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## **Singing my story too: Navigating positionality from the ‘inside’** Laura Curtis

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## **Abstract**

My Doctoral research explores the complex meanings that involuntarily childless women derive from their experiences singing and collaboratively composing within the Childless Voices Choir (2020), based in the UK. Through ethnographic fieldwork and a participatory action research (PAR) project, I seek to examine the ways in which the women participating in the choir, including myself, build community and develop self-empowerment. As an involuntarily childless choral singer and pedagogue, I approach my research from an insider perspective that benefits my research in many ways yet creates numerous ethical tensions for me as a researcher-participant. In this article, I discuss the ways in which I address issues of positionality, power, and assumptions in my dissertation fieldwork by taking a feminist approach to ethnographic and participatory action research. Given both the sensitive nature of my research topic and my personal connection to it, as well as my affiliation with the choral field, reflexivity plays an important role in my research processes, as may be evidenced in this paper as I think through my epistemological standpoint and methodological choices.

**Keywords:** Feminist research; Ethnography; Participatory action research; Insider perspective; Epistemology; Reflexivity

Through this journey of epistemological wrestling, I think deeply about the reasons behind my research topic and my own conditioning. My lived experience has created my worldview bringing me to this place and this topic area...No! I'm not a disinterested and neutral researcher! This topic resonates with and relates to me as deeply as it does to the potential participants. (Sky, 2016, p. 621)

I choose to begin my paper with Sky (2016) because it was through engaging with her article that my approach to thinking about research methodology shifted drastically. During my graduate studies, courses in both the Music Education and Women's Studies departments have expanded my thinking about epistemology and methodology through acknowledgement, critique, and resistance of what I came to understand as my positivist stance on research practice. I was previously convinced that "valid" research required setting aside one's personal connections to the topic being studied. Through engagements with feminist methodological literature, I have become conscious of

what I know and how I come to know it, and how my positionality and epistemological standpoint, as an involuntarily childless woman, informs the Doctoral research I am currently undertaking. This journey is not, however, free of tensions, and it is through what Sky (2016) calls ‘epistemological wrestling’ that I have worked to untangle tensions between what I previously believed was the most ethical way to conduct research and what I now understand, and engage with, as a reflexive feminist research ethic.

## **Methodology**

My Doctoral research explores the ways in which involuntarily childless women experience community building and the development of self-empowerment through singing in the Childless Voices Choir (2020) in the UK. Given the nature of the phenomenon I explore in this study, and the questions I seek to address, the intersection between two methodological frameworks emerged as most appropriate and conducive to my dissertation research, namely, ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley, 2018; Hine, 2017; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Bresler, 1995; Cohen et al., 2018; Dennis, 2009; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Stringer, 2007). While ethnography is my central methodological approach, elements of PAR are embedded within the larger framework through the implementation of a collaborative composition and recording project. Here, my aim is to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge between the women participating in the study and myself as researcher, while also attending to issues of power imbalance inherent within the research process. As involuntary childlessness may be considered a sensitive research topic due to the stigma attached to this phenomenon (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Gold, 2012; Gotlib, 2016; Green, 2012; Greil et al., 2011; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017), it is critical that I employ a research design within which the principles of feminist research are embedded (Ackerley & True, 2010; Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Cairns, 2013; Carroll, 2012; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Foley, 2002; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Olesen, 2005). Taking a feminist stance is integral to addressing tensions found within ethnographic research, in terms of what constitutes “real” ethnography (Bagley, 2009), and demands that a reflexive approach be applied to all phases of my research process. In this respect, the positionalities of both myself and the women with whom I work, and the ways in which these positions shape the research and the

co-creation of knowledge, are both acknowledged and reflected upon (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006). The impact of such an approach is then both personal and generative.

## **Feminist Research**

Historically, research conducted before the rise of feminist scholarship did not include the experiences or voices of women, nor social issues impacting the lives of women such as gender-based discrimination, domestic violence, and reproductive issues, to name a few (Ackerley & True, 2010; Harding, 1987). Over the last sixty years, however, feminist researchers have worked to politicize gendered social issues that were previously considered personal (Ackerley & True, 2010), through ‘critical engagement with conventional research methods and approaches’ (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010, p. 39). Critical engagement with feminist research methodologies addresses issues in the co-creation of knowledge, including the universalization of women’s issues, situated knowledge, and reflexivity.

