Revisiting the Un/ethical: The Complex Ethics of Elite Studies Research

Current ethical codes inadequately speak to the complexities of researching elite groups. These groups contribute to broader inequalities and yet are protected from scrutiny by their own resources and, in the research context, ethical guidelines. For this reason, Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) called for those researching elite groups to adopt an 'un/ethical' position. This position circumvents conventional ethical codes to disrupt the power of research participants. In this paper, we put forward a considered assessment of this position. We reflect on and theorise our own experiences in the field from this ethical perspective, paying particular attention to our multifaceted insider/outsider statuses. We find that an un/ethical position offers short-term benefits but also does long-term damage to the elite studies scholar community. Thus, we counter-propose a way forward that dismantles power relations while avoiding the drawbacks of the un/ethical approach. Our proposal continues a necessary discussion around the ethics of elite studies research.

Keywords: research ethics; elites; elite education; qualitative research; social justice

The first step in the evolution of ethics is an enlargement of the sense of solidarity with other human beings. (Schweitzer, 1965 in Hain and Saad, 2016: 578)

Introduction

Ethical principles are meant to guide a researcher's behaviour before, during and after fieldwork. Doing ethical research requires protecting the welfare, dignity and rights of those involved in the

research. In other words, and as indicated in the opening quote, a central premise of ethics is a researcher's sense of responsibility and duty of care towards his/her research subjects. Whilst safety of the researcher is part of ethical considerations, it is safety of the participants that is the primary concern. This is critical because it is often the researcher who has power over the researched, and such power can lead to the marginalisation or even victimisation of participants.

These guidelines are intended to apply to the majority of research situations. Notably, however, they do not adequately speak to the challenges of researching elite groups. Elites are those individuals 'occupying a position that provides them with access and control or as possessing resources that advantage them' (Khan, 2012). Elite positionality is thus tied to having power (Maxwell, 2015). The study of elite groups thus often aims 'not only to understand, but also to transform a social order that benefits some at the expense of others' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015: 1131).

Yet, there are a number of practical and methodological issues specific to the study of elite groups. These arise in large part from the various pathways of control that members of the elite retain over researchers' processes and outcomes. For example, elite studies scholars have reflected on challenges around gaining access (Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018), managing and utilising one's positionalities (Berbary, 2014; Mercader et al., 2015), interviewing (Berry, 2002; Harvey, 2011; Lancaster, 2017) and disseminating results (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015; Ostrander, 1995). Many of these challenges arise from the unique configurations of power between researchers and their participants – members of elite groups – that characterise this area of research. This configuration inverts the conventional assumption in ethical guidelines that it is the researcher who holds power. In elite studies, participants are the powerful.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) started an important conversation around the inadequacy of ethical guidelines to address the particularity of researching elites. He put forward a robust and provocative case for researchers of elite groups to adopt a *different* ethic, which he termed an 'un/ethical' position. This position, which is 'neither ethical nor unethical' (2015: 1141), requires researchers who are committed to social justice to 'reveal what elite institutions are invested in keeping hidden' (2015: 1141). Adopting this stance means approaching research as an exercise in exposure, rather than as mainly a contribution to knowledge. It also often means breaching the conventional ethical guidelines that give participants the right to withdraw data. We revisit this proposal, which we find critical but not unproblematic, particularly for doctoral and early career researchers like us. Continuing this conversation through 'spirited dialogue and critique' (Howard and Kenway, 2015: 1026) is vital to help the elite studies community conceptualise our responsibilities, possibilities and constraints in research.

Our paper focuses on the ethical dilemmas that are particular to doing research on more powerful groups, especially as scholars whose positionalities filled an ambiguous space between outsider and insider researcher. We start by theorising the concept of ethics in social science research and exploring the limitations of current ethical codes in guiding decision-making processes in the field when researching elite groups and institutions. We also review the notion of an un/ethical position, as put forth by Gaztambide-Fernández (2015). Following this, we discuss and theorise our own research processes and outcomes from an un/ethical perspective. We reflect that our varying configurations of insider and outsider statuses compelled us to make particular ethical choices, sometimes in line with and something counter to the un/ethical stance. We conclude that the un/ethical position might serve social justice ends in the moment but also has long-term drawbacks for the researcher community. Finally, we propose a different way

forward to dismantle power relations. This way forward recognises the tensions between our desire for social justice and our equally important desire for elite studies research to continue.

