Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

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Too often, we who do empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics fail to connect how we do research to our theoretical and political commitments. Yet if critical inquirers are to develop a ‘praxis of the present’, we must practice in our empirical endeavours what we preach in our theoretical formulations. Research which encourages self and social understanding and change-enhancing action on the part of ‘developing progressive groups’ requires research designs that allow us as researchers to reflect on how our value commitments insert themselves into our empirical work. Our own frameworks of understanding need to be critically examined as we look for the tensions and contradictions they might entail. (Lather 1991, p. 80)

Abstract
It is not the intention of this paper to outline my research project per se, as this has been discussed in past papers (see Hawkins, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). This paper highlights the argument for the importance of making explicit and connecting one’s own personal beliefs and understandings (theories) with one’s research. The intention of this paper is to address Patti Lather’s concerns and examine my own “frameworks of understanding” (Lather, 1991, p. 80) that underpinned my doctoral research project. Specifically, this paper scrutinises my worldview and the philosophies that complement this worldview. These frameworks helped develop “a praxis of the present” (Lather, 1991, p. 80) for the doctoral project. By examining the frameworks and value commitments that underpinned the research project this paper facilitates an understanding of how these frameworks and value commitments have, to use Lather’s (1991) terms, ‘inserted themselves into my empirical work’. As Kincheloe (2003, p. 84-85) states “our understanding of an educational situation depends on the context within which we encounter it and the theoretical frames which the researcher brings to the observation. These ideological frames are the glasses through we see the world.” Consequently, the lens through which I viewed the world was of paramount importance to my research project. Therefore, this paper firstly discusses a participatory worldview (drawn from Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Laszlo, 1996, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2006) through which I perceive the world and my doctoral study. This worldview emphasises participation, relationships and interrelationships. My participatory worldview complements this research project’s methodology of participatory action research and how data was collected and analysed (for extended discussions see Hawkins, 2007a, 2007b). This paper then discusses the philosophical thinking that underpinned this research project. I drew from many philosophical sources to meld together a research philosophy that aligned with my participatory worldview and that supported my research project. This research philosophy values participation, collaboration, respect, caring, empathy, trust and understanding.
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

Introduction
A challenge to change our worldview is central to our times (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Indeed, over two decades ago Harding (1986, p. 245) suggested that “the categories of Western thought need destabilisation.” It has been asserted that philosophers of ethics have struggled (and are still struggling) for a new ethical way of thinking to address the problems of modernity: social fragmentation, ecological ruin and spiritual impoverishment (Egéa-Kuehne, 2003). It is also clear that there is a need to address epistemological errors (the understandings that propel individualism, capitalism and consumerism) as well, built into our thinking by this modernity, that have consequences for justice and ecological sustainability (Bateson, 1972). This shift in consciousness has strongly influenced and impacted upon my worldview and research philosophy which, consequently, greatly influenced my doctoral research project. My worldview is a participatory one which the following section of this paper outlines, leading into a discussion on the research philosophies that support my worldview and my doctoral project.

A Participatory Worldview
The positivist worldview, that has been considered the gold standard of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), sees science as disconnected from everyday life and the researcher as subject (who remains objective) in a world of separate objects. Mind and reality are divided. Although it may be said that worldviews do co-exist rather than replace one another, with Reason and Bradbury (2006, p.5) I argue that this “positivist worldview has outlived its usefulness.” The new, emergent worldview is described as systemic, holistic, relational, feminine, experiential, but its defining characteristic is that it is participatory: our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships which we co-author. We participate in our world, so that the ‘reality’ that we experience is a co-creation that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and construing. The participative metaphor is particularly apt for action research, because as we participate in creating our world we are already embodied and breathing beings who are necessarily acting – and this draws us to consider how to judge the quality of our acting (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7).

A participatory worldview sees human beings (along with their environment) as co-creating their world. To do this we must be situated and reflexive. We must be “explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7). A participatory worldview competes with positivism and the deconstructive postmodern/poststructural alternatives; however, simultaneously, the participatory worldview draws on these paradigms. It argues, as positivists do, that there is a ‘reality’ (a primal givenness of being of which we participate in and contribute to) and realises that as soon as we endeavour to articulate this we enter a world of language and expression that is culturally framed. This articulation draws on deconstructionist perspectives.

