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The teaching of the other: Ethical vulnerability and generous reciprocity in the research process

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Abstract

How is it that researchers can engage with those they research ethically? In response to the challenge of this question, we articulate an ethics of research engagement based on vulnerability and generosity. This is explored with a special focus on the practicalities of organization studies research. Building on developments in reflexive methodology, we draw on Emmanuel Levinas' relational ethics to consider how research can be approached as receiving a 'teaching of the other'. Such teaching involves a radical openness to other people's difference such that knowledge arises from being affected by those others rather than claiming to know them in any categorical sense. The possibility that emerges is that of a reflexively ethical position from which to conduct research premised on letting go of the egotistical comforts of one's own epistemic authority. Self-reflexivity becomes rendered subservient to other-vulnerability in embodied research encounters that are open and generous. The promise for research is a deepening of our corporeal, affective and aesthetic engagement with others and an enlarged sense of the ethical meaning of research.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, reflexivity, relationality, research methodology, vulnerability

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Introduction

Researcher identity has long been an important area of concern in methodological debates in organization studies (Alcadipani et al., 2015), especially in terms of how researchers engage with research subjects (Driver, 2016; Empson, 2013) and the ethics of that relationship (Rhodes, 2009). Recent deliberations have problematized the characteristics of the relationship between researchers and those who are the subject of their research (Hibbert et al., 2014), considered how power operates through those relationships (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015), and explored how perceived tensions between research and practice may shape and be shaped by researcher identity (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014). These matters emerge as a response to the danger that researchers consign research participants to a category of 'them' and in so doing deliberately or inadvertently create a hierarchy where the researcher is positioned as superior (Fitzsimmons, 2014). This danger is well accounted for, especially in relational approaches to research that question this hierarchy on ethical grounds, replacing it with the idea that it is the space between self (as researcher) and other (as researched) where research work is conducted (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013).

Central to relational research has been a consideration of how the self–other relationships that form the basis of research can be unequal or even manipulative (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). There is an established call for researchers to be reflexively aware of how they are positioned (by themselves and others) in the research process, and of the political effects of that positioning (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Dallyn, 2014; Mahadevan, 2012). This call extends to the question of bridging the research–practice divide such that scholars have voiced a need for more reflexivity on the often implicit (mis)construal of the other in research (Bartunek, 2007; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Empson, 2013; MacIntosh et al., 2012). Although such issues can have a bearing on any forms of research involving other people, they have been debated most explicitly by researchers who employ methods that involve engagement in personal encounters with the people they research (Hibbert et al., 2014). This applies especially to social constructivist, post-structuralist, qualitative and/or interpretive research using interpersonally engaged methods such as interviews, shadowing, action research and ethnography. It is to people working within such traditions that this article is primarily addressed.

Although we are sympathetic with the motives and arguments that have led, since at least the 1990s (Hardy and Clegg, 1997), to the promotion of relationally reflexive organizational research, we suggest that extant discussions have not gone far enough in questioning both researcher practice and the ethics of self–other-orientation as a central strand of researcher identity. This is, of course, not to make any spurious claims, or worse, judgments, about the ethical practice of particular researchers. It is to say, however, that there are opportunities where the theorization of such ethical practice can be fruitfully advanced. This is so because the self (researcher)–other (researched) relationship is commonly construed as a form of self-interested reciprocity, involving epistemic exchange that is, in essence, an economy rather than an ethics (Rhodes and Westwood, 2016). When this economy operates through invocations for collaboration and dialogue (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007), self and other are imagined as trading partners across an interactional divide where the researched are granted limited roles in a knowledge production process circumscribed by researchers.

The problem is that the economy of interaction present in self–other orientation in research risks bringing back many of the problems that the turn to reflexivity sought to overcome in the first place. Such self-interested reciprocity involves practices where researchers maintain control over designing and facilitating interactions, make judgments about their own authenticity, and assume responsibility for regulating distance in the relationship with the people researched. At its worst, in the service of reflexivity researchers invoke a spectator theory (James, 1907/1977) of knowing, and defend authority positions by using reflexivity as a ruse for the perpetuation of one-sided knowledge and the reinforcement of diagnostic monopoly. In other words, despite methodological protestations (e.g. Gilmore and Kenny, 2015; Rhodes, 2009), researchers are positioned authoritatively in the context of their relationship with those they research.

With this article, we argue that the ethical implications of reflexivity demand a response that goes beyond interpersonal engagement and self-interested reciprocal exchange. This responds to calls for a more radical questioning of self–other orientation in researcher identity and knowledge from an explicitly ethical perspective (e.g. Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Orr and Bennett, 2012; Rhodes, 2009). The position we develop is one that approaches research not as generating knowledge *about other people*, as a self–other position of diagnostic monopoly implies. Neither is it solely focused on the knowledge that might be produced *with other people*, as in a model of self–other orientation with self-interested relational reciprocity. Instead, we cast the possibility of reflexive research being understood and practised in terms of learning *from other people* (Todd, 2012), as it would flow from a self–other orientation characterized by what we refer to as 'ethical vulnerability' and 'generous reciprocity'.

We draw on Emmanuel Levinas' (1969) relational ethics, extending it into an exploration of the self–other relationship in research. In keeping with Levinas, we understand ethics not as a set of rules, virtues or formulas that might be used to ensure or judge righteousness, but rather as a form of disturbance whereby 'the ego can be put into question by Others' (Levinas, 2003: 51). From the position of the researcher, this means approaching research as an engagement with the other in a manner that renders the self 'vulnerable' in the sense that one's own knowledge and self-understanding are themselves open to question through the research encounter (see also Tracy, 2014). This ethical vulnerability is more than just openness. It goes beyond respect, sincerity and honesty by adding the capacity to be personally affected, moved and changed by interactions with others. With vulnerability, the other is not considered another of me, capable of being captured in my imagination and acts of signification; it eschews a drive for that which would invoke classifying and comparing other people in one's own frameworks of knowledge. Vulnerability is hence a radical openness to the other that serves to put the knowledge and self of the researcher in constant question. Attesting to vulnerability aligns us with a Levinasian approach that regards ethics as 'the absolute respect for the other person in face-to-face proximity, and where that other comes first' (Rhodes, 2012: 1319). Moreover, such an ethics puts researcher identity into question by invoking a relationship with the other that extends beyond 'relational reflexivity' (Hibbert et al., 2014) and towards 'ethical vulnerability'. It is an exposition of this vulnerability, as the basis of an ethics of research engagement, that constitutes the main contribution of our article. Central to this contribution is the argument that research can be approached as receiving a 'teaching of the other' that involves being

