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The Nature of Interpretation in Qualitative Research

ALAN PESHKIN

This paper addresses the process of interpretation from a study of the academic achievements of Native American youth. It illuminates the relationship of researcher subjectivity to the many decision points that each process of interpretation embodies. It also contains a counterpoint of problematics that reveals where alternative interpretive decisions could have been made.

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> *Practitioners of science are different from artists in that they give primacy to logic and evidence, but the most fundamental progress in science is achieved through hunch, analogy, insight, and creativity.*
>
> —David Baltimore, Ivan R. Cottrell Professor of Molecular Biology, in *The New Yorker*, January 27, 1997

> *Interpretation, in the sense relevant to hermeneutics, is an attempt to make clear, to make sense of an object of study. . . . But how does one know that [an] interpretation is correct? Presumably because . . . what is strange, mystifying, puzzling, contradictory is no longer so.*
>
> —Charles Taylor, Professor of Philosophy, in *Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research*

This paper is about a journey of interpretation.[1] It presents a retrospective account of the unfolding course of ideas that I developed in a recent study of school-community relations. It also presents a series of metanarrative reflections on these ideas that I call "problematics." The journey and the problematics are complementary strands, together showing what underlies the researcher's process of interpretation, with its numerous occasions for interpolating and extrapolating, judgment-making and assuming, doubting and affirming. At the many crossroads of my interpretive journey, I made decisions that affected the meaning of old data, the new data I sought to collect, the ongoing substance of my thinking, and what eventually I would write. All this was done in the search for believably firm ground for interpretation.

An important reason for reflecting on the development of an interpretation is to show the way a researcher's self, or identity in a situation, intertwines with his or her understanding of the object of the investigation. Rarely, except in highly controlled or consensually defined situations, can research be a simple form of record keeping and summary. More often, however, when it is unclear which interpretation is correct, or *whose*, the very nature of the "problem" is open to question. Then, as Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) suggested in everyday inquiry, the "whole task" includes figuring out what the task is, as well as finding a solution to it.

The interplay of subject and object, self and problem, is usually taken for granted or ignored in both qualitative and quantitative research. Yet the researcher's orientation and the definition of the situation cannot help but have ramifications for the way people are treated or thought of (e.g., as "subjects," as "deviants," or as analogous to computers). As Phillips (1996) suggested, researchers

> ought to give explicit attention to the models of the phenomena that lie behind their research programs, not so that these models can be expunged but so that, like other aspects of research, they can become the objects of criticism and conscious investigation. (p. 1013)

What is even less well understood is the way that a developing interpretation and the identity or orientation of the researcher evolve over the course of a research project when this identity is not a settled affair. It is this process that I seek to describe here.

My journey began in New Mexico where, after visiting as a tourist, I thought I had found a promising site for continuing my study of the school-community relationship. From several good possibilities in New Mexico for research on this topic, I decided to find a school where Native American students are the majority. (Hereafter I refer to Native Americans as Indian, their most commonly used term for themselves.) At this time, I knew little more than that Pueblo Indians were people of two worlds, meaning that they were somehow involved in an Indian and a non-Indian world. What is it like to live in two worlds? I wondered. What does this mean? How is it done?

> *PROBLEMATICS: I was determined to study the phenomenon of dual identity. Had I thought that Indians ought to live in two worlds, or that they should do so in a certain way, I would have known that I began the shaping of my forthcoming interpretations with a particular state of mind and its particular implications. Believing that I did not have such a state of mind, I imagined that I was, relatively speaking, truly open to learning. However, when I name the phenomenon of my study as*

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"dual-world identity," I have already begun my interpretive journey. This naming points to a relevant literature; it identifies the existing work that I must take account of in some defensible way. Generally less consciously known to researchers, the phenomenon as named and conceived is probably associated with personal perspectives, dispositions, and feelings—in a word, their subjectivity—that also will bear on the interpretive process. We are not indifferent to the subject matter of our inquiries.