However, from the action researcher’s perspective Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 6) argue that “the emphasis that deconstructive and poststructuralist perspectives place on the metaphor as ‘text’ is limiting. There is a lot of concern with discourse, text,
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

narrative, with the crisis of representation, but little concern for the relationship of all this to knowledge and action.” As Lather (1991, p. 12) points out, “the question of action… remains largely under-addressed within postmodern discourse.” Postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives have analysed the modernist world and have exposed the crisis it is in but have not moved beyond the problems to examine possible solutions.

The ‘linguistic turn’ in research practice, taken up by poststructuralists, influenced our understanding that knowledge is socially constructed. However, Reason and Bradbury (2006, p.2) contend that this current historical research moment (to use Denzin and Lincoln’s [2005] term for grouping certain trends in qualitative research history) is concerned with the ‘action turn’ which builds upon the ‘linguistic turn’ by considering how we might “act in an intelligent and informed way in a socially constructed world.” The ‘linguistic turn’ examined our ailing world through the metaphor of the world as ‘text’; however, the need to pay attention to the deeper structures of reality that lie under and behind scientific and linguistic phenomena (for an extended discussion see Berry, 1999) calls for a more creative and constructive worldview. Reason and Bradbury (2006, p.7) believe that this new worldview “can be based on the metaphor of participation.”

The characteristics, or dimensions, of this participatory worldview (shown in figure 1) are interrelated: the participatory and evolutionary nature of the given cosmos; the practical being and acting in the cosmos; the relational and ecological form of the cosmos; the meaning and purpose we place on our being, acting and knowledge; and the extended epistemologies that inform our acting.

![Figure 1 Characteristics/dimensions of a participatory worldview](Source: Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 7)
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

**Participatory Evolutionary Reality (Figure 1)**

Participatory evolutionary reality is at the centre of a participatory worldview which understands the nature of the cosmos that we co-habit and co-create. It is founded on Laszlo’s (1996, 2003) assumptions that we are not acting as independent parts but as an integrated and interacting whole. Every human being is interconnected with one another and the environment, acting and coevolving as a whole. Continuing from this assumption is the argument that opposes both modernist and postmodernist ontological thinking that matter and mind are distinct substances. As de Quincey (1999, p. 23) contends

> Mind and matter are not distinct substances. The Cartesian error was to identify both matter and consciousness as kinds of substances and not to recognise them as phases; that mind is the dynamic form inherent in the matter itself. Mind is the self-becoming, the self-organisation – the *self-creation* – of matter. Without this, matter could never produce mind. Consciousness and matter, mind and body, subject and object, process and substance … always go together. They are a unity, a nondual duality.

Laszlo (2003) adds to the above argument by suggesting that all things in the universe are in constant and enduring communication with each other. Such a worldview discounts an analytic paradigm and looks to an evolutionary, emergent and reflexive one in which the universe is continually self-ordering and self-creating (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This perspective highlights the fact that human beings are centres of consciousness simultaneously independent of and connected to, in and with the rest of creation (both human and more-than-human) through constant communion.

Our realities are co-created through participation with our world. So our spiritual, emotional consciousness and our physical body (our bodymind) craft with the whole of creation our realities that we experience. “Subject and object are interdependent. Thus participation is fundamental to the nature of our being, an *ontological given*” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 8). Therefore my doctoral study adopted participatory action research as a methodology that honoured educators as co-researchers or co-creators of this study. This leads us to examine how, as participants in this interdependent co-creating cosmos, we engage with, and act in our world.

**The Practical Being and Acting in the Cosmos (Figure 1)**

The human being acts in a participatory universe. The baby cries and the parent feeds her; the toddler takes her first tentative steps while holding a sibling’s hand; the child kicks a ball to her friends; the teenager parties well into the night (or morning); the adult finds a partner. In all these everyday occurrences the human person is engaged in activity that depends on the participation of another and ways of knowing support this activity. Our ‘ways of knowing’ encourage us to think about our relationships and consider what is worthwhile and what we deem as worthy of pursuit. The following three sections, that further outline the characteristics of a participatory worldview, extend upon this point.