affected by others rather than claiming to know them in any categorical sense. The implications of this for researcher identity are significant. No longer a one-sided expert or a research partner, the researcher is understood as a learner whose learning can only be pursued through a radical openness to other people's difference. This is less about establishing researcher identity, and more about usurping it and transgressing its assumed privilege. This, in turn, positions the activity of research as being centrally concerned with exposing one's own 'discourse to the questioning of the Other' (Trifonas, 1999: 185).

Although our primary point of departure is ethical, better enabling the teaching of the other goes beyond merely inducing self-questioning by the researcher, and should not be framed as a deficit discourse implying a sacrificial position (Kenny and Fotaki, 2015). The ethics we expound is productive, with benefits ranging from increasing our aesthetic receptivity in research encounters, to a less controlled and fuller involvement of the researched in the complex process of knowledge creation, to a heightened sense of meaning in research. Giving primacy to the ethicality of being taught by the other serves to usurp a vocabulary of mastery of research, both with regard to methodological considerations and research writing, and, potentially, the discourse with reviewers.

The article begins, in its first section, by reviewing existing methodological discussions in the organization studies literature that have concerned themselves with relational reflexivity and the ethics of researcher identity, including how this plays out in the research–practice divide. We show how reflexivity may be used in the service of looking at people instead of with them, and further invoke a vocabulary of suspicion and control. In the second section, we question the ethics of relational reflexivity, arguing that although it marks a logical and desirable extension to considerations of the ethics of researcher identity, it does not go far enough. This position is established through a detailed consideration of 'relational ethics' and its implications for the possibility of prizing 'open apparently closed and defensive psychosocial identities' (Frosh, 2011: 225) – in our case researcher identities. To consider relational ethics in terms of researcher identity, in the third section we suggest an approach that shifts the terms of the debate from identity to alterity – that is, to the primacy of the other in the ethical relation (Levinas, 1969). Passing into such a mode of self–other orientation means letting go of methodological control and, still following Levinas (1969), pursuing wonder in our unpossessive and emphatic stretching towards the other. The fourth section considers the implications of our deliberations the practicalities of research. We qualify the notion of generous reciprocity as a twin concept to ethical vulnerability, and draw on extant studies of management and organizations to guide us in how a research trajectory informed by the teaching of the other can and has been pursued. We dwell in particular on implications for research through transgression of cognitive and aesthetic boundaries in research methodology and of the researcher–practitioner boundaries in debates of rigor and relevance.

The (mis)construction of the other in organizational research

The implicit or explicit construction of the other as the subject of organizational research underpins several debates on researcher reflexivity, including the debate about the research–practice divide. This debate has, for the past two decades, explored what is seen as the

'great divide' between the interests and motives of researchers and practitioners (Frank and Landström, 2016; Gulati, 2007; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Kieser et al., 2015; Rynes et al., 2001). The division rests on a self–other orientation premised on the conviction that researchers want rigorous research judged by scholarly and scientific standards, whereas practitioners want relevant research as judged by the standards of practice (Banks et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Rynes et al., 2001).

Two questionable assumptions underpin this orientation. First is the assumption of a strict division of labour where 'we' the researchers do research and 'they' the practitioners do practice. At its most crude, the assumption is that we collect and interpret data, whereas they *are* data. At its best, the other is a user of research that needs to be transferred (Rynes et al., 2001) and translated (Shapiro et al., 2007). Second is the assumption that both parties are somewhat one-dimensional in their character, each stereotyped as beholden to a set of consistent and undifferentiated institutional interests that determine their beliefs and actions (Banks et al., 2016; Kieser et al., 2015). Such stereotyping may be a result of the identity work of researchers rather than reflecting incommensurable differences (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Gulati, 2007). For example, in her autoethnography of experiences reconciling strands of identity as an academic and law consultant, Empson (2013, 2017) shows how her academic colleagues went to great lengths to construct her consultant identity as inferior. When starting her PhD she was told she was at a disadvantage over students with Master of Science degrees and that what she learned as a consultant was worthless (Empson, 2013: 237). She was even criticized for dressing and presenting in a particular professional manner, and told dismissively that: 'You are just a consultant' (Empson, 2013: 237).

There are other stories of academic experience that bear similarities to Empson's (Bartunek, 2007; Eikeland, 2006; Hayes et al., 2016), including our own. Our backgrounds in action research and professional service firms have attuned us to the fallacies of stereotyping the researched. We have worked in organizations where 'practitioners', with or without PhDs themselves, were fully capable of digesting many strands of social science and philosophy – some indeed better versed than our later academic colleagues – and critically reflective of their own practice, as well as that of academics. Some of what we consider our best research involves dropping our reflexive tools and relating to the researched with the unreserved and open welcome of a new colleague or friend, even though there is a limited vocabulary for this in the research literature. We have encountered interviewees reminding us that 'your questions seem to be based on a model of creativity that harks back to Koestler's great book, *The Act of Creation*'. We have also faced situations similar to those reported by Riach et al. (2016), who tell of an event where one of them was unsettled by an interviewee who wanted to begin by discussing the researcher's academic publications. In that case 'mutual vulnerability' was recognized as 'the interviewer had been repositioned by the participant within a presumed epistemic hierarchy' (Riach et al., 2016: 2083–2084). In other cases, we have written joint publications in academic journals with practitioners as co-authors and academic experts (e.g. Byers and Rhodes, 2007).

