



# Qualitative Research in Practice

Examples for  
Discussion and Analysis

Sharan B. Merriam and Associates



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## Cathy

### *The Wrong Side of the Tank*

Juanita Johnson-Bailey

Cathy is a petite thirty-nine-year-old Black woman who exudes joy. She lives in a cramped two bedroom apartment with her five-year-old daughter and eleven-year-old son. Her “place” is located in a cul de sac in Bird City, a government housing project so nicknamed because the streets have names such as Wren, Dove, and Crane. With quick, energetic, and constant movements, her smile, which is wide and sincere, accompanies constant gestures and intense eye contact.

When I arrived to pick her up on a Saturday afternoon in February, Cathy was dressed in pale blue sweat pants, an outdated frayed orange and yellow plaid wool coat that was two sizes too small, and a fluorescent yellow skull cap that covered her eyebrows and ears. Her bizarre dress belied her sharp wit and brilliant conversational style. Cathy’s positive attitude seemed to ignore her desolate surroundings and this zest carried over to her conversations about school.

Despite a history of good grades in elementary and high school, she was hesitant to enter college. In her early thirties, Cathy says she feels old when she’s at school. High school coincided with the beginning of integration and Cathy vividly remembers being ridiculed by White teachers and students. She has residual feelings of inadequacy that she attributes to those traumatic times. It took much encouragement by a friend who was also enrolled in college to convince Cathy to take a chance on herself. This girlfriend persuaded her by constantly reminding her of how smart Cathy had been when they were in school together.

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Juanita Johnson-Bailey. (2000). “Cathy: The Wrong Side of the Tank.” In *Sistahs in College: Making a Way Out of No Way*. Malabar, FL: Krieger. Reprinted with permission.

Cathy has been enrolled in a nursing program at a community college for a year. Although she is an honors student, she recently decided to change her major to elementary education because she believes that the nursing program is unfair to Blacks and because she does not want to "endure" the program.

Framing her adult schooling were memories of childhood experiences. She mentioned her initial experiences often as she grappled to discuss how school was fitting into her adult life. Although Cathy maintained that the disturbing events that occurred in her grade school and high school years were not connected to the present, it seemed more a wishful thought than a reality in which she believed.

### *Unequally Separate*

*I lived through the era of segregation. So I remember too well how much it influenced me, especially in the way I feel about my school days. In the early grades, I had no idea that there were differences between the way Blacks and Whites lived. But things were happening in my community and in home life. Back then the newspaper had a "colored" section. It seemed that all the news in the colored section was bad. Not that we didn't have our own clubs and organizations, but then hard things were happening in the world. I also remember my mother taking me four blocks away from where she was spending her money, to go to the "colored only" restroom. Yet we were lucky. I watched TV and I know that elsewhere people were dying.*

*In our city we had a mayor who placed a 6:00 P.M. curfew on the city. It was supposedly for White and Black neighborhoods, but it was racial. He purchased a tank and rode around in Black neighborhoods only. It was his intention to intimidate people. I was a little girl, around nine years old, but I remember him riding through our neighborhood when I was playing in the yard with a friend. Even though we were just children, the police told us to get back on the porch. But it was warm and we were playing in the yard the way children are supposed to play on warm summer days.*

*In spite of all of this, school was still fun. Achieving is the most fun I've ever had—being able to learn new things. My most pleasant memory of school was being involved in a little small play where I was Miriam of the Biblical story of Moses. My mother couldn't come because she had to work, but my father, who never lived with us, agreed to come. I felt kind of special. But in subsequent years, my father and I have never been really close.*

*I worked hard in the early part of school. During high school I had spring fever—hormonal uproar. I let a few subjects slide. Overall I finished with a 2.3. It wasn't that I couldn't do it. I just got lazy, rebellious, carefree. It was almost over. Why work?*

Cathy's age puts her in the unique position of having been a product of both segregated and newly integrated school environments. Like many Black reentry women in their thirties and forties, she recalls her days of inequality with fondness because in this sheltered world she felt safe and smart. The days of difference were difficult for her and served as a marker for her educational and life narrative. Her statements about this period are terse and pain-ridden.