Theorising Research Ethics

The need for a canonised code of ethics has grown out of atrocious lapses in their usage. The Nazi experiments in concentration camps, for example, notably led to the Nuremburg Code in 1948, which formalised notions of informed consent and voluntary participation (Mandal et al., 2011). Today, so important is research ethics that the Economic and Social Research Council, which funds the majority of social science research in the UK, sees it as a matter of course that every UK university has a Research Ethics Committee (REC) to oversee research processes. Still, despite the acknowledged importance of ethics in research, there are legitimate debates within the social sciences about the efficacy of our current ethical guidelines. A major criticism is that they do not work *in situ* – that is, in the field, which is where most researchers find themselves faced with ethical dilemmas (King, 2009). Punch, for example, asserts in his seminal book on the ethics of fieldwork that conventional ethical guidelines provided both in academic texts and by RECs hardly help researchers 'situationally, even spontaneously' (1986: 13).

In particular, these guidelines do not adequately speak to the complexities inherent to researching elite groups. Elite studies scholars have found that current ethical guidelines relating to confidentiality, anonymity, power imbalance and positionality do not always capture lived research realities (Lancaster, 2017). Such scholars have thus had to come up with creative, ad hoc solutions to unplanned challenges in the field (e.g., Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018), which can carry their own methodological and ethical dilemmas (Herod, 1999). The inadequacy of these guidelines, we feel, stems from an assumption that powerful researchers study powerless

participants, seen as disenfranchised and disadvantaged members of society who need to be protected. For researchers studying elite groups, this is not only unhelpful but also highly problematic, especially if their research aims to untangle how power is maintained and, often, concealed. In other words, in order to *be* ethical, according to such research goals, elite studies researchers are almost always operating in a framework that is neither *completely* ethical nor unethical.

It was to this space of confusion that Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) spoke. He called for a 'radical re-articulation of ethics itself' (2015: 1141) that would allow for researchers 'to reveal the mechanisms that support the continuation of inequality and to promote social justice' (2015: 1140). He essentially argued that a fundamental tenet in research ethics – that participants have a say in how they are portrayed and what information is publicly shared – does not apply to those in elite positions. Gaztambide-Fernández's justification was that because those in positions of power are already protected from scrutiny, 'we need a different understanding of the ethics of representation; we need an ethical position that refuses the refusal' (2015: 1141). In other words, he claimed that in the interest of social justice, research on elites can expose power enactments by ignoring participants' wishes – an action that under other circumstances would *not* be considered ethical. Gaztambide-Fernández demonstrated this very point through the act of publishing his article. In it, he told the story of 'Wienie Night'[i] a decade after witnessing it – a decade, because his research site had blocked its inclusion in his book manuscript (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015). By finally 'refusing the refusal', Gaztambide-Fernández meant to disrupt power and promote social justice as part of a 'larger project of agitation' (2015: 1141).

Consequently, Gaztambide-Fernández thus constructed an ethical position that newly aligned our responsibilities and allegiances as elite studies researchers with the pursuit of

equality rather than with the elite groups we research. An issue that this clearly presents, then, is whether researchers should be aligned with *any* group. Ideally, we feel, the work we produce should contribute to knowledge rather than push a particular agenda – though, of course, all researchers and thus research have implicit biases and angles (including social justice goals). The 'way forward' with which we end this paper attempts to reconcile these complexities.

Our Experiences in the Field

We welcome Gaztambide-Fernández's call for elite studies scholars to critically reflect on the mismatch between ethical guidelines and the purpose of our work. In this section, we present our own research designs and then reflect on and theorise our experiences in the field. We do this from our respective positions of raced and classed insiders/outsiders. In our research processes, our ability to navigate between reinforcing and disrupting privilege was highly contoured by these complex positionalities. In some ways, we had powerful identities and yet, in others, we were powerless. These entwined identities became implicated in our ethical choices.