These stories are reminders that the researcher–researched relationship and the research–practice divide are constructed not only through our encounters with real people but also through processes of academic socialization, and the reductionism that may come with it. Moreover, actual relationships can and do differ from the violence of

stereotypes. Claims to incommensurability (Kieser and Leiner, 2009) and uniformity of 'utility functions' of practitioners (Banks et al., 2016) are based on self–other assumptions where the other is typecast, marginalized and/or considered uninterested and incompetent. Shoehorned into hermetically sealed positions, people involved in the research process are taken to be entirely knowable and predictable.

The oversimplification and stereotyping that characterize debates over the research–practice debate demand questioning, and demand too that alternatives be considered. If knowledge production is to be framed in terms of the lived (rather than idealized) process it involves, we are beholden for that process to be theorized in a way that goes beyond reductionist, simplistic or even spurious accounts of the relations between the people involved. The stereotyping of the other as mere data, passive recipients of research, or even worse as intellectual inferiors, is rooted in a form of representationalism manifest in talk of 'translating' or 'transferring' scientific knowledge that putatively exists independent of practical knowing. In critique of this idea (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Zundel and Kokkalis, 2010), many researchers have sought to find ways to engage with practitioners in the co-production of knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2013; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). However, even explicitly collaborative accounts of research (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012; Reason and Bradbury, 2013; Shani et al., 2007; Van de Ven, 2007) usually say little about the particulars of how researchers and practitioners can form open relationships and engage in a two-sided exchange to jointly construct and interpret data (see Orr and Bennett (2012) for a notable exception).

Literature on methodological reflexivity (e.g. Clegg and Hardy, 2006; Cunliffe, 2003; Weick, 1999) has also concerned itself with how researchers position themselves in relation to what and who they research. Reflexivity is for many a methodological practice and predelcition that is a marker of 'good' qualitative research in organization studies. With reflexivity, researchers are called to acknowledge the political-ideological nature of research, to question the authority of their own knowledge (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Dallyn, 2014; Mahadevan, 2012) and to engage in the psychologically uncomfortable process (Czarniawska, 2016) of looking back at themselves, 'especially in terms of the relation of the researcher to the research process' (Hardy and Clegg, 1997: 10). This commonly yields a research practice whereby research is written so the researcher is included in the subject matter he or she is trying to understand (Hardy et al., 2001). Such self-reflexivity is also not without criticism. Most forcefully it has been castigated as a thinly veiled self-obsession harbouring a distinct danger that 'in the name of reflexivity, many of us tend to be more interested in our own practices than in those of anybody else' (Weick, 2002: 898). No matter how reflexively informed, we still risk enhancing the 'authorization of the "expert" academic and subordination of the researched' (Wray-Bliss, 2003: 308).

The belief that research relationships can somehow be known, regulated or controlled by researchers either objectively (Heshusius, 1994) or in a manner free from their ideological commitments (Dallyn, 2014) is deeply troubling, especially in terms of its ethics (Rhodes, 2009). Reflexivity can constitute a normative form of relationality where the ethical aims of approaching the other are subordinated to one's own ends as related to a desire for knowledge. Armed with the arsenal of reflexivity, it is researchers who decide, for example, whether research participants channel scripts from elsewhere or do impression management (Alvesson, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 2012). An article published not long

ago on 'critical performativity' in leadership studies is illustrative. Alvesson and Spicer (2012: 378) reflect on an example drawn from a research project on leadership in a high-tech firm. After providing a long quote from a middle manager, the authors write:

> Normally we should be extremely cautious in accepting interview statements of managers (and of other people as well for that matter) as valid empirical material. There are all sorts of problems: the manager's understanding of the situation may be bad; he/she may engage in impression management and other forms of selective and self-promoting recall during the interview.

Alvesson and Spicer (2012: 378) then convey that the views of the manager, named Kelvin Goodman, are corroborated by observations and on that basis fall back on granting it some importance: 'In this case we can start by accepting Goodman's view as honest and well-intentioned and realize that he is faced with a complex situation that has no easy solutions'. This example illustrates how a spectator theory of knowledge is still alive in well-intended reflexive research accounts. The authors also use this example to illustrate 'circumspective care' in research interviews, where they may offer tentative interpretations and solutions, thus allowing for at least some degree of participation. Nevertheless, normative concerns of suspicion (being 'extremely cautious' of accepting interview statements as valid), orchestration of control and distanced analysis remain the researchers' prerogative and priority.

The type of critical management studies practised by Alvesson and Spicer constitutes a tradition of research where preconceived schemas of critique and diagnostic suspicion and antagonism (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015) may make a turn to ethical-vulnerability particularly relevant. Our agenda is broader than critical management studies, however. For example, in a recent handbook paper on research interviewing, leading scholars Gubrium and Holstein (2012) provide an example of pharmacist drug abusers to illustrate how research subjects can be scripted in their talk. The interviewees are assumed to channel talk from self-help groups such that their capacity for authentic expression is sidelined. Likewise, Watson (2011) discusses the value of ethnographic research as being able to figure out 'how things work' in the field (in itself commendable), while expressing scepticism about people's abilities and willingness to share experiences and downplaying the value of involving them in joint reflection. These accounts reflect a culturally embedded temptation to assume diagnostic monopoly and claim a privileged position of being capable of judging the intentionality, honesty and value of the words and deeds of others. Without resisting this temptation, the authority of knowledge remains with the researcher (Rhodes, 2009), showing how even an explicit attestation of self-reflexivity can deepen power asymmetries, rendering the other's authenticity as an object of study while holding one's own intact and impenetrable. Counter-questions that might challenge the theoretical scripts of the researchers remain unasked.

