Good Research: Developing a Definition and Learning by Example

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Relationships between mothers and child care providers are highly personal and often brief. They are also, as Wendy Hobbins McGrath (2007) determined, ill-understood, a conclusion with potentially significant implications for child development. McGrath's is an example of good research, a study that aims to shed new light on a question, issue, trend, or phenomenon; that hews to sound methodological and ethical standards; that attempts to advance the well-being of a community; and that contemplates a way for that community to engage with her work. As I continue to refine my own research interests and consider the tools I might wield in pursuing them, I look to McGrath's study – its design and execution, its structure and tone – as one to emulate.

The Study

In "Ambivalent partners: Power, trust, and partnership in relationships between mothers and teachers in a full-time child care center," McGrath (2007) used an ethnographic approach to parse interactions between mothers and child care providers during daily pickup and drop-off exchanges. Her observations, collected over the course of a year, led McGrath to determine that tenuous trust and shifting balances of power make meaningful partnership – the kind extolled and taken for granted in research and rhetoric – difficult to cultivate in the child care relationship. She concluded her work by suggesting steps child care providers might take to nurture meaningful partnerships with the parents they serve. To do so, McGrath argued, promises higher quality care for children and stronger support for child development.

Purpose

I do not believe that for research to be good it must reach novel conclusions or explore wholly uncharted territory. Quieter, subtler discoveries also can enrich and enliven

understanding. Neither do I think good research necessarily needs to start with a specific question (though a compelling question might lend fuel to investigation). Instead, good research might begin simply with an attempt to offer new insight on a subject or phenomenon, or to reveal a previously obscure facet of a longstanding problem. Very good research, in fact, might provoke further questions and spur new research. McGrath's work accomplished this. Her study was grounded, not just in an attempt to shed new light on the nature of caregiver-parent relationships, but in challenging a widely circulated, but ultimately hollow metaphor for how those relationships function.

As McGrath noted, much research on child care has focused on whether and how the experience of being in child care affects children. When research does consider the experiences of adults, McGrath argued, it tends to focus either on parents or on caregivers, and not on the relationship between them, even though that relationship can have considerable impact on a child's learning and development. Most critically, she found that research tends to describe the parent-caregiver relationship in terms of "partnership," without analyzing whether such partnership really exists, and if not, why not. By focusing her inquiry first on a little-researched facet of child care, McGrath broadened our understanding of the issue — something good research should at least attempt. By going further and interrogating what had become an empty stock phrase, McGrath started a new conversation and cleared a path toward more meaningful discourse — something even better research achieves.

Methodology and Ethics

To meet a basic threshold of quality, research must be methodologically sound and ethically defensible. Research that cannot conform to those standards would be difficult to trust. McGrath's work exceeded both standards. She provided a detailed explanation for how she

conducted her study, referring to methods that seem to be well-established and endorsed in her field. She was careful to consider the limits of her work—what was missing from the picture she presented and how those omissions constrained her conclusions.

What I find more noteworthy, though, is that the understanding she sought to build, the questions that drove her research, seemed to inform the methods she employed. McGrath aimed to investigate relationships between parents and child care providers. She explained where she expected to find her data: "Parents and teachers communicate daily in child care centers, and their relationships are built in those routine exchanges" (p. 1404). To untangle those exchanges, to reveal their nuances, and to find meaning within them, McGrath needed methods that would allow her to collect a great deal of rich information. The strategies she chose, including participant observation, interview, and videotape recording, seem particularly well suited. They also allowed McGrath to describe in personal, human, complex terms experiences that are fundamentally personal, human and complex.

Similarly, I have confidence in the ethics underlying McGrath's study. Her participants were navigating sensitive relationships in which much, trust and employment, for example, was at stake. She treated the perspectives of the mothers and caregivers in her study with respect, offering robust discussion of their feelings and frustrations and avoiding oversimplification. Crucially for me, she incorporated long passages in the women's own voices, validating them as experts of their own experiences.

Well-being

Along with a guiding purpose, strong methodology and sound ethics, I believe good research "also requires our careful, ongoing attention to questions of human well-being" (Hostetler, 2005, p.16). Karl Hostetler (2005) has argued that whether a piece of research is

"good" is not merely a question of process and procedure. Good research also connects to – and seek to advance – human well-being. For me, this obligation helps justify the material and creative resources that research demands, but it also stems, at least in part, from an essentially unbalanced relationship between researchers and participants. The reporter-source relationship in journalism is a helpful analog for me here. Journalist Isabel Wilkerson (2007) has explained, "Our subjects give us so much more than they ever get back from us. We publish their stories and go on to win promotions, praise from colleagues, Pulitzer Prizes. Our subjects go on living their lives" (p. 175). For reporters (or researchers), the potential to achieve such significant personal gain comes, I believe, with a responsibility to contribute some public good.

McGrath has attended to this responsibility. Explicit in her work was an aspiration to improve the child care experience for children, as well as parents and providers. Understanding the factors that derail meaningful partnership between parents and caregivers can help stakeholders develop effective ways of building them, leading to "more sensitive and consistent care for children, support and peace of mind for parents, and support and respect for all teachers" (p. 1420).

Engagement and Accessibility

After reading Hostetler's (2005) work on "good" educational research, I wondered whether it implied a further requirement: that researchers contemplate some means by which people – presumably the people whose well-being a study serves – might engage with, respond to, or learn from the research. It seemed to me that researchers could not credibly claim a connection to well-being without their work being in some way accessible. I find McGrath's study accessible in a number of ways.

First, she employed a storytelling approach, describing scenes in rich, telling detail and incorporating the unique voices of real individuals. This lent her piece relevance and immediacy, both footholds for facilitating understanding and establishing engagement. In tone, her work traced the contours of conversation. Verbs were precise. Sentences had rhythm, rising toward important points and easing fluidly into transitions. The strength of McGrath's writing contributed to its accessibility – as well as to its appeal to me.

Likewise, McGrath provided opportunities for readers to engage with her findings. After finding little evidence that parents and caregivers communicate and collaborate as partners, McGrath offered three concrete suggestions for fostering partnership. Not only does her work connect to a "robust and justifiable conception of human well-being" (Hostetler, 2005, p. 17), it goes a step further to furnish a means of leveraging that connection.

Conclusion

I have tried to develop a working definition of good research that is not so narrow it strains to accommodate the breadth of work I might pursue or read, yet is not so wide that it loses meaning. For now, I feel confident that I can call a piece of research "good" that seeks to broaden or deepen understanding, that embodies sound ethics and methodology, that serves human well-being, and that engages stakeholders in its findings. Wendy Hobbins McGrath's piece on parent-caregiver relationships (2007) exemplifies this definition and serves as a sort of blueprint for the kind of work I would like to undertake.

References

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