To my questions about the nature and meaning of living in two worlds I brought certain inclinations from my previous research that would shape my study. For example, I am oriented to learning about high schools within the context of their community. I am convinced that knowledge of this context is necessary to understand what happens in any American school. Thus, I began my research with a substantive focus, the dual-world identity of Pueblo Indians, and with a particular interest in the school-community relationship. Together, they composed my *incipient field of study.*

After months of meeting people and visiting schools, I gained access to Indian High School, a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school that is administered by Indian leadership and controlled by the 19 New Mexican Pueblo tribes. They are the school's community context. My incipient field of study now had a definite educational and cultural context.

While seeking school board approval to conduct my research at Indian High School, the board members made two requests: first, that my study should benefit the school, and, second, that I should be aware of their concern for cultural survival. I was stymied by what to do with the matter of cultural survival. As for doing something useful, I found direction in the school's mission statement that called upon its educators to provide a program that would enable students to make "fulfilling life choices in an Indian and non-Indian world." These words, I thought, contained a promising prospect, still vague, of course, but obviously incorporating my interest in dual-world identity.

PROBLEMATICS: Under the circumstances of my fieldwork, I must get permission to conduct my study. In the course of doing so, I may incur obligations with implications for my interpretive process—for these obligations can lead to unexpected boundaries, directions, emphases, and the like. Responding to such obligations promotes a more symmetrical relationship between researcher and researched, while, possibly, imposing unavoidably complicating perturbations in the researcher's plans.

Once settled in at Indian High School, I attended all the classes and meetings and activities I could. In addition, I interviewed Indian faculty, staff, and students in order to explore the cultural duality that intrigued me.

One line of inquiry emerged from my classroom observations, where I saw the ostensibly unmotivated, nonpersisting academic behavior of the students. I related the academic underachievement of the students to the school's goal of making fulfilling life choices. As I saw it, by not using schooling to acquire further education and to gain employment of economic promise for self and tribe, students had made an unfulfilling choice. Another line of inquiry, predictably, was cultural duality. My field of study took further shape from these two lines of inquiry. As my evolving *conceptual "text,"* they were the basis for ascertaining where and to whom I would turn for collecting data.

PROBLEMATICS: What I perceived as the students' unmotivated, nonpersisting behavior required continuing investigation. What counts as unmotivated and nonpersisting? Furthermore, what I see as unfulfilling is not necessarily what others would see. The course of my interpretation builds upon assumptions of fact that I incorporate into a line of reasoning. My credibility rests on others seeing and accepting the relationship between my facts and my reasoning.

The many months I spent collecting this information resulted in an extensive, *information-based "text."* This text emerged from the interaction between my original conceptual text, its evolution in the course of fieldwork, and what I eventually developed as data from my accumulated array of observational notes, interview transcripts, documents, and literature. In time, I would have a *written text,* the outcome of all the interpretive work that had been in process since I originated this project.

Philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan writes of the researcher's need to distinguish "the meaning of the act to the actor . . . and . . . to us as scientists. . . . [These are], respectively, act meaning and action meaning"(1964, p. 32). After "arriv[ing] at an act meaning . . . [the researcher] must search for the meaning of the interpreted action, its interconnections with other actions or circumstances" (Kaplan, p. 32). With Kaplan's words as my charge, I return to the line of inquiry relating to the act of student academic behavior.

PROBLEMATICS: In the course of my research, I ask: What is going on? What have I seen? What do I, can I, will I learn about what I've seen? And what does it mean to the actors and to me? Kaplan's questions underlie all the work of interpretation that follows. Answering these general questions depends upon my skills of inquiry, including what specific questions I develop to ask and how I ask them, as well as who I can locate to interview and with what depth of rapport. Such skills are not equally distributed among researchers. Given other researchers with other levels of investigatory skills, the shape and substance of interpretation is likely to vary. As will there be variability given other researchers with other ideological leanings.

In their classrooms, students appeared indifferent to what was happening. They turned away from schoolwork, diverting themselves with different activities. They seemed unprepared for the day's work, and not to care that they were unprepared. Early discussions with students and teachers confirmed my observations. Later discussions with a nonrandom sample of about 10% of the students established this collective self-portrait: For the most part, students thought they both could and should work better and harder than they did. While these data document the basis for the paper's ongoing interpretation, here, as in subsequent paragraphs, the data are suggestive but far from sufficient to be convincing.