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*Some teachers would talk to you in such tones. The words did not matter. They would talk down to you. It was as if they knew that your background was lacking—your parents were uneducated and you were ignorant. But that wasn't the case. I remember how difficult it was to look in the teacher's eyes and ask a question. I feared asking a dumb question. When I did ask a question, it was out of sheer necessity, and I'd hear, "Well, you should know this," or "Why are you asking me this?" The kids would snicker and the teacher would not answer. And my ego would slouch even further.*

*I witnessed a lot of rifts between classmates. Once one of my Black friends chased a White girl all around the room. I could see the fear in both girls' eyes. I guess everyone was feeling a certain amount of pain. I know Black people were hurting long before King ever talked to the world about all the injustices. When the schools integrated, the kids, Black and White alike, came with harsh feelings and severe hostilities that grown people encouraged.*

In addition to the period being painful, Cathy thinks that the disparity of her schooling was evident. According to her, the new, formerly all-White schools had equipment and books of which she had never seen the likes.

*My schools did not prepare me adequately even though I maintained good grades. It was hard for me. When the schools integrated the White kids who came from "more equal" institutions did better. It appeared easier for them. Yet I believe that attending all-Black public schools was a good experience in a way because it gave me a sense of identity. I didn't feel different.*

Often when discussing decisions made in youth, there seems to be regret in Cathy's voice. The same seems true for so many reentry women. Phrases like, "If I only had known then what I know now," or "Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but real life vision is blurry," are common refrains. The thirties and forties are not only years for reflecting on what you could have done differently, but seemingly for women these years are times for finishing or beginning tasks that can still be accomplished.

#### ***Revisiting Math and Science Demons***

*When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to go to Upward Bound. But no. I could kick myself now for thinking, "No. I don't want to go. I'm working. I'm working making nothing." Then came children, marriage, and divorce. Now I want to secure more of a future for my children. I've missed so many opportunities. I want to do better and obtaining a higher level of education will be my ticket.*

*Making the final decision to go to school was hard and I didn't make it alone. I was influenced by a friend that I kept running into at the laundromat. She said, "Cathy you were so smart. Did you go to school?" And I would say, "Nah." And she would tell me about the local community college and tell me that I should go. Every time I'd see her, she'd tell me this. She'd hound me about going back to school. And it got so that I stopped going to the laundromat.*

*When I made the decision to go to college, I was so afraid. The counselor will tell you the many times I called her at home and said, "Uh, uh, uh, I can't do this." She would say, "Yes you can." I was coming up with all types of excuses.*

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I was afraid. The fear of failure. It's been too long. I won't fit. I kept going back and forth. When I finally made the decision to go, I think it was the best decision I could have made. I was staying at home. I was on the system—Welfare. I had low self-esteem. I'd had good jobs in the past. I didn't want to sling hamburgers. And so I said, "Well, let me see how I can use this system to help myself so that I can get off Welfare."

The school sent me an application to complete for the minority Summer Enrichment Program. I didn't just send it back in the mail. I completed it, signed it, and took it out there the same day. But I didn't get in. There were no more spaces. I was crushed. They were trying to gear it toward the traditional student. I said to myself, "I'm the one who needs the little extra boost, the incentive, and the help." And so every other day I would call the counselor for the program. They [the school officials] had never seen my face, but they knew me well. I was so determined to get out there. I would call every other day and say, "Do you have a space available—maybe somebody is sick—maybe somebody decided to go somewhere else." And so finally, maybe about a week before the class was supposed to start, they sent me a letter. I got in. Later I found out that no one dropped. They had fifty slots open and they made it 51 because the secretary said listen, "You have got to get this Cathy in here, into this class."

Cathy has dealt with many rejections in her lifetime. It didn't embarrass her to let the school officials know how much she wanted to gain admission into their program. According to her, the worst that could happen would be that they'd just keep saying no. Past ordeals had taught her tenacity. She felt that she had nothing to lose and everything to gain. A wealth of life experiences from which to draw solace and guidance is one factor that sets reentry women students apart from younger women students.