Feminist research aims to capture the experiences of women not from a distant, rational and objective standpoint but, as Haraway (1988) argues, ‘from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity’ (p. 589). Taking a feminist stance is crucial to my research in that I explore my research questions from within the research environment, as a subjective being whose personal experiences as an involuntarily childless choral singer, choral director, and vocal pedagogue are acknowledged and interrogated as shaping the intentions and consequences of my research. Feminist research aims to benefit its participants by seeking to gain a more thorough understanding of the complex meanings surrounding their experiences (Ackerley & True, 2010; Carroll, 2012). Knowledge is constructed through ‘politically informed inquiry’ (Code, 2013, p. 354), whereby the researcher and the “knower” acknowledge and interrogate the sociopolitical environment within which their experiences are located and from where their knowledge is derived. Thus, the women participating in my research play a central role in the co-creation of knowledge throughout the study.

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is key to my research aims. According to Carroll (2012), the reflexive gaze is one which turns both inward and outward, to regard not only one's 'personal, political, intellectual, theoretical and autobiographical selves' (p. 550) but, additionally, the social context within which these selves exist and function. Feminist research is characterized by critical and reflexive practice whereby, as Olesen (2005) explains, 'the nature of research, the definition of and relationship with those with whom the research is done, the characteristics and location of the researcher, and the creation and presentation of knowledges' (p. 238) are critically and meaningfully acknowledged and addressed. Critical engagement with each participant's social positionality is also imperative to avoiding the generation of what Cairns (2013) terms "truth claims" in my research by seeking 'to map how truths are constituted' (p. 327) within the social circumstances and structures that frame the lives and experiences of each woman. I do not seek to generalize my research findings, but to unearth and describe the meanings derived from the particularized experiences of the Childless Voices singers. An interrogation of my own situatedness, then, is imperative to my research (Cairns, 2013). I continue to explore, as my research progresses, the assumptions upon which my methodological choices are built; specifically, the assumption that, due to my own experiences with involuntary childlessness and singing, I am able to better understand the experiences of the women with whom I work. According to Doucet and Mauthner (2006), 'being an "insider"—whatever this actually means—is not a straightforward route to knowing' (p. 40). With this understanding, the researcher and respondent co-create knowledge not by analyzing or representing their words and experiences as one, but as individually situated knowers.

### ***Situated Knowledge***

Haraway's (1988) notion of "Situated Knowledge" is a key element of feminist research that merges the researcher and the researched as co-creators of knowledge from a position of 'multidimensional' (p. 582) subjectivity, rather than one of objectivity. For Haraway (1988), 'the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original: it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (p. 586, original italics). Through Haraway's (1988) description, I understand knowledge creation through feminist research practice as dependent upon the exploration of individual experience within a situated context and not upon generalizable truth

claims that disregard the experience and social position of the researcher and those with whom research is being conducted.

Critical to my research, then, is reflecting upon, acknowledging, and addressing my assumptions regarding involuntary childlessness, which are derived from my personal experience with the phenomenon and my scholarly endeavours. This is especially important in relation to my theoretical framework in that the isolation and stigma I have experienced through my position as a woman who is childless not by choice, as well as my academic pursuits that stem from my experience with involuntary childlessness, inform the ways in which I interact with others who share similar circumstances. Additionally, my privileged social position as a white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, educated woman must be critically reflected upon and addressed in this research. Through the recognition, critique, and resistance of the dominant power structures embedded within my social world, I have developed self-empowerment. Lastly, my extensive experience within the fields of choral singing and choral pedagogy will have an impact on all of my research processes, as my assumptions regarding the field of choral music as an institution are deeply embedded in my pedagogical and scholarly praxis.

### **Ethnographic Research**

Central to ethnographic research is the value of meaning (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Bagley, 2008; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Brockmann, 2011; Cairns, 2013; Carroll, 2012; Geertz, 1973; Haraway, 1988; Hine, 2017; Jorgensen, 2009; Krueger, 2014; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Stauffer & Robbins, 2009; Tsolidis, 2008). Boellstorff et al. (2012) explain that ethnographic methodology should account for the importance of interpretation from both etic and emic perspectives, whereby ethnographers ‘conduct research not just to mine data from informants, but to learn about their theoretical and pragmatic insights’ (p. 16). In ethnographic research, then, it is not enough to observe a context or environment from a distance and attempt to explain it from one’s own (etic) perspective as an outside observer. An ethnographic researcher aims, instead, to gain an insider (emic) perspective of the context being studied (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). It is imperative for me to recognize and critique the ways in which my experiences as a choral singer, director, and pedagogue influence my research from an etic perspective.