Our Research Designs

Adopting a sociological approach to her research, Author A examined the construction and reproduction of elite identity formation in post-colonial Nigeria (Author A, 2016, 2019b). She explored the role of key gatekeepers – namely, educational agents, British headteachers and British consular officials – in constructing and maintaining the notion that British private schools are the best in the world. As is often the case, the eventual objectives of her research changed slightly in light of her findings. Broadly, her objectives were: to investigate why Nigerian elite parents sent their primary and/or secondary age children overseas for education; to understand

elite Nigerian parents' understanding of what constitutes quality education; and to examine the roles of key actors within the international education market, specifically in terms of how they shape the 'rules of the game' by projecting and maintaining British private schools in both Nigeria and the UK as 'world-class' educational institutions. To make sense of why these Nigerian parents seemed to attach a very high value to British upper-class whiteness and whiteness more broadly, Author A adopted an 'ontological dualism' (Hays, 1994: 65) approach, which allowed her to coalesce Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and Frantz Fanon's colonisation theory.

The research was carried out in Lagos (South), Abuja (North) and Port-Harcourt (East) in Nigeria, as well as in London, England. Research participants were recruited initially through relatives and headteachers of British private (boarding) schools in Nigeria and the UK. Snow-balling and opportunistic sampling frameworks were used after initial contact was made with parents to recruit more parent participants for the study. A total of 26 parents (11 fathers and 15 mothers) took part. Data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires gathered demographic information such as parental age, ethnicity, religion, educational qualifications and number of children, while the semi-structured interviews collected qualitative data. Pseudonyms were used in the write-up instead of participants' real names. The discussion and analysis presented in this paper are in reference to the ethical issues that Author A experienced while doing fieldwork with this parent group. As per usual procedure, ethical approval was sought and granted by the REC of the university at which she did her PhD.

Author B adopted historical and sociological approaches to the study of an economically elite secondary school in Switzerland. The school educated an international cross-section of the financial elite. In 2019, fees were 99,000 Swiss Francs per year for privately paying students,

excluding extras. This made it reputedly one of the most expensive schools in the world (Lovemoney Staff, 2019). Author B sought to understand the extent to which emerging theories of transnational elite class formation captured what was happening at this site. Her case study suggests that at this school, class formation is a process adapted by actors in ways that work for them. Her work thus demonstrates that different kinds of elite schools engage in different kinds of class formation processes. It offers a theoretical contribution to the field of elite school studies.

Author B's work drew on documentary, interview and observational data. Participants were given pseudonyms. Importantly, the school site was not. Author B collected data in the field for 15 months – constantly for the first eight and then intermittently for the next seven, for weeks at a time. The documents she accessed were primarily personal letters, Board meeting minutes, internal memos, yearbooks and school publications. In combination, these represent a mix of personal and public materials (McCulloch, 2012). Author B analysed these documents for what they 'did' in addition to what they contained (Prior, 2003). She also interviewed 19 students and two administrators. Student participants were chosen according to theoretical, contextual and practical parameters (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Interviews interrogated participants' beliefs, perspectives and experiences. Author B's observational data shed light on how perspectives emerging from documents and interviews translated into everyday practices. Notably, Author B had been a full-time faculty member at the school. Her research was designed in accordance with the third edition of the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines and approved by her doctoral institution.

In what follows, Author A examines the extent to which strategically using her 'outsider' status – specifically, her identity as a 'British-trained scholar' – enabled her to gain participants'

trust, despite being a 'cultural insider.' She also considers the extent to which 'playing up' her outsider positionality could be considered ethical. Author A then reflects on how, in any case, her status as a PhD student rendered her powerless to act otherwise, limiting the extent to which she could challenge and disrupt power *in situ*. Subsequently, Author B discusses her particular intersection of powerful and powerless positionalities, in terms of her professional, class and academic statuses. She theorises that these positionalities, in concert, produced a non-threatening subject that was not only granted access to her site but also the ability to name it. Trying to maintain this subjectivity, which felt necessary for successful completion of her doctoral work, reinforced her own forms of privilege whilst she was trying to disrupt that of her participants.