I was so happy to get in. It was fantastic. I said, "Thank God," because I knew I needed it. I needed that summer program. I didn't know if my nerves could last until September. This would be something to get me re-acquainted with school.

I did things in that program that I had never done before. We went to museums and we got a chance to go to the Martin Luther King Center. It was real. We went on a tour of his house. I saw Coretta Scott King. I never had the money to go to those places.

After the summer program I wanted to bail out. The counselor said, "No, you're not. Not as many times as you bugged us. You are staying in." And so everything worked out.

My life since I came back to school has been a roller coaster ride. At first I felt a sense of intimidation, not knowing if I could measure up. There were a lot of insecurities. The first day there I looked around. I always sit up front in the middle of the T. And I could feel their eyes. That's my inferiority complex. I felt like everyone was looking at me like, "What is she doing?" I was the oldest. They used to call me mother, the mother hen. I had this feeling from the kids that I didn't belong. Then they started seeing that I was the one who was the first to ask questions. I was the one, you know, who was bringing in the homework and just really trying, trying, to do my best. I guess my age had its benefits. I was serious cause I had been through a lot of things. Age worked to my advantage. Before it was over with, I had won their respect. It was a good feeling.

During her second week of school, Cathy's car stopped working and she could not afford to repair it or to buy a new one. But she was already hooked on school and did not let her transportation problems deter her. She started commuting by bus.

*I will never forget this one incident. I had missed the bus 'cause it would come so early. I had to get up—the children and everything. I just missed the bus. I was determined to get to school. My class was at 10:00 in the morning. It was 8:00 A.M. so I decided to walk. I said from where I live to the college is no problem until I started walking. It was raining and I fell. I got soaked. I looked back. I could see my house. I looked the other way and I couldn't see the college. But I was determined to go. I had to go. I walked up the street, slish, slosh, slish, slosh. I didn't want to miss, not just 'cause I had to walk. I wasn't sick. The children weren't sick and I didn't want to miss school. I was determined to get there. I had to get there. My hair shriveled. It's a good eight miles. It costs about \$4.00 to get there in a cab.*

Cathy made it to school that day and every day thereafter. She talks readily of good times and negative experiences. Overall, it was harder than she imagined and more empowering than she expected.

*There have been some hilarious times when I've had to stop and laugh at myself. I've shied away from math like many women. I eventually took the hard math course, the one designed to prepare me for nursing. There was one problem that still tickles me. The workbook said Ms. Doe has been prescribed 0.5 milliliter of a drug and your solution stock is 100 percent. How do you dilute it? I said to myself, Oops! This lady is dead. It had been so long since I took math that I just didn't get it. Though I was frightened, I learned to master it. Things did start coming back to me and I made an A in the class. It's a different type of math, doing equations, quadrants, linears. So I said, "Let me get some remediation," even though I had been exempted from development studies because I made a passing score on my college preparatory exam. You have to take the college preparatory exam if you have been out of school for over ten years or longer or if you have never been to college. You have to pass the exam's three parts. Taking extra courses just to make sure you understand seems like a common thing for older students to do. We want to be sure we can keep up. I have one friend who goes to school out here. She is taking some developmental studies, not because she wasn't exempted. She feels that she just needs to better prepare herself.*

When asked to describe school, Cathy said it was like a roller coaster ride, full of ups and downs. Here are some moments that she identifies as memorable ones on her reentry ride.