The ethics of relationally reflexive research practice

So far, we have illustrated how self–other orientations in methodological debates on reflexivity can inadvertently put normative relationships and stereotyping prior to an open ethical regard for others. At its worst, this can become a form of 'othering' that results in the attribution of inferiority to difference (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012) and

carelessly applying a condescending stance (Eikeland, 2006). Such observations raise ethical questions of reflexivity that concern the ways researchers, even unintentionally, appropriate others for their own purposes and in their own frames of reference, and in so doing further assert their own epistemic authority (Rhodes, 2009). Such ethical questions have not been ignored. As Gilmore and Kenny (2015) attest, self-reflexivity has long been embraced by organizational ethnographers as an individual ethical responsibility. Indeed, questioning the power of researchers to unequivocally represent those they research, has taken 'centre stage and becoming a requirement in this kind of research' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 56). Despite this, Gilmore and Kenny note that self-reflexivity has been a largely rational and deliberate positioning, often reduced to a simple and tokenistic account of 'power relations between researcher and researched' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 56) that fails to account for the emotional engagement possible in that relationship. In response, Gilmore and Kenny conceptualize research as 'collision of worlds' where those researched might refuse to be 'domesticated by the norms of academia' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 74). Such a collision can, for researchers, be decidedly uncomfortable, with that discomfort harbouring possibilities for deeper understanding and change (Tracy, 2014).

Without being open to such discomfort, however, people who are the subject of research are in danger of being designated as being incapable of entering the creation or questioning of knowledge, either as independent thinkers or as co-subjects. In such cases, the relationship constructed (largely by the researcher) is one that either realizes or imagines power asymmetry, self-aggrandizement and a certain arrogance. This risks rendering one blind to the 'opportunities that human vulnerability can create in [research] relationships' (Tracy, 2014: 459). The question of embedded epistemic inequality has been taken up in what is referred to as 'relational research'. This approach emphasizes the plural and competing voices, viewpoints and interpretations present in any given research, and uses those differences productively as part of the research process (Cunliffe and Locke, 2016). The generation of means to engage with one's differences from others through dialogue, for example dialogue with those who have historically been oppressed, is advocated (Alcadipani et al., 2015; Bhattacharya, 2009). Normatively, this calls for the adoption of 'relationally reflexive research practice', where researchers question their prejudices, the limits to their thinking, and the culturally situated nature of their relationships with participants (Hibbert et al., 2014). The goal is to decentre authority from the researcher to the interface of researchers and informants (Hibbert et al., 2014).

Such forms of reflexive engagement bring ethics to bear on researcher identity and researcher–researched relations. Especially salient is 'relational ethics', the central concern of which is 'the ethical relationship between the self and the Other' (Knights and O'Leary, 2006: 134). This relational ethics, associated most strongly with the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1991), moves beyond regarding ethics as a matter of fair exchange or reciprocal engagement, instead seeing one's relation with the other as the foundation of ethics itself. With this in mind, relational reflexivity, understood as a 'genuine and open encounter with otherness' (Hibbert et al., 2014: 290) can be considered in ethical terms. Levinas' work has had a broad take up in the study of ethics in organizations, with his ideas used to investigate and re-theorize leadership (Knights and O'Leary, 2006), corporate governance (Roberts, 2001), corporate social responsibility

(Roberts, 2003), business ethics (Jones, 2003), organizational justice (Byers and Rhodes, 2007), diversity (Muhr, 2008) and human resource management (De Gama et al., 2012). Levinasian ideas have also been drawn on in relation to methodology (e.g. Rhodes, 2009) and theory-building (e.g. Ezzamel and Willmott, 2014) in organizational research.

The central value that Levinas' ethics has brought to inquiry into the ethical dimensions of organizing concerns his radical departure from the assumption that ethics is centred on the self, whether it be that self's virtues, actions or principles. Before the self is even considered, Levinas maintains that ethics always begins with the other person. This offers a radically different starting point for inquiry in that it positions alterity rather than identity as the primary location of ethics. Levinas recognizes that when we encounter other people in social and interpersonal settings, our understanding of them is based on modes of comparison whereby we associate them with a set of socially dominant characteristics that either identify or differentiate them from one another. Levinas calls this 'thematization' (Levinas, 1969: 301) – the rendering of the world into a language that allows things to be classified, communicated and related. Thematization is, of course, an essential part of navigating our way through life as we use language as a system of comparisons to render lived experience practically intelligible. Indeed, social science research itself can be regarded as a complex system of thematization. Applying Levinas' ideas and terminology to our discussion of research practice, we can see that reflexivity is inevitably enacted through thematization or re-thematization of the other; s/he who is subject to our research, no matter how well respected or engaged with, remains subject to the categories imposed by the researcher. The other person is a knowable subject of inquiry, interpretation and explanation.

Following Levinas' assumptions, however, of the knowability of others defy ethics. This is so because the primary ethical relationship is one that is rested in the very unknowability of the other. When Levinas refers to the other as a 'face', he attests to her entire uniqueness and singularity. This is an other who exists prior to me and calls me to the assignation of ethics, the other who cannot be reduced to my schemes and categories, the other for whom I am responsible before caring for myself. Levinas invokes a meaning of ethics that is pre-personal. The other, ethically, is not a 'type' who can be 'cast in the mold of the known' (Levinas, 1969: 80). To engage with the other ethically is to engage with her prior to applying any principle through which she might be 'known', instead regarding her as wholly other in her sanctity; entirely unique and not comparable to anyone else.

When Levinas speaks of the ethical unknowability of the other, he speaks not of pious ideals, but of the practical struggle to respond to ethics in a world inevitably experienced and lived through symbolic action. The ethical struggle relates to how one might remember the fluid and uncertain encounter with the other who calls out for responsibility, while at the same time unable to conceive of that other outside of the objectifying impositions that are inevitable in language and knowledge (Levinas, 1991). Ethically, the other is always mysterious and unknowable so as to be received in a manner that 'resists possession' (Levinas, 1991: 197) as an objectified fact. Nevertheless, as living social beings our language drags the other into facticity and comparison. This is the very lived struggle of ethics: an acknowledgement of the sacrosanct ethical uniqueness of the other in a human life that can, practically, only engage with that other in a manner that annuls that uniqueness with comparison.