Author A: Managing Trust in Situ

I am a Nigerian. I was born to Nigerian parents and was raised in Nigeria. I had both my primary and secondary education in Nigeria and I lived in Nigeria until the age of 25, when I relocated to the UK. As a Nigerian researching Nigerian elites, I am what some would describe as a cultural insider (Ganga and Scott, 2006). Though I did not share a similar class background as my parent participants, I shared not just the same national identity with all of them, but also the same cultural and religious identities with many of them, the majority of whom identified as Christians at the time of my fieldwork. Research suggests that being a cultural insider can be advantageous for both the researcher and the researched (Harvey, 2010; Hopkins, 2007). For the researcher, being a cultural insider means understanding 'the spoken and unspoken language' of research participants (Ganga and Scott, 2006: 5). Extending this point, Mikecz (2012) argues that 'cross-cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication, in etiquette, beliefs, norms, and value systems can easily lead to misunderstandings' (2012, p. 482). In my case, being a cultural

insider gave me insights into the highly-tensed socio-political climate at the time of my

fieldwork. This knowledge shaped both how and what I asked my parent-participants. For

example, I was aware of the activities (still on-going) of the Economic and Financial Crimes

Commission (EFCC), an anti-corruption organisation created by the former Nigerian president

Olusegun Obasanjo, at the time of my fieldwork. The EFCC activities created tension amongst

economically-elite groups in Nigeria, making them wary of anyone asking questions about their

source of wealth. My knowledge of the high rate of kidnappings of wealthy individuals and/or

their family members at that time also meant that I avoided asking parents for the names of the

schools that their children were attending in Nigeria in order to avoid awkward moments.

Despite the benefits of my cultural insider status, however, I found out quite early in my

fieldwork that this status was more of a burden than a valuable resource, precisely because it did

not gain me the trust and respect of my research participants (see Ganga and Scott, 2006). I

naively thought that my cultural insider identity would work to my advantage by signalling to

my parent participants that I was 'one of them', albeit nationally and/or culturally. However, this

changed after my first interview with a parent. Apart from providing monosyllabic responses to

my questions, with my request for further elaboration met by her own question of, 'What do you

want me to say?' (Mrs. Seiye). This parent also sat on the arm of a chair opposite me throughout

the entire interview. At the time, I took the latter as a sign of both her impatience with me and

my irrelevance to her. In my second interview with another parent, I learned something crucial.

This parent became more talkative and friendly when, at the end of the interview, she asked me

about my academic qualifications. I explained that I had received both my undergraduate and

postgraduate degrees in the UK. I also told her that I was teaching in a UK university. I realised

afterwards that it was my outsider status, specifically, my positionality as 'British-trained

scholar' (Mrs Kuti) – to use the words of one of the participants – that had changed this parent's attitudes towards me.

In order to gain the trust and respect of my participants, I made the conscious decision not only to 'play up' my outsider positionality as a 'British-trained scholar,' but also to be strategic in how I used it. I figured also that such a strategy was even more crucial in a situation whereby I did not share the same social class background as my parent participants. Consequently, I mentioned my 'British credentials' at the start of each interview with the parents. Such strategic use of a researcher's positionality is not new. It has been employed in the past by many social scientists researching elites as a way of gaining access to, and the trust and respect of, elites (Blix and Wettergren, 2015; Lancaster, 2017; Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018). Herod, for example, explains that researchers can manipulate their 'positionality in a self-conscious way, on some occasions playing up social distances between researcher and interviewee, on others playing down such distances' (1999, p. 321) in their attempts to maintain access to and the trust of research participants. In her research with elites in the city of London, McDowell (1998) shifted her positionality according to the gender and/or age of the interviewees. For example, she 'play[ed] dumb' with patriarchal figures, was 'brusquely efficient' with older and fierce women, acted 'sisterly' with women of the same age holding similar positions and presented herself as 'superfast and well-informed' with younger men – 'definitely not [someone] to be patronised' (1998, p. 2138).

I found 'playing up' my outsider positionality to be very effective. For example, I noticed how the parents' attitudes often changed from being aloof and lukewarm to friendly and more relaxed when they realised my 'other' status. In a short space of time and often within the same interview, my position shifted from 'intruding insider' to outsider '*of high standing*' (Sowatey

and Tankebe, 2018: 8 emphasis in original), given the importance and value that these elite parents attached to the British education system and British teachers, more specifically (see Author A, 2019b). I moved from being perceived as an unqualified, locally-trained researcher to a 'knowledgeable Western[er]' (Herod, 1999: 317) worthy of their time, trust and respect.