*In my first year at the college I was nominated by my English 101 teacher for the honors program. And that first day I was the only little Black woman in there and the oldest again. And I called my counselor that night and said, "I'm leaving this." I felt like I had the weight of the rest of the Blacks at the college on my shoulders. I'm the only Black in the class. That old inferiority complex had me*

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dated. Let me tell you what I discovered. Those kids in those classes don't know  
anymore than you do. If they are in the class it's for the same reason I'm there.  
Someone nominated them just like they nominated me. Still I felt it was all on  
me. I pulled a B out of the class. It felt good when I was one of the participants to  
walk up on the honors stage.*

*Some things do get me down. I was in a sociology class and the students were  
talking about Welfare recipients and homeless people. I didn't know that real peo-  
ple felt that way about people like me. You see people on talk shows saying cruel  
things about how poor and homeless people are in their circumstances because they  
prefer those conditions. Who wants to be homeless? To me that is ludicrous. I tried  
to respond in class. Then they asked me questions like, "Why don't they go on birth  
control and stop having babies? We're taxpayers." Apparently they don't know that  
things sometimes don't happen the way people plan. No one plans to be poor.*

*On one of my very first days of class, an instructor said, "Open your book to  
chapter four. If you don't know the first three chapters then you don't need to be  
in this class." It had been such a long time since I dealt with algebra. I skimmed  
through the three chapters. And the first chapter was OK, but when I saw those  
algebraic equations, I said, "Oh man I don't know this." The teacher was taking  
the class so fast. It was hard for me to learn it that fast. I didn't understand it like  
I should have. I withdrew and took remedial math for a refresher. Later I made an  
A for that course. The next time I take a math course I'll be more prepared.*

*I didn't feel prepared for anatomy and physiology either. It was a two-part  
class—lab and lecture. Everyone has problems with it unless you have the back-  
ground for it. This course is the money maker for the college since it has such a  
large failure rate. Everyone knows that a third of the students in each class don't  
complete the course and the majority of those who remain won't make a passing  
grade. The average student has to take it three times in order to pass. Mostly the  
people who do well have private school backgrounds where they took anatomy  
and physiology in high school.*

*I didn't understand all the chemistry. I didn't take chemistry in high school.  
And so I got a lot of self-help books. Maybe I needed more books and more time.  
But for whatever reason I didn't get it. Instead of slowing down, the class sped  
up. I didn't feel mentally ready. I couldn't absorb that much. It took me so long  
just to understand one chapter. Mainly it was the terminology, the medical lan-  
guage. I had to look up every few words because I wanted to know what they  
meant and I wanted to be able to pronounce them. It slowed me down. It was  
very difficult.*

*I tried to talk to the teacher. He told me that there was no substitute for three  
or four hours of studying per day. At first I thought he was being smart. Then  
I thought about it. He was making all kinds of assumptions about me. Now I  
hadn't been studying that much because I can't study at home. It's so comfort-  
able there and then there are the dishes. There is food. There's the telephone. I  
come to school early in the morning to study and study anywhere else that I find  
quiet. My schedule makes it hard to have four straight hours. Maybe he was  
telling the truth. I am deficient.*

*Of course the teacher didn't seem at all interested in me. He assumed that I  
was not studying adequately. He dismissed me. I tried to ask him if he felt that  
I should take remedial courses. But he said that we were just touching the surface.*



*But everything I saw was a chemical formula. The molecular structures looked foreign. And I didn't understand about conservation and reduction. I could see the definition but I didn't understand about adding and removing the water.*

*There is a test coming up and the teacher told me to wait until after the test to decide about staying in the class. I made a 70 on the first test and he thought that it was a good grade. I didn't think it was acceptable. Of course I'd take that over an F. But there was no leeway.*

*The counselor wanted me to hang in there. I gave it serious thought and decided to pull out. It's not the first time I've done that. But each time that I have made that decision it has worked best for me. I dropped a psychology course because my teacher was in another world. And when I took it from a different instructor I made an A. Well, I had a feeling, intuition, something inside, a knowledge within myself. I knew I didn't understand the test. I have no regrets. I dropped the class because I didn't feel prepared. Even though I made a 70 on the test, it was like walking along a ledge. I didn't even take the second test. Actually there were two tests on the same day, the regular test and the lab exam. The class test was going to cover twelve chapters. A lot of students took the second test and failed it miserably. And everyone I talked to asked me had I dropped the course. If they didn't fail the lecture, they failed the lab part.*

Cathy dropped the course. She said that she had to follow her heart. Respecting your inner voice seems to be a common trait among the reentry women.

