The Theater of Qualitative Research: The Role of the Researcher/Actor

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Abstract
If the world is a stage and life is a collection of scenes, there may be a great set of discoveries to make if a researcher thinks of society like an actor. The art of analysis and human understanding may too often be under the influence of scientific approaches to method. By applying methods of theater to that of qualitative research, we explore a set of concepts to identify the interplay between the interviewer as character and researcher as actor. Furthermore, we offer practical applications of theatrical methods to qualitative research to enhance self-awareness, understanding, and discovery that all work in tandem to enhance the art of qualitative research.

Keywords
qualitative evaluation, methods in qualitative inquiry, arts based methods, performance based methods, qualitative meta analysis/synthesis

Introduction
As an interviewer, when collecting data with participants, are you fully yourself? There are distinct complexities in the role of the researcher. The interview setting has unnatural barriers to human contact—primarily a consent form, a recording device, and the premise that one person is being researched. The premise of the interaction is contrived, but the information a researcher hopes to encounter is best when unbridled, spontaneous, and revelatory. Communication between researcher and participant is sacred and, in its ideal form, can be a selfless act—an act of “devotion” (Saldana, 2018). An interview experience is like stepping into a stream of water that will never be the same as it is in that moment. The contour of the creek bed, the speed of the water, and the temperature of the surroundings are all impossible to replicate, as is the interaction between researcher and interviewer at that precise moment in time. The purpose of this paper is to examine the interplay between self (researcher/actor) and the presentation of self (interviewer/character), especially as it manifests in the interview experience. We examine ways to articulate, understand, and develop, and refine the instrument of self and propose a possible tool for reflexivity in the interview process.

Researchers need to engage in reflexive opportunities (Berger, 2015; Bott, 2010; Luttrell, & Refstvedt, 2010). We approach this reflexivity through the examination of life, representation, investigation, and excavation, and use theater arts as a mode and method of instruction for the researcher as actor in the theater of qualitative research. The role of the researcher is aptly termed in qualitative studies in that the researcher is the instrument, playing a part in a scene. This interaction requires parameters and a certain distance from the full self.

The crux of the matter is cultivating an understanding of self and how much of that should be revealed in the interview setting where we play a character. The opening section builds on understandings of the world as a stage and human performances of the daily sort. The second section is designed to

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examine the blurry line between the self and the role. The third section crosspollinates the preparation of an actor with that of a researcher and introduces the GOTE acting method (Cohen, 2008) for researchers. The final major section of the paper applies the GOTE method in a latent analysis of a study on leadership and gender roles. When an actor is analyzing and preparing a scene, they think about their character’s **Goal**, who else is in the scene (the **Other**), the **Tactics** they will use to achieve their goals, and their **Expectations** for the outcome (e.g., does the character expect to achieve the goal). We then use this technique to reflect on a study conducted by the second author of the article, Stockton, thereby examining and excavating the interplay between interviewer/character and researcher/actor.

**The Stage and Performance**

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man, in his time, plays many parts.”

– Shakespeare (1623), *As You Like It*

The complex world of human relationships is akin to a series of roles (even facades), which, when decoded, can provide meaning from and about the interactions. Geertz (1977) uses a drama analogy to seek a better understanding of culture, the perception of culture, and communication. For Geertz, everything humans do is a performance, and those performances give insight into meaning. Culture, according to Geertz, is expressed through individuals who offer insights into the ways in which a culture is a web of deeply-rooted shared understandings, symbols, and meanings that all emanate from the culture. The purpose of a researcher is to try and decipher those webs of meaning. Geertz distinguished **thick** from **thin** description by emphasizing that thick description includes this interpretation of the web of meaning, as opposed to a thin factual account of culture, which does not include those dense details and their associated meanings. The drama analogy gives deeper insights into the web of meaning that allows people to orient themselves within the world. The researcher is also an actor in this drama, making the webs of meaning more complex.

Building further on the idea that the researcher is playing a part in a drama is Goffman (1959), who wrote about the belief in role play:

When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. (p. 17)

There are two extremes of this performance: in one extreme, the performer is so convinced of their act that they believe it is reality, and it is very convincing to the performer’s audience. In the other extreme, the performer is not fully convinced of the authenticity of their own routine, and thus the audience may not be convinced either. The same is true in qualitative research. Reflexivity and self-understanding within qualitative research are liminal explorations.