My experience chimes closely with Jabeen, a Pakistani PhD student who was studying in Australia at the time of her fieldwork in Pakistan. Jabeen (2013) felt that her participants, local elites, granted her interviews because they (mis)took her for an Australian. Jabeen argued that she might not have been granted this access 'had they known that [she is] a Pakistani, studying in an Australian university' (2013: 222). Jabeen explains that whilst she was uncomfortable 'with this vague introduction,' she accepted that it 'worked more often than [her] accurate personal and project description' (2013, p. 222). Similarly, although I was never comfortable with my 'British-trained scholar' identity, I felt that it was still a fair description and, crucially, 'a practical way to harness and use the benefits embedded in these identities' (Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018: 8).

Although the literature indicates that those researching elites do not always view these strategies as unethical (Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018), in hindsight, I can also see how the strategic use of my outsider identity could be conceived of as unethical because of its racial implications. To put it bluntly, I was aware that I had gained my participants' respect and trust because I had been trained by 'real [white] British teachers' (Author A, 2019a: 202) who were perceived as 'the experts' in education, as opposed to the 'unqualified' teachers in Nigeria (Author A, 2016, 2019b). In other words, my credibility and authenticity as an academic and *knowledgeable* researcher was based on the hegemonic discourses of Western superiority. Such hegemonic discourses that construct whiteness and the West in general as the symbol *par*

excellence essentially 'fix[es] Africa and Africans in a perpetual state of underdevelopment while positioning Europe and the West in general as developed and advanced societies' (Author A, 2019b: 128). Consequently, by 'playing the game,' I became complicit in the perpetuation of this Western hegemonic discourse.

Yet, despite feeling uncomfortable with this description of me mainly because I never saw myself as such, I reasoned that what mattered most was gaining the trust of my participants so that I could understand how they protect and maintain their privileged positions, and how this in turn perpetuates inequality in society. Similar to Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) and Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte (2017), I had rationalised my actions using the rhetoric that when it comes to social justice research on elites, the end justifies the means. By this logic, manipulation of researchers' positionalities and identities (Herod, 1999; Sowatey and Tankebe, 2018) and the creation of the ideal *but* 'fake' self to fit 'the specific [research] situations and participants' (Blix and Wettergren, 2015: 698) are, in this situation, not only necessary but also *just*. Paradoxically, I had reasoned at the time that I had not caused my participants harm (as defined by the conventional ethical codes I was following) by going along with, and playing the part of, the 'knowledgeable Westerner.'

On a macro-level, I had 'power' as the 'British-trained scholar', which had gained me some level of trust and respect from my participants. On a micro-level, however, I was still the supplicant in the researcher-participant relationship. The protocols and gatekeepers such as the guards, personal assistants, maids and secretaries that I had to go through left me in no doubt about who held the power in the researcher-researched relationship. Aside from signing in with porters, I was often kept waiting in lobbies for several hours. Also, most of the elite parents were indignant when asked to sign a consent letter, with one mother describing it as a 'mindless

exercise' (Mrs Kuti). I was also used as a scribe by some of the parents who considered the filling of the questionnaire a demeaning and timewasting task. On reflection, I realise that these were some of the ways in which these parents communicated the balance of power to me. They were certainly some of the ways by which I was constantly reminded of the cosmic gap between mine and my participants' social status.

My powerlessness was further compounded by the fact that I was relying on these parents to recommend me to their friends and/or family members who were also sending their children to private boarding schools overseas. It is important to stress that this was not by choice but because of the very small number of Nigerian parents that were sending children to UK-based private boarding schools at the time of my fieldwork (SCIS, 2013). Given these factors, what prevented me from calling out classism and internal racism, which I had witnessed in every single interview with these parents, was not 'procedural concern with research ethics itself' as Gaztambide-Fernández (2015, p. 1141) might suggest. Rather, it was the desire to collect good-quality data (Shenton and Hayter, 2004), which was necessary for the successful completion of my PhD, to which my future job security was inextricably tied at the time.

I had experienced a cocktail of negative emotions, ranging from anxiety and fear to sadness and anger, during my fieldwork. I constantly worried about whether a parent would be available to speak to me (there were quite a few last-minute cancellations and I was not able to reschedule in some cases) and, if they were available, what or how they would respond to my questions. Parents' disparaging remarks about Nigerian teachers and blackness in general, as well as their low opinions of those who have been educated in state schools or private schools using the Nigerian curriculum – basically, anyone who had not attended British private schools – often caused me sadness and anger.