**Meaning and Purpose (Figure 1)**

There is agreement among researchers that the function of human inquiry is to promote the flourishing of life (Fals-Border, 1988; Greenwood & Levin, 2005; Heron, 1996; Maguire, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). A participatory worldview demands that researchers examine what this means for them and participants in their
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

studies and what are the purposes and meanings of their research efforts. As Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 11), rather passionately contend

Participative consciousness is part of a re-sacralisation of the world, the re-enchantment of the world (Berman, 1981; Berry, 1988; Skolimowski, 1993). Sacred experience is based on reverence, in awe and love for creation, valuing it for its own sake, in its own right as a living presence. To deny participation not only offends against human justice, not only leads to errors in epistemology, not only strains the limits of the natural world, but is also troublesome for human souls and for the *anima mundi*. Given the condition of our times, a primary purpose of human inquiry is not so much to search for truth but to *heal*, and above all to heal the alienation, the split that characterises modern experience.

This participative worldview for me is not only a physical and scholarly perspective, but also a spiritual one. Reason (1994) points out that a characteristic of the participative worldview is that mystery and meaning are re-established and we experience the world as a sacred place. However, the notion of the spiritual need not be inflated to a sense that it is almost unattainable, nor that it is only to concern ‘inner work’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The idea of the spiritual can be experienced in our every-day lived experiences and our inner work can ground our outer work that involves our actions in the world. The grounding of this participatory action research project was based on the fact that every individual is sacred and as such all participants (educators, preschoolers and parents) were perceived as beautiful and wonderful in the philosophical and theological sense. This belief was held by the co-researchers of this doctoral study who were fervent about guiding their preschoolers to see the beauty and wonder in all people.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 3) much of the eighth historical moment of qualitative research is “concerned with moral discourse (and) the development of sacred textualities.” This study aligned with Denzin and Lincoln’s eighth moment as it concerned itself with discourse into social justice issues and upheld humanity as sacred. This idea permeated my doctoral research project. My study fitted Reason and Bradbury’s (2006, p. 12) definition of the practical inquiry of human persons: “(It) is a spiritual expression, a celebration of the flowering of humanity and of the co-creating cosmos, and as part of a sacred science is an expression of the beauty and joy of active existence.” My research project being a practical inquiry of human persons, as a spiritual expression, asserts that human beings have a connection between each other and the ecology in which we exist and that these relationships are interrelated.

*Relational and Ecological Form (Figure 1)*

“A participatory worldview is a political statement as well as a theory of knowledge (and)... implies democratic, peer relationships as the political form of inquiry” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 10). This political aspect insists on people’s right and ability in contributing to, and voicing a powerful and heeded say in, decisions that affect them. This participatory worldview sees a strong connection between power and knowledge. This emphasis underpinned my study in that it saw the early childhood educators and preschoolers as holding the knowledge and having the power to change their situation for the better. However, “the political imperative is not just a matter of researchers being considerate about their research subjects or acting ethically: it is about the democratic foundation of inquiry and of society” (Reason &
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

Bradbury, 2006, p. 10). This imperative had a great impact on the research project as not only was it an aim to conduct democratic and participatory research, but also to facilitate preschoolers’ awareness of, and sensitivity to social justice issues such as the positive recognition of differences in race, gender, culture, ability, class and sexuality. A positive understanding of these social justice issues, which are related to difference, diversity and human dignity, will go a long way in building a democratic society. The research was concerned with the production of knowledge and action directly useful to the preschool situations; however participation in the research project also empowered the co-researchers (early childhood educators) and preschoolers at a deeper level to challenge their perceptions of the world and how they act in it.

Another aspect of this relational ecological form as a characteristic of a participatory worldview is the human relationship with the more-than-human world. Although my study confined itself to examining the human side of social justice due to constraints of time and management, the ecological side is worthy of examination and two excellent education based research projects undertaken as doctoral inquiries have been conducted in this area (see Davis, 2003; Wooltorton, 2003). Gammage (preface in Howe, 1999, p. xi) asks “what will our children do in a world of global warming, of rising seas, of melting ice-caps and unbreathable, polluted air, a world of forecast forest degradation and long-term ecological disaster?” The damage that has been done to the earth’s ecosystems has resulted in an ecological sustainability crisis. “Participation is an ecological perspective” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 10) and human beings must understand and nurture the planets ecosystems and examine how humanity has impacted on nature’s processes. Thus there is a great need to sustain the world in which we live (both human and more-than-human relationships) for the flourishing of life. We can sustain the world through our collective knowledge of how to respect, honour and transform our planet as we have the capacity to be self-reflexive and self-determining. This knowledge is co-constructed.