*Maybe I would be better qualified in elementary education. A girlfriend told me that I looked like a teacher. It shocked me. She said that she would let me teach any of her six children but that if she saw me in her hospital room as a nurse she said she'd have to ring for help. I've had the opportunity to tutor a fellow classmate and I was uplifted. I had a sense of pride and satisfaction in helping others learn. I've always taught, whether it's working with my children at home or working with neighbors. There are other nursing programs. But I have transportation problems. I'm not closing the door on it. I want to get better prepared—to take biology and chemistry. I don't want a week to learn 206 bones inside and out. It may take me longer. I would rather be qualified. Black women have to be 105 percent qualified anyway in order to succeed in the long run.*

*There have been really good experiences. I had a poem published in the school magazine. It was hard for me to conceive that something that I had written was good enough to be seen by anyone else. I went on to write short stories and then essays. I won first place in a Minority Student Enrichment Program. You know, the one that I begged to get into. Now after a year, I feel more confident about trying new things.*

The new confidence in the school setting is fragile. Yet it is encased in an adult's understanding that school is a business. There are rules and ways of succeeding. Cathy quickly applies previously learned life lessons to this environment.

*The first day of class before the bell, I go to meet the instructor to find out their office hours. It's not necessarily brown nosing but to try to get an impression of them. Hopefully, it gives them a positive impression of me. It's also a good opportunity to ask questions about the class. I've gotten insider information this way—*

about books and about any additional aids I might need to buy. I don't hesitate to ask for help.

I get to class early. I look on my left and say, "Hello, my name is Cathy. What's your name? And if you don't mind could we exchange numbers." I made it a rule of thumb to do this in every class.

#### **Riding the Roller Coaster**

My children are so proud of me. I often hear them tell their friends, "You know that my Mama goes to college." A lot of mothers around the neighborhood, for whatever reason, don't do anything. Now more and more mothers are going back to school. Some went back, I guess, because they saw me and realized that anyone could do it. Now there's a lot of media attention being given to women on Welfare who go back to school. The Housing Authority, who manages the housing project where I live, promotes entrepreneurship, GED completion programs, and community college programs. First it was a neighbor who went to the community school. Then I enrolled. Now there are two more women from my area who have started classes.

I think maybe I'm becoming a role model. The woman that I ride with just started school. She's a little older and she was very concerned. She was intimidated and overwhelmed by the amount of information and the new life that she was experiencing. Looking at her was like looking at a frightened chicken running around. I had to stop her and unruffle her feathers. She had actually started talking about dropping out of school. I told her, "You just got in. You're not going anywhere."

Cathy's pride in succeeding is short-lived. According to her it's always something. Every time she thinks it's smooth sailing something happens. Her greatest joy in school, enrolling in an honor's program, was clouded in controversy.

When I went to sign up for my first honors class, I was so proud. Not many students get this opportunity, especially Blacks. You get selected for these classes by having high standardized test scores or you have to be recommended by a professor. I had been recommended by my English teacher and it was a big deal for me. So there I was standing in the honors line. I was aware that I was the only Black and that I was surrounded by blue-eyed, blonde-haired young girls, cheerleader types. And just as this realization hit me a professor who was supervising the line came and stood next to me, looked directly at me, and announced that if there was anyone in the honors line that was not invited into the program, they should move to the other line. Well I didn't move. As I approached the registration desk, he took his place at the table. I watched him intensely after he made the announcement. He did the paperwork for several young women in front of me without question. When it was my turn, he asked, "Were you invited into the honors program? Do you have an invitation letter from a faculty member?" As I pulled the letter from my purse he processed my papers, placing the honors sticker on my registration card. He refused to look at my letter. I insisted. For that one moment it felt good. But it ticked me off. And it made me wonder again about everything.