By drawing on Levinas' account of ethics, we can recast our earlier discussion of identity and reflexivity in the researcher–researched relationship. While having begun to appreciate the alterity of the other, we contend that reflexive research methodology has not adequately accounted for the pretensions involved in assuming to be able to know her in certain terms. In other words, we have failed to enter into the radical questioning of researcher identity and knowledge that a Levinasian relational ethics calls for. As such, so long as we regard those we pigeonhole, inter alia, as 'practitioners', 'participants' or 'research subjects' in one-dimensional terms without considering or engaging with their unique particularity, we inevitably end up reducing them to being mere members of our imposed categories. In Levinas' (1969) terms, the other becomes incorporated in the 'same' without reverence for her difference such that one's own identity is on the privileged side of that relationship. From this perspective, the question of researcher identity and reflexivity is no longer limited to self-consciousness, introspection, and awareness of one's prejudices (Hibbert et al., 2014). What needs to be asked is how one can 'enter into relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?' (Levinas, 1969: 38).

This question points to the idea that reflexivity is not a personal attribute, character disposition or acquired skill, but rather, ethically, it is an existential struggle that is at the heart of any practice that would involve generating knowledge about other people. To approach the other ethically means to accept their alterity as being mysterious and unrepresentable, whilst also accepting that the only tool we have to know them is representational language. Such a Levinasian reflection on ethics, identity and reflexivity in the researcher–researched relationship calls for a renewed consideration of research practice that challenges the stubborn institutionalization of the idea that for research to be considered legitimate it must involve the researcher speaking and interacting from a position of epistemic authority. Indeed, with ethics, it is the status of knowledge itself that must be brought into question: an 'unsettling of [its] own condition' so as never to forget that 'the Other alone eludes thematization' (Levinas, 1969: 86). In research, this would involve relationships that do not seek to erase the differences between researchers and those others we encounter in research. Instead, it is through relationships that the self of the researcher might be 'unsettled' (Orr and Bennett, 2012) and rendered vulnerable (Tracy, 2014) by such encounters.

Ethical vulnerability and the teaching of the other

It is a worthy conclusion that a Levinasian-inspired relational ethics for reflexive research demands an unsettling of the declarative conditions of knowledge. The implications for researcher identity are especially important. As Trifonas (1999) explains, exposing our own knowledge to a questioning from the other is tantamount to questioning the authority and autonomy of our knowledge and of ourselves; it invokes opening up the self to a difference that one cannot simply incorporate into one's own schemes, models or theories. This is not simply a matter of adopting a new rationality in research situations, as much as it involves a new affective sensibility. As Orr and Bennett (2012) explain, following Levinas, research can be expected to involve 'painful acts of disclosure and exposure' which serve as 'the dynamic motor of learning between academics and practitioners'

(Orr and Bennett, 2012: 490). It is in this sense that Orr and Bennet are careful not to characterize academic–practitioner or researcher–researched relationships as being a simple matter of harmonious interaction for mutual benefit. Instead, this is a relationship that is best understood as political in that it exposes the tensions and contradictions of research as sources of both interpersonal intensity and productive possibility.

To explore this further, we now consider those dimensions of Levinas' philosophy concerned with twin ideas of ethics as vulnerability (Levinas, 1991) and ethics as an openness to the teaching of the other (Levinas, 1969). One of the key ways Levinas describes the ethical relationship with the other is in recognizing that the other is one's teacher. Levinas is, of course, not talking of classroom scenarios. He is referring to a teaching that comes from acknowledging and welcoming the other as exterior to one's self, and exterior to one's own potential knowledge of them. This teaching is about actual relationships enacted in speech, embodied interaction and conversation. However, what Levinas means by teaching is not reducible to the transmission of predetermined messages; it is through teaching that the other, entirely unique and unknowable, presents herself to me through the here and now. Teaching is the means that we can experience, however imperfectly, the ethical exteriority of the other. To be taught by the other is not about generating knowledge but about affective engagement and 'an opening of the self beyond its own frame of reference' (Wirzba, 1995).

While acknowledging that ethical teaching operates through communication and signification, the danger Levinas alerts us to is the always present possibility of using language in order to thematize the other; that is to reduce the other to one's own categories. It is in the space where we engage with other people in real encounters (in our case encounters in the research field) that, for ethics, their uniqueness must never be forgotten, extinguished by the hubris of our intellectual schemes or internalized into our own egoistic sense of identity. To be able to accept the teaching of the other, one must steadfastly remain vulnerable to them; vulnerable in the sense of retaining 'the capacity to be affected by things … to be afflicted by them, susceptible, exposed, not only to their sense, but to their force' (Lingis, 1987: xx).

To be vulnerable to the other's teaching means to engage in relationships that are embodied, responsive and affective, rather than just rational and knowing. Such engagement is not without risks as it involves opening oneself up to the other and letting go of the safe haven of one's own presumed certainties (Levinas, 1991). This exposure abandons the egoistic protection of knowledge and the solidity of identity; it radically reconceives the nature of the self–other relationship, as it might inform practices of relational research. Research will always be conducted through language and communication, but after the other's teaching the status of this communication is always an imperfect and incomplete rendering of the subject at hand. Research is then about an ongoing openness and deliberation that fails to reach conclusions or rest in the presumed comfort of knowledge of the other, instead always wanting to learn more about the other, while accepting that any knowledge that results is, of ethical necessity, imperfect and incomplete. What we have here is a mode of relationality that is not reduced simply to a different way of interacting with people, but expanded to a different way of imagining them within the perspectival limits of one's own consciousness. The result is a radical overhaul of the all too human pretensions embedded in our faith in knowledge. As teaching, the researcher–researched

relation is no longer one of epistemic domination by the researcher, but rather of ethical respect that accepts that the meaning of the other will always remain exterior to me.