The word “person” has its origins in the Latin word **persona** which refers concepts such as: human being, assumed character, and even having a role in a drama. Other connected origins of the word suggest an earlier meaning related to the concept of a mask—perhaps an acknowledgement that we are always playing roles to expand our knowledge of self and others (Goffman, 1959). The idea of masking has been a reflective concept in self-understanding and aspects of identity for centuries and is expressed in psycho-social concepts like symbolic interactions where the individual is shaped by the complex layers of how they perceive society as viewing them and how they project that perception back to society through personas, narratives, and masks (Ezzy, 1998).

Goffman (1959) conceptualized masking to be part of the process of how we conceive ourselves, what we are seeking to be, and ultimately can be incorporated as an integral part of our personalities. If a person does not believe in or see themselves in the role they are playing, they could be engaging in some form of deception (even self-deception) or misrepresentation. In the case of research and the evolving researcher, the function of deception is an ethical conflict. Special permission is typically required to use deception in a study with human subjects. However, the masking of a portion of self and only divulging enough to play the role of interviewer, is not deception—until the researcher says something that they do not actually believe. At that point the interviewing role becomes a breach of self and could be considered deception.

**Finding the Line Between Self and Role**

More complex than intentional deception is the art of being flexible and resolute during a dialogue about a topic where people have deep disagreements (this particular issue will be addressed in the Application section). While playing the interviewer role, the researcher should determine the degree to which they can create space for someone else to convey ideas with which they disagree without actually betraying their deeply held beliefs. Take, for example, the act of listening to and asking questions of someone who is sharing disturbing information that you find repulsing or offensive. If the breach of this boundary causes harm to self, it is not prudent to continue the role. If a direct offense causes the researcher to move from interviewing to intervening, it may be an impetus to end the interview as the premise of the engagement is the former.
One difficulty in complex dialogues is to perceive and navigate what are implicit and explicit ideas. Being overly committed to defining every term makes communication very labored, and intercommunication leads to assumptions that could cause confusion or misinterpretation. Inability to balance the explicit and the implicit can disrupt the interaction or the performance of human interaction, which led Goffman (1959) to highlight that one fundamental problem for performances (or human interactions) is controlling the balance of information. Our objective here is to apply the way Goffman addresses conflicting roles in the context of everyday life and put it in the specific role of a researcher conducting an interview.

Schechner (2011) brought attention to points of connection between theatrical and anthropological thought and demonstrated the influence that Geertz has had in the mixing of genres, like social science and theater. In a study of the point of contact between theater and anthropology, Schechner (2011) highlighted how playwright Bertolt Brecht perceived some distance between the character and the performer, in that the performer reproduces the remarks for the character as authentically as possible to the best of his knowledge—but is never able to complete a transformation. This approach expands the boundaries between the actor and the character, but there are other theatrical theories that reduce the barriers and enhance the interplay between the person and the role, such as the work of the well-known theater practitioner, Stanislavski.

Stanislavski (2017) used a form of naturalism to diminish what he considered artificial distancing between the performer and the character. The objective of the work, in Stanislavski’s view, is to initiate a transformation of consciousness. Attention to the amount of distance between a performer and the character is also instructive for relevant concepts like masking and code switching, as well as reflection on the distance between the individual identity and researcher role in their interactions with participants in a study. Schechner (2011) has depicted a process where there is self (me) and performance (not me). Everything in between self and performance is a liminal space and in the subjunctive mood or a place where there are possibilities for new existence. It is where a person can transform or grow in between the character they are playing and who they see themselves to be (akin to role playing therapy in psychological treatments). Some of the self becomes performance and some of performance can become part of the self.

Stanislavski’s (2017) notion of transforming consciousness involves developing an intuitive flow that could be deliberately controlled. The process involves training the intuition. Stanislavski “wanted the actor to be carried away, not into chaos, but into the precise core of what had been prepared through rigorous training, workshop, and long rehearsals” (Schechner, 2011, p. 118). Stanislavski (2017) addressed in the idea of the long-term perspective an actor must possess but not convey as they perform the character:

So, as we develop a role, we have to bear in mind two perspectives: one belonging to the role, the other to the actor himself.

Figure 1. Interplay.