I'd like to think that it's not as bad as it used to be when I was a little girl. I know individuals have their old gripes and prejudices on both sides, Blacks and Whites. But there have been several teachers, and I can't prove it, but there are

*advisors at my school that advise and treat Black students differently. Many are advised right out of school during their first quarter. They are told to take full loads, three and four courses. A lot of these people have been out of school for a while—twenty years or more—and they are easily discouraged because this is a brand new experience. A lot of them are the first ones in their family to attend college, just like me. And so we advise each other. We have to stick together because Black flight is occurring at my school. Black students are leaving in significant numbers. The numbers are getting smaller and smaller.*

*I'm a very different student now than when I first entered. The counselor at my college has taught me to hang in there. I'm more confident, committed, determined, very serious. Even though some people say you should never say never, there comes a time when you realize that you have potential and that you are only allotted so many days on this earth. I know this. I have already waited too long.*

Cathy, like the majority of women of color and poor women who return to college, attends a community college. This point of entry has a higher dropout rate than traditional four-year institutions, but one advantage to attending a community college is that there are often remedial programs and more flexible class schedules. Such benefits are important to Cathy because she has been out of school so long that many terms and behaviors that are commonplace to traditional-age students are foreign to her. Playing catch-up is particularly important in the sciences and mathematics for many returning women students. In addition, Cathy's single parent status necessitated that she have some flexibility in when she attended classes.

Cathy's description of school as a roller coaster ride is indicative of the events she described as her day-to-day school life. But she smiles through it all and says that she just won't quit. This sense of "now or never" seems particular to women who are finally in school after a delay. The ability to take the good with the bad and to keep it all in perspective is a benefit of the wisdom that comes with experience. For Cathy, it seems to be an advantage that is buckling her safely into that roller coaster seat.

*Dancing Between the Swords:  
My Foray into Constructing Narratives*

Juanita Johnson-Bailey  
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The imaginary sword dancer of my dreams is reconstructed from muddled flashes from old Aladdin and Scheherazade movies. She is a woman spinning around and waving multicolored scarves as on-lookers brandish sabers that synchronously determine the boundaries of her dance and challenge the expertise of her art. The dancer is smiling, the audience is mesmerized, the blades are sharp and dangerous, and she is twirling effortlessly between the pointed parameters. The performer ends the fun-filled night by spinning a story that further captivates the audience. This complex analogy from my dreams seems akin to narrative analysis in that constructing a narrative is a joyous balancing act among the data, the methodology, the story, the participant, and the researcher: the metaphorical swords. In the end a wonderful narrative is told, and the researcher, the symbolic dancer, has negotiated difficult steps to arrive at this finale.

The culmination of this narrative dance is Cathy's story, "The Wrong Side of the Tank." To collect the data and tell Cathy's tale, I followed the traditional format of interviewing the participant by using semistructured questions. However, in the collection of data it was necessary always to remember that a narrative analysis methodology dictates that the story remain the central focus. In addition, it was significant that I was interviewing an African American woman whose cultural group membership meant that she had inherited a rich oral tradition. Therefore, my interviewing resembled a dialogic process, since Black women have a traditional Afrocentric view that emphasizes oral tradition, dialogue, and communal structure (Collins, 1990). Accordingly, they filter knowledge claims based on the credibility of the person disseminating the knowledge, thus making awareness of the person transmitting the information essential to the process. So in talking with Cathy, we traded stories of our educational sojourns while the tape recorder captured our talks. The transcription for Cathy's three-hour interview, the

field notes, and file memos became the data that would be used to construct the final narrative.

To organize the narrative in a way that preserves the essence of the story, I searched for tools that honored meaning and voice as the most important components of the narrative. Since stories are the way that people communicate and the way in which we construct sense in our lives, it is vital that the participant's intended meaning be maintained. In an effort to keep the idea of meaning primary, I used data analysis tools that concentrated on preserving voice and the specific and personalized sense contained in the data. The process of developing the narratives began by summarizing what I perceived as the highlights of the respondent's life, thereby generating categories. In analyzing Cathy's words as text, my questions were ignored and emphasis was placed on her responses. This procedure emphasized the voice of the person being interviewed. By removing the questions from the body of the transcript the text resembled a cohesive first-person statement, and at this point the oral narrative looked like a written autobiographical account. The new transcript, *sans* questions, was coded according to the major themes and the data pertaining to each theme were grouped and analyzed.