Implications: Ethical vulnerability and generous reciprocity

Recasting the researcher–researched relation in the way just described does not lead, in any simple or unproblematic way, to a new set of protocols or procedures, as if an ethical relation can be codified through a checklist of requirements. Without doubt, such a position can appear incommensurable with established conventions of doing research, as well as with the contemporary pressures for research to be measured in market terms as an 'output' that should be maximized as a commodity that yields financial value for one's self and one's institution (Rhodes, 2017). In contradiction to this, the approach we have articulated here demands a complete upheaval of how the very project of research is conceived in that accepting the teaching of the other requires one to submit to the idea that the other is 'irreducible to objective knowledge' (Levinas, 1969: 68) and that the vulnerability this implies puts one's very self in question. The paradox is put most clearly in Rubinstein's (2008) thoughtful interpretation of Levinas. Rubenstein submits that turning to the face of the other with radical openness amounts to opening a wound of wonder. The shock of unassimilable alterity and infinity involves the 'not-being-able-to-comprehend-the-infinity-by-thought', a 'non-condition of thought' (Levinas, in Rubinstein 2008: 68) and a decentring of self towards the unpossessible other. We might well ask, if stripped of capacity for knowing and identity in facing the uniqueness of a succession of singular others, is research at all possible?

Responding to this question, we develop a set of implications for research that can follow from conceiving of research practice in terms of teaching and vulnerability. Collectively, this amounts to exploring *generous reciprocity*[1] as the basis for relating to the other in research. With generous reciprocity, we understand the ethos and practice of an ethical primacy of turning to the other with openness and vulnerability. A generous reciprocity is based on an unpossessive and unconditional form of relating (Nussbaum, 2001) and is fundamentally asymmetrical both in terms of never being able to appropriate the other (Haker, 2004) and by expecting no equal exchange or consideration in return (Tatransky, 2008). Following a lead from Grant (2013) and Diprose (2012), we can say that a generous reciprocity is giver-oriented, as opposed to a taker-oriented reciprocity that strives for diagnostic monopoly or a matcher-oriented style of self-interested reciprocity that aims to be relationally reflexive in expectation of a balanced exchange with the researched in collaboration.

Implicated here is also that striving for ethical-vulnerability must go beyond a discourse of domination and submission. As recently pointed out by Kenny and Fotaki (2015) in their discussion of Bracha Ettinger's critique of Levinas, this framing leads to an emphasis on the negative aspects of an ethics of subjectivity. The Levinasian shock of unassembled otherness may not be seen only as trauma or wound, but a form of relational arousal (Carlsen and Sandelands, 2015) that opens up an 'in-between' space where subjects co-emerge and constitute one another (Kenny and Fotaki, 2015: 193). Conceived as such, a turning to the other with radical openness may fortify a giving identity and enable shared wonder that makes researchers come alive and grow in their work (Dutton and Carlsen, 2011). In more practical terms, generous reciprocity can be understood both in

the sense of trying to maintain an aesthetic readiness (Anderson, 2005) to be inflicted and brought into wonder by the other (Carlsen and Sandelands, 2015), and in repeatedly seeking opportunities to engage the other as a co-subject in inquiry. In the latter sense, the ethical imperative of Levinas brushes up against that of Ricoeur (1992: 193–194) in the sense of treating the other as a person capable of 'evaluating the ends of your actions, and, having done this, as holding yourself in esteem as I hold myself in esteem'. Acknowledging the other's full reflexive capability in turn necessitates practices for looking at data and interpretations together, creating a triadic space of using tentative understanding of subject matter as the material for interaction and a more open-ended version of sharing observations rather than conclusions. It asks too that we erase the illusion of clear lines between collecting empirical material and analysing it, and attend to micro-processes where researchers and practitioners co-create new understanding rather than its being the realm of individual discovery by researchers (Anderson, 2014).

These are fairly broad aims that are not easily pursued and our argument, although relevant to research practice, we believe, cannot (on account of its own ethical position) be specifically prescriptive. Generous reciprocity is more of a sensibility than it is a rationality. It refers to a pre-reflective and corporeal ethics (Diprose, 2012; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014) that is grounded in the body before the mind such that it must always be enacted in affective and responsive interactions with the other; a responsiveness that is anathema to following some or other protocol. The ethical relationship cannot be rationalized into a codified normative schema. Instead, it 'arises from the interaction between people, the embodied effects and affects of that interaction and the indissoluble relation between thinking and feeling' (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015: 159). Consistent with Levinas, this means that ethics is found in intercorporeal encounters, felt experience and embodied engagement (Diprose, 2012), with any rationalizations being subsequent and supplementary, as well as insufficient. In response, rather than positioning the practical implications of our discussion in instructional terms, what we do in the following is to approach a vocabulary for being taught by the other by alerting a certain stance and ethos of how such research may be conceived and approached. We chart strategies for increasing the possibility and *degree* of ethical vulnerability, without the illusion of either a predetermined path or a final point of arrival.

Generous reciprocity in research conversations

We have argued that reflexivity in research has been conceived as involving a self-interested form of reciprocity where researchers retain, despite their own declarations, a position as neutral spectators and assume dominance over the other through an arsenal of suspicion and control. By contrast, pursuing generous reciprocity in research necessitates taking the other seriously (Sandelands, 2015) in her uniqueness and capability for reflection. Broadly, this involves approaching interactions in the field with a participatory ethos (Heshusius, 1994; Shotter, 2003) and seeing them as occasions for mutual engagement rather than 'data gathering'. It also may entail acts of resisting the normalization of negated alterity (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014) by defying stereotyping and power asymmetry. Striving for radical openness may be hollow window-dressing without active efforts of dropping the tools of reflexive control and opening oneself up to the other.

Thinking back on our own experiences of finding meaning and feeling connected in research conversations, we see several examples of such duality of responding to the other while breaking free from self-imposed or socially given constraints of reflexive control. There is the example of being stuck in an interview setting where a scepticism towards the promotional agenda of a communication agency manager produced even stronger suspicion in return and the interview only opened up through bursts of unreserved laughter (Carlsen, 2005). There is the similar experience of escaping from a standstill of boredom and perceived banality (by an interviewee) in an interview with a star architect by putting a theoretical resource from an anthropologist – in this case the beautiful *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram – on the table and thereby igniting interest and qualifying oneself as conversation partner. There are experiences of being displaced and finding unabashed joy in receiving the metaphors and stories in conversation, or of sharing fragments of analytical models in interviews and discovering a different layer of shared reflexivity and insight. There is the revelation that the researched may be allowed fuller and wiser participation when they are invited to look back at transcripts and co-construct a richer story with us (Rhodes, 2000). And there is the epiphanic experience of feeling that conversations in the field may seemingly live a life of their own, later pass through our fingers and end up as gifts in our writing without any conscious recollection on our part of how that ever happened. Although some of these experiences have found their way into methods literature, we had little vocabulary for them when they transpired. These were experiences marked by corporeal connection and a feeling of going outside our allowed regime as researchers.