Hamlet must not know his fate at the end of his life, but the artist must see the whole perspective the whole time, otherwise he will not be able to order, color, shade and shape the different parts. The future of a role is its Supertask. The characters in the play must work towards it, there is no harm, for a moment, the actor remembers the entire perspective of his role. That only strengthens the meaning of each immediate bit as he experiences it, and makes him concentrate more strongly on it. On the other hand, both perspectives must constantly think towards the future. (p. 460)

Translating this concept of Supertask for a researcher may be to answer the research question or to achieve the overall goal of the project. In a given study, the researcher operates as both interviewer/character and researcher/actor. At a particular moment (i.e., a scene) where the researcher engages a participant in an interview, the interviewer/character does not need to know the fate of the study or even share the research questions with the participant. However, the researcher/actor has to keep in mind the larger scope of the study and will be the only one who sees and analyzes all of the data. Along these lines, we encourage developing researchers not to ask the research questions as part of their interview protocol. This approach honors the ways in which the researcher is the only one who can actually answer that question because only they are privy to all of the data collected in the study. Conversely, the interviewer/character is best when fully present in the scene and following the mental pathways of the participant. Figure 1 demonstrates some of the nuance and interplay between the interviewer as character and researcher as actor who understand the larger design and analysis of the study beyond the scene of an interview.

This scope of an interview compared to the scope of the study is not the only area requiring nuance and balance between interviewer/character and researcher/actor. When a participant becomes distressed during an interview, the interviewer must gauge whether to check-in with the person, end the interview, and/or recommend additional help. Though the interviewer must maintain awareness of distress and direct them to help, they likely cannot actually provide the help. This tension can be characterized as knowledge of the parameters of the role of an interviewer and researcher, which is not the role of nurse, counselor, confidant, or friend. Those roles are important, but if an interviewer tries to blur the boundaries into those other roles, they are potentially taking on duties that may not be appropriate, honest, or in line with their qualifications. The stated premise of the relationship from the time of engagement in a study is around that of the research—to pretend
or intimate otherwise is potentially an ethical issue. Part of research is knowing self and the boundaries of the role as an interviewer.

A Researcher Prepares

In terms of theatrical production, Stanislavski (2017) examines the actor’s interior. To examine the interior takes tremendous initiative and diligence (c.f., the role of emotional intelligence, Collins & Cooper, 2014). Through interior examination, the researcher/actor can prepare for the interviewer/character to fully engage the participant. The purpose of an interview is to focus on the participant and their deepest values, beliefs, and experiences on the topic being explored. This may be described as the balance between researcher-evacuated and researcher-inserted tension (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is never fully absent but also not present so as to not inhibit the purpose of the interview scene. Overemphasis on the researcher in the moment will take up space and potentially inhibit or restrict the consenting participant. That does not, however, mean lack of awareness or consciousness on the part of the researcher. Sometimes it will be important to share, and other times it is important to listen. Either way, for both the actor and researcher, “Without their subjective experiences, if [the Supertask] is arid, dead. It is essential to find a response in the actor’s personality if the Supertask and the role are to become living, vibrant, re-splendent with all the colors of genuine human life” (Stanislavski, 2017, p. 309).

Social science with qualitative research is designed to understand the deep complexities of human life. In the sacred moment of an interview, an acute consciousness is required in the presence of the other actor in the scene, with an even broader consciousness of the larger study (awareness of the supertask of the future, or the big research question). But the presence of the moment cannot be betrayed by an overemphasis on the larger study or the researcher who is conducting the interview.

Achieving this balance requires careful attention to the emotional tenor of self and others in the interview process. This vulnerability and deep emotion that emerges in the research process for both participants and researcher has been explored primarily through the lens of researcher reflection on their emotional responses (Behar, 1996; Holland, 2007; Reed & Towers, 2021; Visser, 2017). To expand this exploration, we find the popular acting technique known as method acting to be a helpful tool. In this technique, the performer tries to sincerely experience and express the emotions of the character, as described in the substantive method work of Stanislavski. In the original preface, Stanislavski (2017) wrote:

My book has no pretensions to be scientific, although I take the view that art should be on good terms with science. I am alarmed by the kind of scientific sophistries actors use at moments when they are creating intuitively, and it is that with which this book is mainly concerned...You cannot create or come to know a living spirit through your brain, you do it first and foremost through feeling. That awareness is created and sensed by the actor’s own living spirit. In theater, knowing means feeling (p. xxiv).