The conventional codes of ethics offered me very little help in these circumstances. That said, I do not think Gaztambide-Fernández's un/ethical framework would have been of much help either. This position would have required me to confront my parent participants *in situ* when they made disparaging remarks about Blacks and Nigerians in general – particularly when they showed a preference for white Britishness – instead of timidly asking them to elaborate on their remarks. Crucially, the un/ethical framework would have also *entitled* me to express rather than hide my disappointment, my hurt, and anger from my research participants. Given the reasons that I have already mentioned earlier, chiefly that I needed my participants more than they needed me, Gaztambide-Fernández's un/ethical framework was not really an option. Further, the vagueness of the un/ethical position, which Gaztambide-Fernández had described as '[n]either ethical nor unethical' (p. 1140), means never knowing where one sits on the un/ethical ethical spectrum. This would have caused me more, not less, stress. The conventional ethical codes at least provided me with clear guidelines within which I could work while reminding me of the central role of beneficence in research. It forces those of us researching elites to see them first and foremost as humans with *rights* rather than mere objects of research – that is, to research *with* rather than *on* our elite research participants. The latter is a fundamental point and unachievable within the un/ethical framework not least because it would require us to take their 'feelings' into consideration.

Author B: Classed Configurations of Access

I had been a full-time faculty member at the Leysin American School (hereafter, LAS) in Switzerland before doing my PhD fieldwork. There, I worked as a college guidance counsellor at the school. This meant, formally, that I assisted graduating students both in choosing which

universities to apply to and in completing those applications. It also meant, informally, that they and I discussed their dreams, their fears and, more generally, how they saw themselves fitting into the world around them. This being a boarding school, I also lived in a girls' dorm and was responsible for the well-being of its inhabitants. I chaperoned various school trips and events, including week-long excursions to neighbouring countries. I took groups of students out to dinner on 'family nights.' I was *in loco parentis*.

This meant that I was professionally an 'insider' when I approached the Head of School about doing research at LAS. 'Insider researchers' are those who, 'before they begin to research, already have an attachment to, or involvement with, the institutions or social groups in, or on, which their investigations are based' (Sikes and Potts, 2008: 3). In this way, my positionality was similar to that of Khan (2011), who worked as a faculty member at the elite American boarding school that he studied for his doctoral thesis. This positionality is not uncommon. Building a positive track record with an elite school seems critical to being let inside its doors as a researcher. In fact, other doctoral students have leveraged, for example, being a hired researcher at their school site (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009) and a faculty member at a similar school (Howard, 2008) to gain access. My history as a faculty member therefore felt instrumental to my gaining access to LAS.

I was also, however, a 'class' insider – not amongst the students, but amongst the administration. This was perhaps equally critical to gaining access. Maxwell and Aggleton (2015) have argued that the 'match' between a gatekeeper's and a researcher's social class and educational history can influence access. This has been contested elsewhere (Bertron and Kolopp, 2017) but my experience supports Maxwell and Aggleton's contention. The Head of School and I shared a nexus of capitals. We were both white, Christian and from financially

comfortable families, from countries that were predominately white, Christian and capitalistic. We were both Ivy League educated. I felt that this shared background added to my credibility in the eyes of the Head of School. It appeared to provide him with a kind of assurance that I 'got it' and would not unravel the systems that had served me (and him) so well. Being a class insider seemed to suggest that I posed less of a threat.

This positionality was likely further supported by the fact that my higher professional and social standing was balanced by a rather low academic standing. Elite schools often protect themselves from exposure. Yet, as noted above, a number of doctoral students have successfully gained access to them. I do not think it is coincidental that doctoral researchers are also the least 'powerful' in the academic field. At LAS, being 'just a student' seemed to suggest that my research would not be read widely or taken too seriously. The Head of School often highlighted my student status. He had completed an EdD and seemed to enjoy talking with me about his doctoral processes. He would often ask about my research progress and offer his own recollections. This was welcome and friendly conversation, but it was also a subtle reminder of whom had already proved their academic worth (him) and whom had yet to do so (me).

This synergistic intersection of high and low statuses seemed to produce an ideal subject (and subjectivity) for doing research at this site. It was this subject that was granted permission by the Head of School to use the school's real name. 'Leysin American School' is not a pseudonym. I requested this 'privilege' out of an ethical concern for my participants. Because my research would detail the unique history of school, I felt that the institution's identity would be obvious to those with any knowledge of the area or access to the internet. Furthermore, I planned to discuss being an 'insider researcher' in my work, as it critically shaped my

methodology, access to sources and breadth and depth of data collection. However, I had only worked at one Swiss school. A glance at my CV would thus also reveal the site.