When trying to grapple with otherness in conversation, the work of John Shotter and colleagues (Katz and Shotter, 1996; Katz et al., 2004; Shotter, 2006, 2009; Shotter and Katz, 1999) is of particular relevance. This is a tradition of research that questions the inherited constraints of the professional conversation while trying to conceptualize the embodied and interactive nature of responding ethically to the other. With roots in family therapy and the work of Tom Andersen (1987, 1991), famous for having therapists and clients trade places in clinical observations and analysis (indeed an act of resisting normative conventions), this work in several ways mirrors Levinasian imperatives. Shotter's stance was from the outset process oriented in that it attended to the flow of relational responsiveness and people's embodied presence in living moments of conversation (Katz and Shotter, 1996; Shotter, 2003). It also explicitly regarded ethical values as being prior to any knowledge of the other (Shotter, 2009: 21). Not being responsive to the other in spontaneous interactions signals lack of respect, causes offense and also directly undermines the identity of the other (Shotter, 2009). 'Conditional questions' (another term of resisting through surfacing normalization of defied alterity) carrying diagnostic intent represents a form of 'misplaced systematicity' (Katz et al., 2004) that may alienate the other and prevent us from being aesthetically available and bodily expressive in interactions.

Going back to our previous examples, one might ask what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) or Gubrium and Holstein (2012) could have done to better enable teaching from the other in their reported conversations. Following the premises of generous reciprocity, a range of options become available (without us pretending to know which one would be more fitting in these particular circumstances). One would be a humbling and subordinating

move to actively unmask intentions of critique or diagnostic analysis, another to try to attain a position of 'not-knowing' and stimulate 'two-way curiosity' (see Anderson, 2012, also inspired by Shotter) by sharing patterns of interpretations, story fragments from other encounters (anonymous if needed), or even theoretical resources that underpin preliminary interpretations. With Anderson (2012), one could ask: 'you know, part of what you have told me here reminds me of something I have heard elsewhere – would you like me to share it?' The purpose would not be to exchange determinate knowledge, but to stimulate resources that could keep inquiry open and subjecting one's understanding to questioning from the other (Brinkmann, 2007).

In conversations that heed generous reciprocity, the precise matters under investigation do not have to be pre-ordained or directed by the researcher, such that interpersonal attention turns to ambiguities, oddities and subject areas deemed interesting for exploration by both parties. Such a stance broadly favours non-directive research interactions (Spradley, 1979) and calls for being able to both wonder *at* and *with* people in the field in moments of joint arousal and exploration (Carlsen and Sandelands, 2015). In Shotter's (2013) terms, the relationally responsive encounter that pertains to wonder involves attending to 'shared noticings' that come to us in the living and embodied moments of engagement (such as felt anticipations of insights, or sensations of something wrong or unexplained), or the arresting moments that are indicative of larger patterns. In such moments, we may begin enacting vulnerability through a process where 'practitioners become co-researchers and researchers become co-practitioners, as each articulates what they have been "struck by" in the unfolding process' (Shotter, 2006: 601).

Generous reciprocity in research design

In terms of overall research design, self-interested reciprocity entails maintaining an interpersonal divide where the researched are granted limited roles in knowledge production that are controlled by researchers. The generous reciprocity implied by the pursuit of ethical vulnerability seeks to resist and transgress such a divide. This involves regarding research as a series of interpersonal encounters (e.g. initiation, repeat interviews, feedback, iteration and reframing, writing) where knowing is co-created and mediated between people (Beech et al., 2010; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010), rather than seen as a fixed output. A triad between researcher, practitioner and knowledge, where each is, in a sense, 'produced' through the research encounter and held in inviolable relation, is in place.

Amongst the many possibilities, we cite three examples that are particularly illustrative of what might be involved. First, Lorino et al. (2011) filmed activities (of vital concerns for practitioners) and cross-reflective comments (of actors involved in the activities and commenting from each their vantage point) to facilitate group discussions between teams of researchers and practitioners. The result was a carefully designed process of widened dialogical inquiry mediated by a series of shared artefacts. The researched other participated actively in both producing and analysing empirical material. Elsewhere, Carlsen et al. (2014) used a shared polyphonic resource of A5 cards in an action research project to produce 'thin categories' across massive amounts of data. Each card combined

visual and textual resources and suggested a potential theoretical category. These categories were subsequently 'thickened' in terms of engaging the researched practitioners to enrich, compare and combine the cards. Here, the researched other participated in responding to and deepening theoretical categories, thus indirectly also to theory-building. In another example, Ripamonti et al. (2016) used a process of eliciting first-person written accounts from managers on key events in their practice, followed by sharing and facilitated discussions of selected accounts in a larger community of inquiry. Managers were also subsequently involved in thematic grouping and discussion of types of actions emerging from the first two steps.