This is epistemological work; and for Stanislavski, it is geared to and designed for the actor. But when combined with the work of Geertz, Goffman, Turner, and others, this stance examines the interplay between the character and the self and, because of that, gives insight into the ways in which the development of character relates to the development of self, which is essential for the qualitative researcher. At the fundamental core of this process are epistemological questions: how do we know what we know? And what might we believe to be true?

Cohen (2008) wrote a book entitled, Acting One. He developed a very well-known method of character preparation called GOTE, which stands for: Goal, Other, Tactics, and Expectations. The method focuses on purpose-driven acting so that relationships and performances on stage are authentic, meaningful, and compelling.

The first letter of the acronym GOTE, Goal, refers to what the character wants. If you know what a character wants, then you know what drives the actions. Clarity on the overall goal for a character in the scene will create an understanding of the second word in the acronym—Other. The Other is the other person in the scene with you. This component places emphasis on identifying why the other is there and how they will help the character achieve their goal. The “T” refers to Tactics, which are the methods used to achieve the goal. According to Cohen, the two basic forms of tactics in human behavior are to (1) threaten and (2) seduce. If an actor follows Cohen’s approach precisely, they must justify every word they use in the scene as a type of tactic; which ultimately gives insight back to the goal. The difference between tactics and goals is established by distinguishing between internal motivation and external action. The last part of this method is the Expectation. What is the expectation of the outcome in achieving the goal? Ultimately, a script might have a character fail to achieve their goal, but the expectation shapes the character’s journey.

The methods of acting and preparation for an actor, therefore, serve as an analogy for how a researcher prepares. More specifically, the preparation includes a recognition of remaining in a liminal space somewhere between the self and the researcher. In the book Naturalistic Inquiry, Lincoln and Guba (1985) contrast the positivist form of inquiry with the naturalist form, where in the former, “The inquirer and the object of inquiry are independent, the knower and the known constitute a discrete dualism. In the naturalist version, however, the inquirer and the object of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable” (p. 94).

In this relationship of interactivity, the meaning is shaped by the interaction. Therefore, the role of the researcher as a present instrument is integral to the notion of collecting data because the researcher is also forming the data. The presence
of the researcher in the setting ultimately shapes the way in which the knowledge is produced. So, understanding and reflecting on the liminal space, the lungs of the gap that expand and contract between the self and the researcher, may give additional insight into how to play these roles well with appropriate boundaries, in a way that is also trustworthy:

The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290)

By means of practical application, we adapted the GOTE method for acting and translated it for qualitative researchers in a grid. Each aspect of GOTE is a question the researcher can ask and answer about their own study. (Table 1)

### Application

Our purpose in adapting the GOTE grid is to facilitate researcher reflexivity as it relates to the interplay between the person, the researcher, and the study, building on the theatrical comparison that examined the interplay between the person, the character, and the script. In reviewing and applying this literature to the qualitative research process, we put forward the assertion that carefully developing the character influences the person/actor and that the same interplay holds true for person/researcher. If the theatrical analogy has any explanatory power in research, then engaging in a study as a researcher will demonstrate interplay and influence on the person as well. It is, therefore, important to include an examination of this interplay between person and researcher in the reflexivity process.

In order to examine this proposition, we use as a single case, a study conducted by Stockton. The description and examination of the study that follows is an attempt to move beyond the technical language of methodology designed to convey the details, linearity, and rigor, and to move into a reflective space that shows what may be unwritten, unspoken, behind the scenes, or just below observability within the process of a study. Following the GOTE prompts, Stockton did a latent examination of a study she completed that explored the experiences of men who were executive leaders or administrators at universities and were identified by women presidents to have been advocates (e.g., mentors, sponsors) on their leadership journeys. The context of the study was within religious colleges and universities that had a history of excluding women from leadership roles. The exclusion was in line with many of the historical religious practices of the Christian churches or groups connected to the universities. The religious patriarchy embedded in these institutional cultures of their university contexts generally enforces an understanding of gender using binary representations of masculinity and femininity. As a researcher studying gender dynamics, my experiences as a White, cisgender, straight woman shape the way I (Stockton) engaged with and interpreted the experiences of the White, cisgender, straight men in my study, although this process was not static.