According to Jorgensen (2009), the exploration of the experiences of those engaging in music-making activities from an emic perspective allows for a richer, deeper understanding of the ways in which research participants and researchers derive meaning from their experiences. My involvement with the Childless Voices Choir (2020) for twelve months prior to beginning my fieldwork meant that I came to my research from an emic perspective of how the choir functions. While I consider my position as a singer in the choir as beneficial to my research aims, I am also aware of tensions that may arise when a researcher has a personal connection to those she is working with, regarding meaning making through ethnographic research. Here, I turn to Krueger's (2014) three assumptions embedded in ethnographic research that support the central focus on the contextual and cultural character of meaning-making in ethnographic research.

### ***Assumptions in Ethnographic Research***

The first assumption Kreuger (2014) discusses is that researchers should avoid predetermined hypotheses and should instead 'attempt to remain sensitive and open to the ways in which the subjects, rather than the researchers, make sense of and give meaning to experiences' (Krueger, 2014, p. 137). Here, reflexive practice is crucial to my research processes, particularly in challenging pre-supposed notions of what I may find. Consequently, I approach my research with the knowledge that my epistemological stance is based upon my own experiences, and not those of the women I observe and interact with.

The second assumption proposed by Krueger (2014) is that research participants are themselves essential sources of data in that 'both their actions and statements about their beliefs and actions are considered important' (pp. 137-138). To this end, in addition to observations, I conduct multiple interviews and focus groups during my time in the field. These activities offer participants the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the meanings they derive from their experiences. Lastly, researchers should pay close and critical attention to the ways in which participants are influenced by any 'social and institutional conditions [...] [that may] enhance, shape, or limit actions and events taking place' (Krueger, 2014, p. 138) during the research process. The choral environment itself often has particular—and unspoken—institutionalized policies and practices embedded within it, of which participants may not be aware. Additionally, participants' experiences with involuntary childlessness are embedded in pronatalist discourses and must be acknowledged and critiqued as such.

### ***Tensions in Contemporary Ethnographic Research***

In addition to addressing Krueger's (2014) three assumptions, I aim to address tensions found within contemporary ethnographic research, which has evolved from traditional anthropological explorations of the cultural Other (Marsh, 2009). Contemporary approaches to ethnography enrich music education and community music research but have brought with them tensions and critiques from both anthropologists and sociologists (Balén, 2017; Campbell, 2010; Carpenter, 2015; Higgins, 2012). Taking a feminist stance in my research is integral to addressing tensions found within ethnographic research, in terms of what constitutes "real" ethnography. These tensions include how much time should be spent in the field, what constitutes valid knowledge, and issues of ethics and power (Hammersley, 2006; Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Tsolidis, 2008).

My study takes place in two phases, totaling a period of six months. Compared to traditional lengths of anthropological ethnographic fieldwork, my time in the field may be considered short. Hammersley (2006) reminds us that shortened ethnographic immersion can be problematic particularly in relation to 'sampling and generalization,' as well as 'failing to recognize both cyclical variability and fundamental patterns of change' (p. 6) within the field site. In contrast, Brockmann (2011) argues that her own short-term ethnographic exploration of young people's learner identities benefitted her study. She states that 'in the absence of full immersion, short-term observations enabled situated conversations between the informant and the researcher, as well as situated actions, allowing the researcher to observe actions or interactions as they arose in the context of the learning environment' (Brockmann, 2011, p. 241). The author concludes that her short-term observations as an active participant in the research were beneficial to her study, as they exposed her to the same 'pressures of the learning environment' (p. 241) as her participants. The challenge, then, is to conduct the most rigorous ethnographic research possible within the given timeframe, attending carefully and meaningfully to the 'levels of complexities and nuances' (Parker-Jenkins, 2018, p. 22) that the study demands.

According to Tsolidis (2008), recent ethnographic research, specifically in the field of sociology, 'aims to acknowledge the validity of the personal, including the emotional side of lived experience' (p. 272). She seeks to address this issue through reflexive practice, with the understanding that 'lived experience is situated within wider social processes and structures that need to be scrutinised' (Tsolidis, 2008, p. 275). I strive to address the issue of validity similarly, in



that I work to acknowledge and critically reflect upon my assumptions regarding involuntary childlessness and choral singing, and the social processes and structures that have shaped them, in part through field journaling.