With these risks in mind, I decided that openly using the name from the onset was the only way that participants could make a fully informed decision about whether to participate. They would know when I approached them that their identity would be anonymised but that their school's identity would not. Although this decision followed broader historical traditions (McCulloch, 2008) and Khan's (2011) elite school ethnography, schools do not often agree to be named. I was thus aware that I was, in fact, being given a rare privilege – one that allowed me to more ethically do my research.

This privilege was also a burden. As might be expected, I became self-conscious about what data I could share and how, a phenomenon also reported by Walford (2012) and Khan (2011). In practice, this meant that I read documents and interview transcripts with a selective memory. I focused on the aspects of those texts that directly informed my research questions and tried to forget (or at least did not use) the rest, as Tesar (2015) did in a similar situation. I also felt the burden of maintaining the positionality that allowed me to do this work in the first place. I had long intended to leave my job at the end of my contract, yet almost renewed it out of fear of changing my relationship with the Head of School. I was terrified of the school withdrawing its consent to participate or of being told that I could use my data in my thesis but not in publication (I had read 'Wienie Night'). For this same reason, I did not challenge perceptions of my low academic status. I did not tell the school when I was awarded a studentship. I did tell them when I began presenting at conferences but did not share how interested audience members were in an inside look at an expensive Swiss boarding school.

My most complicated positionality in this situation, however, was that of my class. It was in my interest to protect the Head of School's belief that we shared a kind of class solidarity. As mentioned, that allowed me to do this research according to my own ethical standards in the first place. Thus, I both hid behind ethical guidelines and circumvented them when necessary. In this way, I deployed the same class power in my research processes that my research ultimately aimed to disrupt. For example, ethical codes required me 'to minimise and manage any distress or discomfort' (BERA, 2018, p. 19). Thus, when students offhandedly discussed their wealth, I did not make them uncomfortable by challenging their privilege. One young woman, for instance, spoke about the 'smallness' of the lives of those still living in her home country (Emma). I decided not to embark on a teaching moment about flows of capital and how her advantages relate to others' lack thereof. The ethical guidelines in this case aligned with my personal motivations. I knew that students were talking to each other about these interviews and I needed participants. I did not want to antagonise them. And I did not want complaints to reach my gatekeeper.

Yet, in other situations, protecting this perceived class solidarity meant breaking ethical codes. When I described my academic field to the Head of School as 'elite studies,' he interrupted to say, 'But we're not an elite school. Our students do their own laundry.' I did not push him on the meaning of an 'elite school' – or on the fact that stressing *not* being an elite school when fees are 99,000 Swiss Francs per year arises from and reinforces extreme privilege. A questioning stance is perhaps the most difficult one to adopt, particularly when the feeling was that 'my relationship with the school would have collapsed' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015, p. 1136). I did, however, continue to use the label 'elite school' in my writing. I thus represented my site in a way that its gatekeeper would object to. In a small way, then, I adopted an un/ethical

position by revealing something that was meant to be hidden. And yet, this was something that I did passively, in the production of my texts. I did not confront the Head of School with any acts of resistance. I prioritised my ability to do research.

My experiences suggest that the various statuses of our multiple identities intersect to confer upon us a particular subjectivity. This subjectivity can open research doors but also burden us with feeling that we must preserve that subjectivity at all costs. In my case, I cultivated an image of class privilege and 'belief in the system' (Howard et al., 2014), for the sake of my research, whose importance I knowingly undersold. Acknowledging this moves us closer to fruitfully interrogating not only the complexity of power relations in this kind of research but also the ways in which this affects our scholarly processes, including our ethical decisions. My strategic choices around ethics were underpinned, consciously or not, by dynamic power asymmetries. If we are to dismantle power relations through our work as elite studies scholars, we must start by dismantling the power structures that we construct ourselves. This means calling out how we, too, strategically navigate the system.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: A Way Forward

In the spirit of healthy debate and in lieu of a conclusion (we hope that this is a debate that will continue), we outline what we consider to be two fundamental flaws with the un/ethical position. We conclude by arguing for a way forward that recognises the analysis stage (such as this, wherein we can theorise our experiences in the field), as an equally important 'moment' for disrupting power and privilege.