### Goal

I entered the study with curiosity about how men who hold or have held positions of power think about women in leadership. The surface level assumption I had entering the research project was that these men had supported and invested in women that they admired, respected, and believed in, and I wanted to know more about the narratives they created around those relationships. I was also interested in what they would perceive to be influential in their formation to becoming men who women would identify as advocates in their leadership journeys. To secure participants for this study, I invited college and university presidents who are women to nominate men, who I then invited to participate. This nomination process signaled for me that these would be the men in executive leadership who were intentional in supporting women to move into higher professional levels. Ironically, in terms of gender advocacy, what I found when I began conducting my research was that it was difficult for the men in the study to acknowledge or self-identify as advocates. In fact, most of them denied or were uncomfortable with the idea of pursuing gender equity, advocating instead for gender neutrality and merit-based concepts.
When asked about barriers for women in leadership, it was difficult for them to identify any, but if they could name some barriers or inequities, almost no one said they had tried to do anything to disrupt those inequities. Instead, their narratives focused on the exceptional nature of the woman who had nominated them. The irony is that demonstrating the participant’s understanding of gender advocacy was the premise, or the goal, for the study. In looking back, it seemed the women had made more meaning of that relationship and their role as an advocate than the men had.

Was my goal undermined? There is a wide array of research about sponsorship and mentorship that is derived from hierarchical assumptions about leadership that people in power help others access power. The conceptual framework for the study was a leadership identity theory rooted in social construction (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), the idea that the process of developing a leader identity is a process of claiming and granting. That is, individuals come to see themselves as leaders because both by internal beliefs and external affirmations of their leadership (largely by their followers). Over the course of my interviews, I began to recognize that perhaps the experience of advocacy by the men in my study was another form of granting—that leadership identity is perceived to be granted by not just by followers, but also by those with organizational power or authority.

The driving force or goal of my study began to evolve as I progressed further into data collection, and so did my role as the researcher. I wrestled with what my participants were sharing and my interpretations of what they said, listening again and again to recordings of my interviews while I drove long stretches to my next interview in a different state. In that listening activity, I began noticing different aspects of myself and the participants. The process of discovery showed an interplay between me, my role as a researcher, and the study. I was beginning to see that male advocacy of women leaders was, perhaps, not a shared phenomenon among the participants because the participants could not clearly see or describe that they were doing it or that it had any salient meaning for them. The study’s goal, therefore, changed to responding to a question of what I could know about what that lack of salience meant.

Other

I walked into each room for an interview as a young woman leader in the system where my participants were currently leading or where they had committed much of their lives and leadership, expecting that they would have things to share why and how they cared about gender equity. I thought they would want to demonstrate or prove to me that this is an issue of concern and advocacy for them. They did not. Or at least almost all could not articulate or claim a particular commitment to gender equity. Before beginning my interviews, I had read this book, *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*, and I was captivated by this rhetoric about men in power, that if they do not mentor women, how will women be mentored? It began to convince me that perhaps there were men who were part of the solution to achieving greater gender equity in leadership. Then all 14 of the men nominated for the study said, “yes,” to participating in these interviews, which surprised me. Even in their willingness to participate, I saw something heroic and thought, “they must really care about this, or they would not have said yes to my research.”

Looking back to my very first interview, there were distinct moments where the participant seemed to take control of the space, dictating how we would proceed and including career coaching and advice. From my research leading into the interview, I knew the participant to be someone who had seemed to have changed his mind about gender equity and became more committed over the course of his leadership. When we sat down to begin, he began the conversation by telling me, “here’s how this is going to go” in a jovial way. At that point, given who I was in the context of these conversations and my own background, I do not recall feeling resistant to that control either internally or externally. I think I knew enough to know it was inappropriate that he wanted to run the process, but when I listened later after several more interviews, I began to see some of the ways I was playing into the power dimensions of these interactions, primarily unconsciously.

At a midway point in the interviews, a participant described an experience of seeing his nominator experience inappropriate treatment by another male colleague in the organization in the following way:

Participant: When I figured out exactly what was going on later on, I just wanted to go and punch the guy’s lights out, but I can’t say that.

Me: You felt a protectiveness for her maybe?”

Participant: No, no, no.

Me: How would you describe that reaction?

Participant: I had empathy, and I was passionately upset about it, but I wouldn’t use that word [referring back to protectiveness].