PROBLEMATICS: Since I did not stop to definitively verify the students' self-portrait, I must wonder whether I assembled a group of students who made a salubrious self-assessment for my benefit. Does it belie how students actually evaluate their own capabilities and intentions? My interpretation will differ depending on the extent to which I accept or reject what I am told. To be sure, I am as careful as I know how to be about calculating the degree of trust I should attach to what I hear. Since

carefulness and certainty are not perfectly correlated, interpretation is a somewhat tenuous process.

My ongoing data collection led me to three important understandings:

1. That parents and tribal communities wanted, needed, and urged the students to work hard and succeed in and with school; such urging was a litany in the lives of the students.
2. That teachers—one third of whom were Indian, most of them Pueblo Indians—liked their jobs at Indian High School, and liked working with Indian students. They worked hard and with a fair grasp of those cultural understandings about how teaching Indian students differs from teaching other students.
3. That the students were like students in most schools anywhere—they could succeed; they were not mentally handicapped in any way that I or anyone else that knew them had discovered.

Given these three understandings, I rule out of my interpretive process the parents, the school, and the students as primary factors for explaining the students' unmotivated behavior. Of course, some families are discouraging, some individuals have disabilities, and some teachers are insensitive and incompetent. In addition, Indians are and have been victimized by the dominant society, and their educational experiences, historically, often were in harshly assimilating schools. As I see it, these are not currently the primary factors of consequence for Pueblo students. Beyond these three understandings, I further asked, Does anyone want these students to do poorly in school? Nothing I learned provided a reasonable, affirmative answer. Granted all of this, I was left with no direct internal or external factors to account for my research phenomenon—the students' academic underachievement. For continuing my interpretation at this point, my recourse was to search for indirect factors, that is, for unintended, inadvertent circumstances.

PROBLEMATICS: To clarify the form I gave my interpretation, I must indicate what I see as self-evident: that a common condition among many children in our nation's schools—in this case, academic underachievement—can have both shared and different antecedents. Thereby do I establish the grounds for the thrust of what I take to be a suitable interpretation. When I regard the students, their parents, and the school as but minor factors in accounting for the students' classroom behavior, I depart from established focal points of educational concern and reform. By doing so, I construct for myself a certain conceptual space—presumably warranted, of course—within which to develop my own account. By labeling something as "minor," I clear the decks of some factors to make room for those my own interpretation favors. Much is at stake in the appropriateness of one's deck-clearing conduct. What I exclude or de-emphasize has consequences for how and where my interpretation will proceed.

In search of indirect factors, I asked the students why they didn't do better in school, given that they were sure they could and thought they ought to. In the first instance, they said that their academic underachievement was due to being lazy; to feeling weak, tired, and bored; and to finding themselves easily distracted by the more entertaining, more satisfying activities going on around them. I see this as a sort of the victim blaming the victim.

In the second instance, students reflected on what they had been telling me, in the course of which they revealed much of consequence. Here are several examples: "I really don't know. I wonder if I want it [academic success]. Sometimes, I think I don't. [She pauses.] But I do want it and I don't know why." Given the tribal circumstances of her life, this student is ambivalent about education.

I ask another student if education is important. "It's kind of not too important in considering life and how people act. It's really what people are doing for a living. It's kind of not mainly about life." For him, life is elsewhere, at home where his family and community are located. Making a living, indisputably important since tribal jobs are scarce, is a matter for schools and the outside world. Making a living is the customary rationale for doing well in school.

And from a third student I hear, "I feel I can do it [compete], but I'm just, it's just the thought of losing or not getting as far as I want. It makes me stop myself from trying to compete. People are scared of losing." Here I see consequences having become causes, in that the students are surrounded by persons who, having done modestly in school, inadvertently model academic underachievement. At the same time, they urge current students to do much better than they themselves did. In short, student lives are replete with persons who appear to be "scared of losing," but also, as I would learn, scared of winning.

Given these student insights, I returned to the students' picture of themselves as tired, weak, lazy, bored, and the like. These attributes comprise a syndrome that I interpret to be a malaise, that is, "an indefinite feeling of generalized debility" (*Webster's Third New International*). What, then, is behind this malaise, this epidemic-like condition that afflicts most students?