Extended Epistemology (Figure 1)

We are in the centre of a swing away from a view of knowledge as disinterested and “moving towards a conceptualisation of knowledge as constructed, contested, incessantly perspectival and polyphonic” (Lather, 1991, p. xx). This understanding of knowledge appears to combine many ‘ways of knowing’. As Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 9) propose “(a) participative worldview, with its notion of reality as subjective-objective, involves an extended epistemology: we draw on diverse forms of knowing as we encounter and act in our world.” To frame my study a number of epistemologies were drawn upon and are very briefly outlined below.

Park’s (2006) epistemological framework highlighting relational, reflective and representational forms of knowledge was extremely helpful as he contextualised his framework in participatory research. Feminist epistemology highlights “the linkage of gaining voice to the recognition of knowledge as a social construction in the context of human relations (and) is critical to feminist-ground research” (Maguire, 2006, p. 65). My research project strove to give voice to educators and students who are often silenced or at the very best whose ideas and opinions are considered unimportant in scientific research paradigms (Cooper & White, 2006; Kincheloe, 2003; Walsh, Tobin & Graue, 1991). Finally, critical social constructivism assumes that it is impossible to conceive knowledge without thinking of a knower (Kincheloe, 2003). My research project was underpinned by the understanding that the knowers (the early childhood
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

educators and preschoolers involved in this study) had the capability to construct knowledge that was pertinent to their contexts and to make positive change in their public and private domains.

The above section has explained my participatory worldview. The following section expounds the philosophy that complements and supports this worldview.

**Philosophy**


**Levinas philosophy**

Much of Levinas’ writings on ethics and justice were developed in the context of a renewed interest in contemporary religious thought and concerned ethicopolitical issues (Egéa-Kuehne, 2003). Levinas’ works were published in the second half of the twentieth century (1974, 1985, 1987, 1990, 1999) while sciences, and the techniques and technology they produced, grew (and are still growing) at a powerful rate. However, just as many questions of ethics were (and are still) becoming increasingly urgent for consumers and philosophers alike. A regression and degradation of education and culture, and a proliferation of ignorance, prejudices and illiteracy parallels the apparent triumph of the sciences (Egéa-Kuehne, 2003). Egéa-Kuehne (2003) asserts that new ethics were, and are still needed.

Levinas saw ethics as a response to the call of infinity and transcendence guided by the grace of God. He drew much of his thinking from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic religious traditions and from studying the Bible and the Talmud. Levinas (1985, p.18) links the “ethical plenitude” he found in the Bible to the Hebraic tradition and to the wisdom of the eternal. His theses (1985, 1987, 1990, 1999) have obvious biblical and Talmud underpinnings and reference points and, although his thinking is philosophical and phenomenological (he did not consider himself a theologian) the biblical message is significant in that it lays the foundation of the idea of the Other. “The Other is what I myself am not” (Levinas, 1987, p. 75).

Levinas developed a ‘phenomenology of the face’ as a presence signifying a prohibition of violence, through the infinity of which it is a trace and a sign – the face signifies Infinity (Levinas, 1985, 1999). The Face of God is an image often referred to in the bible and its teaching asks the reader to find the face of God in the people on Earth. Egéa-Kuehne (2003, pp. 109 – 110) explains that “(f)or Levinas, what he calls ‘the face of the Other’ means the first relation to ethics. In the face-to-face encounter, he sees, beyond all knowledge, an ‘elevation’ of the ethical order, an indirect encounter with a transcendental God, a relation to Infinity.” She further explains that it is before the Other and the face of the Other that one can have the pure experience of the Other which Levinas sees as one and the same with ethics, in as much as one is conscious that one is responsible for the Other, that the existence of the Other is more
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

important than one’s own. Levinas (1999) concludes that to recognise that we come after an Other, whoever s/he may be, is ethics. Moral consciousness is developed through the face-to-face encounter with the Other, in the course of an interpersonal relation and through the responsibility and the respect, called for by the Other, for the Other as other (Levinas, 1999). The epiphany of the face-to-face encounter with the Other is a phenomenon in which the Other’s proximity and distance are both powerfully felt. However, thus far this discussion has consisted of only two entities and humanity cannot be condensed to two individuals.