Next the narrative was analyzed by using three approaches. The first was a process of narrative analysis that employed Alexander's (1988) procedure of letting the data reveal itself by using his *principal identifiers of salience*, such as omission, frequency, and emphasis. This pragmatic process allows the researcher to sort through the data's "network of rules designed to call attention to importance. The sifting has a twofold purpose: (a) to reduce the data to manageable proportions, and (b) to break the conscious communication intent of the content" (Alexander, 1988, p. 268).

A second method used was Denzin's (1989) autobiographical analysis, which attends to such matters as subtle shifts in the life narrative, biographic markers (important life events), omissions (obvious gaps in the story), and epiphanies (verbalized insights into the meaning of life circumstances). Denzin explains how such elements characteristically occur in most stories. He also discusses the vantage points from which stories are situated—the cultural, ideological, and historical contexts—and the purposes and reasons stories are shared.

As a third method to my narrative analysis process I used a culturally specific linguistic approach. Since this narrative was obtained from a Black woman, I assumed that she would have a cultural locus outside of what is termed the "dominant" culture. So in addition to Denzin's (1989) and Alexander's approaches (1988), I used a culturally unique narrative analysis tool. Culture, "a shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative actions" (LeVine, 1984, p. 67), gave measure and meaning to Black women's lives as Black women are defined by their communities (Etter-Lewis, 1991). A culturally distinctive analysis paid attention to the special ways Black women communicate, recognizing techniques such as signifying (repetition of words and revision of phrasing to emphasize meaning) and the use of Black English to show strong emotion (Etter-Lewis, 1991).

## Cathy: The Wrong Side of the Tank

Using the three-part system described, I attempted to weave Cathy's educational narrative. The various themes that occurred in her data also doubled as sub-headings that highlighted changes in direction within the story. To honor the scholarly audience for which I write and the academic forum in which I publish, it is requisite to give background information and to place Cathy, as a subject, in relation to other research. I accomplished this by using bridges of analysis throughout the text. These passages, which are set apart from the italicized narrative, provide contextual data and transitions for the story. Here is an example of an analytic bridge that simultaneously introduces Cathy's story within the story of pleading to get into her community college while also situating her circumstance within the larger body of literature on nontraditional women students: "Cathy has dealt with many rejections in her lifetime. It didn't embarrass her to let the school official know how much she wanted to gain admission into their program. According to her, the worst that could happen would be that they'd just keep saying no. Past ordeals had taught her tenacity. She felt that she had nothing to lose and everything to gain. A wealth of life experiences from which to draw solace and guidance is one factor that sets reentry women students apart from younger women students" (Johnson-Bailey, 2000, p. 21).

Overall in the academic arena, disenfranchised groups, which include women, women of color, and poor people, are "othered" in the telling of their stories (hooks, 1999; Johnson-Bailey, in press; Patai, 1991; Scott, 1999). As a woman of color, it was especially important that I not replicate this experience. Since the flexible and responsive methodology of narrative analysis allows for power disparities to be addressed, an essential part of this method for me involves asking the participants to read, react, and approve the constructed narrative, as one way of attempting to manage and present another's story (Johnson-Bailey, 1999).

In further assessing the ethical issues of this process, it has to be recognized that my voice—as the one presenting—is ever present. The nonitalicized text in a way is my dialogue with the story, my voice whispering directions, signaling changes in focus, and inserting opinions and synopsis from the literature as a type of "truth" or backdrop to the story. This omnipotent being has the power of the pen, and this seemingly innocuous format of telling a story—which is gaining widespread acceptance in academia for its apparent accessibility both for researchers and consumers—is wrought with issues of power. Who owns the story? What happens when there is disagreement on interpretations? What are the ethical boundaries in telling the story? How are those boundaries negotiated when within-group membership makes loyalty an issue? These are the concerns that come back to haunt me when I'm the dancer trying to keep her balance amidst the swords of data, methodology, participants, narratives, and my researcher's perspective.

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