PROBLEMATICS: By labeling the students' behavior as "malaise" I open the door to connections with Pueblo cultural duality, to what interested me most before I'd spent one day at Indian High School. Thus, I must consider if I had merely found a label that supported my a priori interests? Would I have found another label, a better label than malaise, if I had been less interested in cultural duality? I must wonder if I was so hell-bent on pursuing cultural duality that I made it into a template within which everything else had to fit.

I associate the students' malaise with their cultural duality, the inescapable, deep-seated, commonplace multiplicity of their lives that is enshrined in the mission statement of their school. Here is how I make the association.

However much the curriculum of Indian High School has been Indianized, and much time and effort has been invested in this process, it remains a school of the White man's world, a school whose origin, language, content, and instrumentality are non-Indian. While students hear repeatedly that they must succeed in school, most people they know succeed only to a limited degree. And those who do succeed risk being accused of acting White. Furthermore, at the same time students attend Indian High School they are learning at home and in their tribal communities to be a Pueblo Indian, and all that that entails in religious and other terms. In short, they are simultaneously involved in learning from both their Indian and non-Indian worlds. The words from several students' essays illustrate the tension that learning from both worlds creates:

> I am struggling to know my Pueblo language. I feel that I will lose because I am in a point in life where I have to go on with my education. I am pulled by a huge chain by the white world.
>
> Sometimes it gets very confusing and frustrating to choose between the worlds. It is frustrating because you have to give up something else to have the other one.
>
> As a Native American I feel like I can't really learn my culture because to me the White culture seems to be more dominant and if I start to learn my Native culture like the old people, I will fall behind in the dominant world. But at the same time, I want to learn my culture.

Also illustrative are the words of several Pueblo adults. "In my head," says one man, "it is a tug of war, a constant pushing and pulling." "[T]wo nations pulling you left and right," says another man, "and you are in the middle."

. . . interpretation is an act of imagination and logic. It entails perceiving importance, order, and form in what one is learning that relates to the argument, story, narrative that is continually undergoing creation.

> *PROLEMATICS: My exploration of the dual-world circumstances of Pueblo persons elicited continuing characterizations of their feelings for each of their worlds. Living in the shadow of questions and doubt about their cultural survival, they could well have overstated their tribal attachment, while overstating, as well, their reluctance toward the White man's world. My interpretation assumes the authenticity of their assessments. On the one hand, it hinges on the fact of their very positive (albeit, not perfectly positive) attachment to Pueblo community, and, on the other, to their very conflicted (albeit, far from fully conflicted) attachment to the non-Indian, outside world. Clearly, if my assumptions are unwarranted, my interpretation is seriously flawed.*

Under their circumstances of cultural duality, students could well feel trapped in a double bind, unable to move toward either world. In fact, they escape the severity of this bind by virtue of the continuing efficacy of their tribes to socialize their people with loyalty and affection. So students have no doubt where heart and home are. Basically, their tribes are intact, and tribal learning remains a powerful agency in their lives. At the same time, they feel torn, uncertain, confused by the demands and imperatives of the mass, outside world that they can neither safely ignore nor comfortably accept.

What, then, is the act of doing poorly in school? Not surprisingly, I interpret it (a) as resisting non-Indian culture; (b) as managing ambiguity and ambivalence, that is, by doing well enough to become informed for life outside the reservation, but not well enough to be accused of being White; and (c) as conforming to prevailing norms for how to be a student.

Finally, I interpret the White man's school as the means for access to the dominant society, notwithstanding that the school has been ornamented with the trappings of Indian culture. Most fundamentally, schools are at once an essential aspect of Indian life and an unsettled, unresolved aspect of culture contact. This is my central point. Unlike the White man's schools, the White man's Catholic religion thrives, despite the fact that Spaniards had forcibly imposed Catholicism on Pueblo tribes at the expense of their traditional religion. Today, most Pueblo persons are religiously both traditional and Catholic. After 500 years, this expression of culture contact, an unintended euphemism for conquest and dominance, has become harmoniously integrated in Pueblo life. Not so in the White man's school. This alien institution rests uneasily at the interface between Indian and non-Indian life; schools are an unending occasion for approach and avoidance. I account for the "strange, mystifying, puzzling, contradictory" responses of students to schooling by the confounding ambiguity of their cultural duality.