Levinas (1999) suggests that the third party – the reality of society – disrupts the simplicity of the one-on-one encounter. This plurality is problematic: which one comes before the other in one’s responsibility? This becomes a question of justice. Thus the entrance of the third party to the intersubjective relation triggers a move from ethics to justice. Levinas (1985, p. 94) states “(t)his is the fact of the multiplicity of human beings, the presence of a third party next to the Other, which conditions the laws and establishes justice.” Levinas’ search for justice goes back to the face of the Other, the source of responsibility and ethics. This initial obligation (responsibility and respect for the Other) placed before the multiplicity of human beings, becomes justice (Levinas, 1999). Egéa-Kuehne (2003) proposes that the individual’s choice to acknowledge the Other as other can be considered an ethical decision and it is this acknowledgement which Levinas calls justice. She expounds that his concept of justice seems “to be conceived in a biblical sense, as a synthesis of moral behaviours” (Egéa-Kuehne, 2003, p. 115) where the uniqueness and primacy of the Other must not be forgotten.

In Levinas’ model of ethics and justice the Other and the others manifest simultaneously. In reality there never was just one Other and ‘I’. There has always been the Other, others and ‘I’ in a “fraternity” based on responsibility (Levinas, 1974, p. 202). Egéa-Kuehne (2003, p. 116) writes on Levinas works and also quotes from him:

The concept of ‘fraternity’ renders justice accessible to all, which is the essence of justice – if justice is to be just – in the fact that “I am another of the Other…. The reciprocal relationship binds me to the other… in the trace of transcendence, in illeity” [Levinas, 1974, p.158]. A few pages down Levinas [1974, p.187] confirms that “justice can only be established if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocatable relationship with the other, always for the other, can become an other like the others’. The importance for justice of this “fraternity” cannot be overlooked since it is thanks to this fraternity that there can also be justice for “I”.

In his model of ethics and justice Levinas (1999) contends that responsibility to the Other involves responsibility to all others, which leads to responsibility for social justice and world peace.

A slight philosophical shift as the research project progressed
At the beginning of the research project I felt that I had a total commitment and responsibility to and for each co-researcher as philosophised by Levinas. However, during the early stages of the research project I began to problematise this commitment. If I had total responsibility for the Other in a non-reciprocatable

8
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

relationship, was I denying the Other a true identity and self-determination and, indeed, the chance of experiencing an equal, mutual relationship? Although I deeply respected Levinas’ philosophy (and still do) I wanted to build on his philosophy by adding to it the notion of reciprocity. Levinas’ philosophy exudes a caring aspect to ethics and justice and I found the philosophies of Nel Noddings (1995, 2005), Virginia Held (1995, 2001, 2005), Maxine Greene (1978, 1988, 1995) and Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1999) resonated his thinking with, however, a difference. They discuss an ethic of care towards others. This ethic of care can not only be upheld in one-on-one, face-to-face encounters but also in a community context and it has a distinctly feminine/feminist spirit. Therefore, my philosophy began to shift during the orientation phase of this research project as the research team examined philosophies regarding an ‘ethic of care’ and feminist communitarianism.

An ethic of care

An ethic of care is based on taking into account the perspectives of others (Greene, 1995) as opposed to an ethic of justice which predicates that there is one right view of any situation (for extended discussions see Held, 1995, 2001). Aitken and Kennedy (2007, p. 169) contend that “everyone is entitled to care and concern and everyone is ethically obliged to give it their attention.” Caring requires one to believe in and work continuously towards one’s competence and capability so that the recipients of one’s care – people, animals, objects, ideas – are enhanced (Greene, 1995). “There is nothing mushy about caring. It is the strong, resilient backbone of human life” (Noddings, 1995, p. 368). Indeed, human beings cannot flourish or survive without caring relations (Held, 2001). However, taking care ‘of’ and caring ‘about’ can become problematic as this type of caring tends to be unidimensional and conditional. The concept of care needs to be reconceptualised to better support leaders in activism, pedagogical social justice work and to genuinely build relations of respect and care that would enhance relationships in collaborative research situations (Woodrow, 2001).

