnerable communities. Through an in-depth examination of our cumulative ethnographic work with informal recyclers in two urban settings, we have built an analytical framework that posits three challenges facing ethnographers who set out to do doubly engaged ethnography. Our framework requires researchers to engage in self-reflection about their own positionality, the value of subject engagement versus the probability of exploitation, and the imperative of just, honest, and ethical representation of the subjects’ lived experiences and realities.

Drawing on a collective cumulative effort of more than 8 years of fieldwork in the informal waste picking sector in two Latin American countries, our theoretical stance is informed by our experiences. While our multisite ethnography has some distinctive characteristics, we have drawn generalizable insights that can be applied to a wide variety of formal and informal sectors and activities.

We have shown the diverse ways in which ethnographers risk failing to control their intervention in specific field sites. We have demonstrated that undertaking doubly engaged ethnography in vulnerable populations requires a very strong sense of self-reflection, a critical stance on the researcher’s own biases, and an honest introspective examination of whether investigating vulnerable communities’ practices can lead to a deterioration of their livelihood. Under the no-harm principle, we owe it to our communities to undertake responsible scholarship that minimizes the possibilities of harm. We have also learned that responsible ethnography requires a commitment to changing the factors that contribute to a research community’s vulnerability, including the stigma that they face, the policies that make their work and lives more difficult, and the systems that perpetuate social and economic inequality. We therefore posit that doubly engaged ethnography is a robust analytical lens through which scholars can assess their own work and their impact on vulnerable communities as well as work to redress some of the factors that create and perpetuate such vulnerabilities.

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Notes

1. Both of us have conducted fieldwork that has been reviewed and approved by Canadian universities’ ethics review boards. As a result, we are both trained in and well aware of how Canadian regulatory agencies operate in order to protect human research subjects. We believe that Canadian Tri-Council policies offer at least a modicum of protection for vulnerable populations, but at the same time, we also ask ourselves to what extent this is a result of sound ethical design or a fear of legal retaliation. For cross-national research purposes, we also refer to (and follow) the multijurisdictional part of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcp2-uptc2/chapter1-chapitre1/.

2. Different disciplines use ethnography in different ways. Van Mannen (2011) explains the main differences between ethnography as method and fieldwork as ontology and their interactions. He also describes how sociology and anthropology take markedly different
approaches to ethnographic engagement and fieldwork research. We thank both Joseph Henderson and Carole McGranahan for making this particular point.

3. Even though we don’t follow the exact definition of Canadian ethnographer Dorothy Smith of institutional ethnography, we use a related body of works pioneered by Billo and Mountz for human geography scholars. Billo and Mountz depart from the traditional Smith treatment of institutional ethnography as being purely textual. In our own work studying institutions, we also depart from pure textual analysis and focus on institutions, rules, routines, and norms as per the Ostrom tradition (Aligica, 2003; Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994).

4. Pacheco-Vega recorded each city where he observed informal recycling behavior as well as the dates and periods of observation for data preservation.

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