Three themes appear in all of these examples. First, the meaning of an empirical description or interpretation as a set of linguistic resources does not lie solely in its syntactic relationship to other signs (Lorino et al., 2011). In Levinas' terms, it was not thematized into static and categorical knowledge. Instead, the social and situated context of its use attested to its open, processual, fluid and relational foundation in the flow of interpersonal experience. In triadic spaces, the interpretation of subject matter is formed between the others and oneself through exploring, co-creating and dwelling together. Second, the involvement of the researched as active co-producers and co-interpreters of data involves creating a socio-materially shared space mediated by artefacts that enable dialogue both across and within communities of researchers and the researched. It is significant here that these dialogues extend beyond a mere member checking, and serve an invitational function based on looking at data or provisional categories together. We still know little about how such in-between and inter-corporeal spaces (Kenny and Fotaki, 2015) work with regard to fostering radical openness, though this invites drawing on traditions like visual research (Meyer et al., 2013), arts-based research (e.g. Leavy, 2009) and social poetics (Cunliffe, 2002; Katz and Shotter, 1996). Third, the research designs involving repeat encounters where the other was engaged as co-subjects are ethico-political acts (Pullen and Rhodes, 2014) of resisting established conventions. Carlsen et al. (2014) talk about a shift in interaction from the monologic and cognitive activity of 'reporting back' to interacting on tentative categories as a ludic and aesthetic event that shifted power relations in theory-building in favour of the researched. Ripamonti et al (2016: 59) convey the sense of a similar shift:

> From a researcher's perspective, we felt a degree of vulnerability in handing the selection of issues to the managers, as they were not necessarily the issues we would have identified. This meant recognizing the need to relinquish the control we often feel we need to have over our research, and be responsive to our co-collaborators. (Ripamonti et al., 2016: 59)

Returning yet again to the examples of Alvesson and Spicer (2012) or Gubrium and Holstein (2012), enabling ethical vulnerability through research design could mean radical moves to invite the researched fully into analysis, even as observers of, and commentators to, the discussion amongst researchers. Likewise, going back to the rigor relevance debate, the argument developed here proposes that rather than seeking to 'bridge' the researcher–practitioner gap, researchers can fruitfully explore the possibilities of a transgression of it; a transgression engaged in for reasons of both ethics and knowing.

Conclusions

With this article, we have sought to advance methodological considerations of researcher reflexivity, especially in the context of relational research, by shifting the focus from identity to alterity. We have done so, following Levinas, by extending the ethical purview and practice of reflexive methodology into an ethics that begins with the other, who is, of ethical necessity, unknowable. We have thus sought an ethics that imagines research as being taught by the other, rather than being a matter of knowing them in certain terms. Such teaching is not categorical or even primarily rational, but rather embodied, affective and engaged. The implications for researcher identity are significant. As one who is taught by the other, the researcher is rendered vulnerable, with this vulnerability offering hope and encouragement for forms of research that rest in a fluid, respectful and responsive form of co-learning, rather than on one-sided imperialistic knowledge creation.

The ethical vulnerability that we attest to as a reflexively ethical position from which to conduct research is by no means a comfortable or easy one to take up. On the one hand, it is difficult because of the challenges involved in the letting go of the egotistical comforts of one's own epistemic authority. On the other hand, it is difficult because the nature of human interaction through language and symbols always already pulls one away from the openness to the other demanded by ethical vulnerability. Language is a principal medium through which we engage with other people in research, but with it come modes of comparison and categorization that inevitably involve a certain violation of the uniqueness of the other person. The idea of being vulnerable to, and taught by, the other as a way of conceiving of reflexive research thus always remains a distant horizon that bears both the necessity of the journey towards it and the impossibility of its destination ever being reached. This is not one-sidedly negative, and we have pointed to opportunities for both improving research and fostering researcher growth by being taught by the other. At the same time, ethical vulnerability is a valuable sensibility through which research can be conducted in a manner that struggles against the domineering tendencies inherent in seeking knowledge of the other. We are not claiming that organizational research is always oppressively constraining, but that the condition of normalizing approaches of stereotyping, reflexive control and self-interested reciprocity give rise to an ethically motivated response of resisting and liberation. Being taught by the other requires dual acts of responding to the other and ethico-political acts of resisting rigid categories and unmasking rigid subject positions. As such, we do hope that some of the vocabulary offered here may even eventually find its way into the process through which research is written and published, so that we as reviewers and editors might be sensitized to look for and ask for ethical vulnerability in considerations of research design.

Attesting to ethical vulnerability as an ethical position from which to conduct research is not just a matter of methodological reflection or meta-theorizing; it is also something that has distinct and important practical implications. As we have argued, ethical vulnerability in research implicates a generous rather than self-interested relational reciprocity; one justified by ethics rather than by economy. Such a generous reciprocity is premised on a non-symmetry in favour of the other (Levinas,

1969), but also seeing the other before oneself insofar as selfhood cannot be conceived without the other. Acknowledging that such selfhood extends beyond one's solipsistic reflexivity suggest that research, ethically, involves receiving the other in their own full reflexive capability as a person qualified to make sense of their own experiences and situation. In this way, reflexive research is pushed into transgressing the existential boundaries between researchers and practitioners. Research thus becomes about mutual participation and engagement with alterity rather than about gathering data, about co-creation through conversation rather than expert analysis, and about collective interpretations of provisional findings. The ethical stance of other-vulnerability is not prescriptive, yet it is potentially practical and emancipatory. It offers a starting point through which we as researchers might reconsider how our own self-identity might be questioned and destablized on the grounds of an ethics of the other. It also affords a deepening of our corporeal and aesthetic engagement in research and a more generous way of responding to and heeding the calls of the other. In that sense, pursuing ethical vulnerability may mean exchanging the confines of interpretive monopoly and misplaced reflexivity with possibilities of an enlarged sense of meaning in research.

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Note

1 Questions of reciprocity are at the heart of some of the more complex exchanges over the philosophy of Levinas (e.g. Haker, 2004; Ricoeur, 1992; Tatransky, 2008) and cannot be treated in much detail here. Very briefly, we use the term reciprocity not in its absolute form, as did Levinas (1969), but as incorporating styles of self–other orientations that can vary in degree. Thus, when Levinas talks of responsibility for the other without waiting for reciprocity, it corresponds to what we have called a giving-oriented and generous reciprocity. Insisting on the asymmetry towards the call of the other (Haker, 2004; Tatransky, 2008) as primary is not the same as not inviting, or at least remaining open to, moments of return of care or recognition by the other. The unconditional and unpossessive does not rule out elements of mutuality but may actually strengthen the possibility for it, which indeed is a red thread in much of Shotter's research (e,g, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2013). We also recognize that analytical distance in the aftermath of individual encounters may serve broader institutional responsibilities for knowing in research and the weighing of concerns from competing others that could also deserve our vulnerability.

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