Caring needs to be democratised and universalised so that individuals, families, communities, agencies and governments understand that we all have multifaceted systems of care responsibility to those with whom we work and to more distant others (Tronto, 1999). Tronto (1993, p. 40) proposed a framework and definition of care characterised by interdependence and reciprocity

... a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’, so that we can live as well as possible. Care itself consists of four elements: caring about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving. An ethic of care has further four elements – responsibility, competence, integrity and responsiveness.

However, care must focus on “the universal importance of protecting spheres of choice and freedom within which people with diverse views on what matters in life can pursue flourishing according to their own light” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 9). History shows that the attitude of the Australian government towards caring for the Aboriginal people has been polemical to Nussbaum’s caring focus. An abomination in the name of care can be seen in the atrocities caused by the Australian government to the Aboriginal people during a shameful one hundred year period (1860 - 1960) of Australian history, referred to as ‘the stolen generation’.
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

On February 13th 2008 the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, formally apologised on behalf of the government through an Apology Statement tabled at a parliamentary sitting and is attempting to bring equity to this abomination in the name of care by implementing recommendations of the Bringing Them Home Report tabled in 1996 that was ignored by the previous government (Rudd, 2008). These recommendations seek to empower Aboriginal communities, not through government projects (which have failed miserably in the past) but through Indigenous leaders and communities. As Nussbaum (1999, p. 9) concludes “the goal should be to put people into a position of agency and choice, not to push them into functioning in ways deemed desirable.” Therefore, an ethic of care is not simply caring for and/or about others but with others; working with others in a caring, supportive environment that encourages them to explore possibilities that best cater for their needs and their own caring. Tronto’s and Nussbaum’s thoughts echo the aspect of caring that gives power to the other, valuing the other’s agency and respecting the right to decide how she/he/they may thrive and flourish as individuals or as communities.

It is well documented that early childhood professionals have a strong sense of caring for others: children, families and colleagues (Aitken & Kennedy, 2007; Cherrington, 2001; Kennedy, 2003; Woodrow, 2001). The early childhood professionals involved in my research project were no exception. They collaborated with this study because they cared: they cared about ‘improving practice’, they cared about the children in their settings, they cared about the parents and they cared about teaching for social justice. Therefore, this research project was fortunate to begin with people who knew the essence of care: shared consideration, sensitivity and trust (Held, 2005). What was then needed was for the research team to continue in an ethic of care with a sense of community, which lead the team to explore literature on communitarianism.

A feminist communitarian ethic

Many feminist thinkers believe that the values of caring, trust and solidarity can extend beyond personal friendships to the political and social arenas (Held, 2005; Noddings, 2005; Nussbaum, 1999; Tronto, 1999). A feminist, communitarian ethic calls for caring, trusting, collaborative, non-oppressive relationships among researchers and participants (Christians, 2003, 2005). “Such an ethic presumes that investigators are committed to recognising personal accountability, the value of individual expressiveness and caring, the capacity for empathy, and the sharing of emotionality” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 52). In the communitarian sense we are “persons-in-community” and bonding is the foundation of, rather than simply being influential to social action (Barnes, 1997, p. 30).

There are tensions in the understanding of the term ‘communitarianism’, as some accept the liberal, fundamentalists’ stance that communitarians defend the ‘common good’ at the expense of ‘individual rights’ (Sandel 1998). My use of the term ‘communitarianism’ is broader, based on an eclectic personal recognition of community as the trajectory of a participatory worldview. Stocker and Pollard (1994) explain that communitarianism is an approach that highlights the importance of a sense of community to that of human wholeness and selfhood.

Face-to-face communication is the crux in building a community that upholds forming relationships with authenticity, respect and warmth (Croft, 1996). This ethical theory presumes that the understanding of self and others is constructed through the
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

sociocultural contexts with which one engages and where moral commitments, values and understandings are negotiated through communication. Communication processes (for example: dialogue, participatory inquiry, defusing personal agendas, mediation, strategies for promoting harmony and co-operation) within a community are strengthened and supported by the ontological assumption of the spirit of peace (Brown & Brown, 1996; Boyd, 1996; Gastil, 1993). The quality and nature of genuine community is the communion between community members. This communion is underpinned by kinship, respect and empathy (Buber, 1960).