In an interaction like this one, it is tempting to be drawn into psychology, psychoanalysis, and interpretation. This participant noted feeling aggressive and violent in reaction to something negative experienced by his nominator. I reacted to his description with an interpretation that reflected what I thought he was doing—being protective. He rejected that interpretation.

My final interview was quite different. At one point in the interview, the participant relayed how his nominator (a woman) would come into his office sometimes, check in on him, and just see how he was doing. He said, it was like she was caretaking. And he added that, he had to set a boundary with her, and that she was not his wife.

She began to mother me and I don’t think she knew it... In her effort to protect me, especially during the revolt. So I had to ask her, I said, Julie remember... Maybe mother is not it. ‘You and I
don’t have a wife and a husband role. I’m your boss,’ type of thing. After that day, it changed. It became more professional, a little bit more distance and casual, but not in a negative way. And I would argue that there was no emotional connection between us, it was just that being a strong personality she was and, in her effort, to... Kind of thing. You know what I mean? You can get too close...I hope I’m not being sexist here. I don’t want to be—It was like—Because you can get too close.”

Rather than interpret his comments during this interaction participant as I had in the previous interaction, I could see clearly what was happening in this moment in my role as researcher. These comments, although I found them concerning, were full of rich data toward the goal of the study. This participant was able to give honest thoughts in response to my questions, despite his concern that they might be, in his words, “sexist.”

The others in these interview scenes are another layer of interplay. In these moments, I am negotiating my role or character, and they are negotiating who they are and what they have done in response to what I am saying. Contemplating the identities, interplays, and power dynamics of the other is essential to reflexivity. The shifts that emerge from interplay come in the form of tactics.

**Tactics**

For character preparation in the GOTE method, Cohen defined the two basic forms of tactics to be to (1) threaten or (2) seduce. For the researcher, these tactics are dangerous territory. Ethical considerations must be of central concern and coercion has to be avoided both during design and data collection. As I have reflected back on the 14 interviews I conducted, I noticed the evolving nature of my tactics to create an environment conducive to the most honest and meaningful conversations possible.

As an example, in my second to last interview, I again asked a question found at the end of my interview protocol that I had asked in every interview. The following vignette outlines the conversation that proceeded:

Me: As you heard about my topic, is there anything you think it would be particularly helpful for me to consider or think about?”

Participant: Are men who are encouraging women in leadership—are they picking up on characteristics that the women have in some way that those skills or personal characteristics—is that what is attracting their attention? So, they’re promoting them because of that? Although, you know, as I said earlier, I’ve not deliberately promoted women... Maybe I’m picking up on leadership potential and you believe they’re going to succeed.

Me: I think it’s sort of interesting the way we started our conversation—that you had some ideas about leadership characteristics that women may be more likely to hold. I think there’s what you’re noting is an openness to seeing potential for leadership in both genders and maybe even having an expanded definition of what that looks like.

Participant: I wonder, are there characteristics about the men who mentor women that are unique? Some men are very macho, crass, they lack that sensitivity and so forth. Maybe the study should—rather it should really be about the men.

Me: Yeah, what do the women notice about the men?

Participant: What kind of person promotes or gives women an equal opportunity?

Me: Yeah. The study is about the men [laughing].

Participant: Is it?

Me: It is absolutely, for sure.

Participant: It’s not about the women...?

Me: Yeah, I think it’s largely about the men and how you came to be perceived by—

Participant: Yeah, but you don’t. But you didn’t ask...

Me: What should I have asked if it’s about the men?

After I asked this question, we went on to discuss his conjecture that perhaps men who were more stereotypically “macho” (e.g., athletes, car enthusiasts) would be less likely to “give women a fair shot” because of their biases. This dialogue demonstrates how the interplay between the researcher, the role, the goal of the study, and the other create an ever-evolving setting for shifting tactics. This interview was my second to last, and I would not have said what I said on the first or second. I would not have said to him, “It is about the men.” I might not have thought to remind him of his earlier comments about leadership characteristics that women maybe more likely to hold. I would not have known to step in like that. I might not have thought to remind him of his earlier comments about leadership characteristics that women maybe more likely to hold. I would not have known to step in like that. I was finally seeing that this process is also about me and the role I am interplaying with as researcher. When characters discover something about themselves, the person is really discovering what their character discovers, and it is in real time on stage.