Ethical considerations span from gaining access to the site, informed consent, the sharing of personal information, and the researcher-participant relationship (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Dennis, 2009; Hammersley, 2018; Matsunobu & Bresler, 2014; Olesen, 2005; Parker-Jenkins, 2018). Where the researcher has close contact with participants, often for extended periods of time, it is important to consider the researcher-participant relationship, especially in circumstances that include the sharing of sensitive personal information. I address issues of ethical research practice, in part, by establishing trust through my immersion in the field as a singer in the Childless Voices Choir (2020). Through my weekly engagements with the choir over the last eighteen months, I have been transparent and forthcoming about my experiences with involuntary childlessness and singing, and the ways in which these experiences have shaped my life course.

Finally, in ethnographic education research, the context that research participants are observed in is often complicated by power structures; this frames the learning environment that constitutes the research site (Bagley, 2009; Brockmann, 2011; Cairns, 2013; Dennis, 2009; O'Toole, 2005; Tsolidis, 2008). My research seeks to examine dominant power structures that shape the experiences of involuntarily childless women within the choral environment. It is thus central that the women I am working with, and myself, critique dominant discourses embedded within music education and community music environments and practices, as well as the pronatalist discourses that frame the experiences of involuntarily childless women.

### **Participatory Action Research**

While ethnography is my central methodological approach, elements of PAR are embedded within the larger framework. Here, my aim is to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge between participants and myself as researcher. According to Cohen et al. (2018), PAR's purpose 'is not merely to understand situations and phenomena but to change them. In particular it seeks to emancipate the disempowered, to redress inequality and to promote individual freedoms within a democratic society' (p. 51). While the purpose of my project is not to emancipate involuntarily childless women, it does aim to facilitate experiences in which these women come to see the forces

that have acted upon them, within and through this particular choral community. I have chosen to incorporate a PAR project into my ethnographic research based, in part, on Freire's (2018) notion of 'transforming action,' through which oppressed populations of all kinds may pursue 'a fuller humanity' (p. 46). Attending to issues of power imbalance is central to my research in that I seek to facilitate an opportunity for involuntarily childless women to recognize, critically reflect on, interrogate, and resist oppressive power structures that shape their experiences (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017). The role of the researcher in PAR is that of 'democratic facilitator and consciousness-raiser' (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 220). To this end, within my ethnographic research study, I co-facilitate, with the director of the Childless Voices Choir (2020), a PAR project during which members of the choir, including myself, work with an involuntarily childless female composer in a song writing and recording project. The songs we compose may incorporate narratives regarding our experiences with involuntary childlessness and our participation in the Childless Voices Choir (2020). PAR projects not only create knowledge but mobilize that knowledge such that support may be given to social movements, issues of social justice may be addressed, and perspectives and voices that have been effectively 'silenced' (Fine & Torre, 2019, p. 3) may be uplifted.

The recording session that is facilitated during the project aims to offer potential listeners an opportunity to learn from the participants' experiences and to acknowledge and interrogate the oppressive social structures within which involuntarily childless women function (Elliott & Bowen, 2018; Green, 2012; Lovett, 2018; Malacrida, 2009; Petropanagos, 2017). This underscores the research of Denzin (2009), who states that 'performance is a way of knowing, a way of showing, a way of interpreting and a method for building shared understanding' (p. 260). The performance of our narratives within the PAR project, then, is an opportunity for creative meaning making between the singers, the potential audience, and the researcher/facilitator.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this paper, I have described the ways in which my approach to research practice shifted from a positivist stance to a feminist understanding through what Sky (2016) terms 'epistemological journeying' (p. 625). The ways in which I seek to explore meaning in the experiences of involuntarily childless women who sing in the Childless Voices Choir (2020) are informed by my own experiences with involuntary childlessness and singing. Like Sky (2016), 'I'm not a disinterested or neutral researcher' (p. 621). I make no apologies for the "insider" positionality I

have gained from my lived experiences but, rather, acknowledge and critique my role as researcher-participant and the ways in which my positionality impacts all aspects of my research practice. Through reflexive feminist research practice, I seek to address assumptions and tensions embedded within the ethnographic and participatory action research methodologies that frame my work, with the intention of co-creating knowledge with women whose voices have been effectively silenced by their experiences with involuntary childlessness.

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