A community becomes a dynamic whole when a group of people participate in common practices, depend on each other, make decisions together, identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships and commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another’s and the groups well-being with active engagement (Forster, 1995; Metcalf, 1996). During this ‘long term’ conflicts will arise that must be attended to with an ethic of care. As Forster (1997, p. 9) states “communities which avoid conflict not only fail to resolve differences satisfactorily, they deprive themselves of a major course of creativity and vitality.” He further contends that there must be a balance of freedom and responsibility with individuality and community responsibility intertwined.

Research supported by this philosophy should be “collaborative in its design and participatory in its execution” (Christians, 2003, p. 227), where participants are given a forum, enabling them to come to mutually held conclusions leading to community transformation. During the course of my collaborative project the research team, who considered themselves a small research community, actively engaged in all research practices and processes to bring about empowerment and transformation in both the research community and the preschool communities in which they worked. There were spaces of disagreement; however the research team became a dynamic whole where co-researchers participated in active engagement, depended on one another, made decisions together and were committed to the research project.

A collaborative philosophy built on care
I will now draw these diverse philosophies into my own personal philosophy that has greatly impacted on my doctoral research project. This study was inspired by Levinas’ phenomenology of the face. It is through the face-to-face encounter that we are conscious of the closeness and the distance between each other. It is through this encounter that we experience each other and are conscious of our responsibility to each other. The face-to-face encounter was of great importance to my research project. Many people were touched by this study: early childhood educators (as co-researchers), preschool children (as our ‘teachers’), parents of preschoolers, university supervisors, conference audiences. In each research meeting, storytime session, supervisory meeting and conference presentation every face that met mine had a story to tell, an idea to present, a feeling to express and in each of these stories, ideas and feelings were personal values either overtly or covertly communicated. Through the phenomenology of face I was able to listen, absorb and respond with utmost humility and respect due to the desire to truly experience the Other and be responsible for this relationship.

I believed in a holistic approach to this research project whereby participant knowledge and experiential knowledge were valued and where those involved in the
Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations

study were actively engaged. I wished the early childhood educators and myself to be regarded as co-researchers with equal status. Therefore, because I already saw these co-researchers (and all involved in the study) through the phenomenology of face, an appropriate research ethic needed to be considered.

A feminist communitarian philosophy underpinned by an ethic of care became the foundation on which this collaborative study was built. I believed that as a research community, relying on participant knowledge and expertise, much could be done to support and promote teaching for social justice in each co-researcher’s individual preschool community. The research team forged caring, trusting, empathetic, respectful and collaborative relationships. Our research meetings upheld care, equality, shared governance, harmony, respect and trust.

My philosophy borrowed from Levinas, an ethic of care and feminist communitarianism complemented my participatory worldview and strongly influenced how this research project was conducted. My doctoral study adopted the collaborative design of participatory action research that upheld and respected participants as co-researchers valuing their knowledge, expertise and understandings. As Lather (1991, p.80) contends “if critical inquirers are to develop a ‘praxis of the present’, we must practice in our empirical endeavours what we preach in our theoretical formulations.” Although this paper examines the theoretical underpinnings of one research project it highlights the importance of such critical reflection and examination regarding any research project to lay firm foundations for ‘empirical endeavours’.

**Conclusion**

This paper has addressed Lather’s (1991) concerns and examined my “frameworks of understanding”, specifically my participatory worldview and the research philosophy that complemented this worldview and underpinned my doctoral research project. It was explained that a participatory worldview upholds relationships and emphasises the interconnectedness of all human beings with one another and the environment, acting and coevolving as a whole. The paper then outlined the philosophies that melded together to help form my own research philosophy that supports a participatory worldview. It was elucidated that my research philosophy valued collaboration through community involvement that upheld respect, care, empathy, trust, shared governance and understanding. Through examining my frameworks of understanding it became clear how this doctoral study was to be conducted and what research design would be appropriate. This paper explained a phenomenological study of how I identified my theoretical orientation and how this connected to my research. Through the processes of critically reflecting on, analysing and making explicit my own frames of reference this paper may encourage other researchers to do the same. As Lather (1991, p. 80) asserts “our own frameworks of understanding need to be critically examined as we look for the tensions and contradictions they might entail.”

**References**


Addressing Lather’s concerns: Practicing in research endeavours what is preached in theoretical formulations


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