When the audience sees a character discover, because the actor discovered, it is a convergence of discovery, and that secures the number one most difficult task in theater, which is believability. So, as the person and their role as researcher discovers, so too can their readers. As your goal shifts, the perception of the participant shifts, and tactics shifts, and then expectation shifts.

**Expectation**

Amid that evolution I was experiencing, other discoveries were taking place. I was discovering and unearthing more about the entire process as it progressed, which is interesting when compared to the final product of qualitative work. It
conveys the process and concepts as fixed, solid, and scientific, but none of that understanding captures the essence of a reflexive discovery process. Because the discovery happens in the reflexivity, and in the response of the people that are in the scene with us, the process of having an expectation (even shifting) can invite others to discover at the same time.

During the study, I had to fly and drive long hours to go and meet each of my participants over several months. On one drive, I listened to an episode of Revisionist History about Sammy Davis Jr. and the role of tokens (i.e., minorities among a skewed majority group). In the episode, Gladwell cited Kanter (1977) who noted that tokens “find themselves colluding with dominants through shared laughter.” My eyes welled up with tears as I recalled all these interviews I had listened to where I was laughing with the participant at something I really did not find funny, in the moment. I was finding them increasingly unfunny the longer I did the interviews.

This awareness of problematic patterns in myself applied not just to these interviews, but to the ways I related to men in many contexts. I really did not see these patterns in the beginning, but when they happened again and again as I was listening to myself, I began to truly hear what I was doing. This insight and others in the discovery process revealed how consciousness and discovery changes everything about expectations. My increased consciousness of this previously unconscious reaction (e.g., laughter) changed the same behavior. It became a tactic, where power had once seduced me to collude, consciousness allowed me to use the same behavior subversively.

My original objective was for my participants to help me understand what works in advocacy and mentoring. And so, I was playing with patriarchy, playing by the rules, consciously and unconsciously. Then along the way I realized I was not going to be able to answer the question as I had expected, it was not answerable and the exact same tactics took on a completely different meaning. With this realization came a different sense of connection and motivation with my participants because I was recognizing more fully that these systems related to my topic are beyond any one individual’s story. When I heard the same kind of response to a question about gender for the seventh time, I started to see that there was something else going on, something bigger than the participants’ unique beliefs.

That higher-order insight is the purpose of a research project and a research question. Getting sucked into the context of only the individual changes the role we are playing to more of a therapist, or pastor, or caretaker, when really what we are doing is fundamentally different and focused on a larger and more systemic task.

**Conclusion**

In the latent analysis of Stockton’s study, we found the importance of discovery is another of the many applications of the theater of qualitative research. The quixotic pursuit of sounding scientific leaves discovery as a term related to new knowledge in findings. The concept of discovery in theater is akin to an actor who is portraying a character making a discovery in the moment. In research, these latent discoveries can influence the person doing the research and show again the influence between the scenes of interviewing and the processing as a researcher.

We asked the question how theatrical metaphor and practice could deepen the understanding of the researcher as the instrument. The theater of qualitative research has a stage, a script, actors, and requires exploration of liminal spaces of consciousness and purpose. Scholars often signal that what they are doing plays by the rules of a socially constructed and academically confirmed type of positivistic knowledge production paradigm (e.g., the data show..., or science confirms...). By following these rules, one may claim that they have produced a knowledge according to the canon of science. Stanislavski (2017), speaking about the definition of the creative road of the actor, asked a question as to whether or not there are rules and accepted processes that can teach someone how to act? He went on to talk about discovery and creative work through unique method. One of the hallmarks of rigor in science has been repetition, which may be criticized through the related concept of imitation. Stanislavski (2017) addressed the concept in theater saying,

> By imitation, I mean teaching someone to imitate someone else’s voice, or manner, or results, or to give an exact copy of the deportment of a well-known actor. This is not the road of individual creative work. (pg. xxx).

The issue of imitation and the theoretical and analogic approach that we are taking here, may also serve as both inspiration and critique to lean in to the theater art of qualitative research and perhaps less for the quest to appear as a positivistic science. In the theater of qualitative research, we find a whole world of understanding life, meaning, interaction, and communication—all of which are core to the purpose of qualitative researcher and the quest to become a better researcher. The reflexive role can enhance knowledge of self, purpose, and ability to connect with participants. The GOTE grid is a portable tool drawing from theatrical theory that helps to clarify the role a researcher is cultivating before, during, and after the interview.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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