First, we contend that Gaztambide-Fernández's un/ethical position has the potential to create a two-tiered hierarchical community amongst researchers. Gaztambide-Fernández calls for

elite studies scholars to be more daring and to ignore ethical protocols when 'required.' This, we feel, poses the real danger of positioning such scholars above and beyond ethical protocols. Ethical protocols become something meant not for those researching elites, but for those researching the less privileged. Ironically, this mirrors the social structures that we hope to dismantle. Moreover, since the un/ethical position is neither *ethical* nor *unethical*, it means that those of us researching elites would essentially be operating in a 'no man's land' whereby anything (including the *un*ethical considerations) goes. We believe that this has the potential to be abused and therefore significantly damage the integrity of elite studies research. As Author A argued earlier, beneficence should be at the centre of our research irrespective of who our research participants are.

Second, we fear that if elite groups are not given the same rights as other kinds of research participants – for example, the right to withdraw data or to have a say in how they are presented (Mero-Jaffe, 2011) – they will deny future requests to participate in research. Author B was acutely aware that her site could withdraw participation, and others might not agree in the first place. We are not sure how Gaztambide-Fernández's research site responded to 'Wienie Night' (2015), but one can imagine that it has now closed its doors to further research. Other elite schools could do the same. Elite institutions are often in conversation with one another. It is therefore possible, perhaps not after just one transgression but perhaps after a sustained onslaught, that we, as an elite studies community, would no longer be allowed into these spaces as researchers (Walford, 2012). We must seriously ask ourselves, what does this achieve? Even if the un/ethical disrupts power at the time it is deployed, if we cannot continue to do research as a field, we cannot investigate inequalities over time.

Recognising these issues with the un/ethical position but also appreciating its intent, we propose a different way forward. This way forward allows us to disrupt power in the moment without introducing inequalities into the research community or jeopardising our ability to do research on elite groups in the future. Central to our way forward is the re-imagining of the 'moment' or 'moments' of disruption. The ability to actively engage and disrupt power *in situ* is a unique and significant privilege that we, as social science researchers, are afforded. It allows us to explore 'moments of vulnerability' (Maxwell, 2015) in power hierarchies and, potentially, to transform both participants' self-understandings and our own (Howard et al., 2014). Our conceptualisation of 'in situ' includes Gaztambide-Fernández's recounting what happened in the field. We contend, however, that the analysis stages are equally important in this endeavour. We thus propose that these 'moments of disruption' be understood as also happening in other phases of academic work. This reframing allows us to disrupt power by *theorising*, rather than revealing, the ethical issues that we encounter in the field without breaching conventional ethical codes.

For example, we feel that the power of Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) lies not in the final telling of the 'Wienie Night' story but in the theorising of the censorship that the story encountered. In his article, Gaztambide-Fernández outlines three points drawn from the way in which his experience unfolded: 1) elites are concerned with shaping a particular public image, 2) elites set terms that protect that image and 3) researchers are implicated in the same power discourses as are elites, but through the lens of academic status. These conclusions are critically important to how we understand the ethics of elite research, and yet they have nothing to do with the publishing of 'Wienie Night.' We argue that it is through sharing this story of censorship, not

'Wienie Night', that we can truly 'demystify the process by which the powerful disguise power relations' (Cookson, 1994, as cited in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015, p. 1134).

In other words, it is through discussions of what we face in the field that we, as a field, can build more nuanced understandings of our ethical dilemmas and their implications for the pursuit of social justice. Our reflections above demonstrate this. Author A theorises from her research processes how the privilege of whiteness can be maintained and reinforced through Western hegemonic discourses, to which she herself was subjected while trying to collect data. Author B suggests that our ethical choices can be contoured by dynamic power asymmetries arising from our own intersections of status. Crucially, both authors concluded that we must call out the power not only of our participants but also of ourselves in navigating this system. Our proposed way forward can be construed as involving more 'talking' and less 'doing', the latter being what, perhaps, Gaztambide-Fernández's un/ethical position offers. Nevertheless, we strongly feel that it is through such considered and honest discussions that we, as a community, can find an ethical position that works for social scientist researchers in general rather than one that only works for 'elite' researchers.

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[i] 'Wienie Night' was a student ritual that Gaztambide-Fernández was allowed to witness at his research site.

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