> *PROBLEMATICS: The church and school of the White man's world are two institutions of culture contact. One is integrated in Pueblo life, the other is not. Can I understand the school as an institution in Pueblo life by considering the church as an institution in Pueblo life? Is it defensible to juxtapose them analogically? Assuming that it is, I infer cultural integration in regard to the church and cultural dissonance in regard to the school. With the aid of this analogy I have completed a line of reasoning: Everything appears to cohere, fit, stand to reason. The puzzle of the students' academic underachievement no longer puzzles me. I have closed in on an interpretation.*

Schools of the outside world promote accomplishment in that world. School success is at odds with the ideals and conduct of Pueblo culture as currently enacted. The challenge for students is not how to succeed in school but how to be *acceptably* accomplished in both worlds. Who one can become in personal and vocational terms as a result of school success is not yet authorized by Pueblo tradition, not yet integrated in Pueblo social structures. This integration is a strictly Pueblo matter.

Until it is achieved, until this expression of culture contact is legitimated by Pueblo culture, I conclude that Pueblo Indian students will experience the malaise that results from the tangled duality of their lives. This will happen in whatever schools they attend, not just in Indian High School. Paradoxically, as things stand for the survival of Pueblo tradition, the student malaise, in the short term, may be functional—another interpretation.

> *PROBLEMATICS: If my interpretation of academic underachievement is useful, I wonder, what can be done? What are the remedies, and in whose hands does their implementation lie? When I identify the unaccomplished integration of schools and Pueblo culture as "a strictly Pueblo matter," I mean to sidestep any directly prescriptive responsibility for answering these questions. Matters of cultural integration in Pueblo life relate explicitly to religion. Pueblo school officials told me in unqualified language that I must never inquire about their traditional religion. For this reason, I do not explicate ameliorative alternatives; for the same reason, I also must be reserved about*

my own interpretation. Occasionally, it has a somewhat feathery feeling, the consequence of my circling around Pueblo life but never being allowed to penetrate to the heart of tribal community matters, where traditional religion prevails. If I had had access to Pueblo religion, would I have arrived at another interpretation? Perhaps. What can be done about what the researcher does not know and cannot learn? I judge what I have managed to learn to be useful or not, I judge where it can fit in my line of reasoning, and I judge what extent of qualification I must attach to what I believe I can conclude.

Summary and Conclusion

I have been engaged in the process of interpretation from the very beginning of my research process. I do so in order to create my starting point—a conception of what my inquiry will be about. This conception is mutable. It must be if I am to exploit the opportunities for learning that my fieldwork makes possible. I select what will come into and affect my conception. Such selection, together with ordering, associating, and meaning making, is an element of interpretation. Stated otherwise, interpretation is an act of imagination and logic. It entails perceiving importance, order, and form in what one is learning that relates to the argument, story, narrative that is continually undergoing creation.

Interpretation has to do with the confluence of questions, images, and ideas that are the starting point of my inquiry, or the conceptualizing of my study.

Interpretation has to do with where I choose to look to see that something is going on with regard to my conceptualization, or the situating of my study.

Interpretation has to do with the judgment of what to collect that provides documentation for what I think is going on, or the instantiating of my study and the further focusing of its field of inquiry.

Interpretation has to do with what to select for writing that establishes or affirms what I have identified that has gone on, or the composing of the elements of my research story.

Finally, interpretation has to do with a perspectival accounting for what I have learned, or the shaping of the meanings and understandings of what has gone on from some point of view, an issue of the crisis of representation for some observers (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). It is inconceivable to me that I can conduct any aspect of my research except from some point of view, which is to say that other interpretations, other meanings and understandings, are imaginable. Indeed, they may offer sturdy competition to my own. For everyone's work, however, there is a court, not of last resort, but of public discourse. It comes into session when our work is published.

Throughout the problematics, I have intended to clarify the intersection of my subjectivity and what I incorporated in my interpretation. I do this not for the sake of confession or self-indulgence but to clarify the sources of my imagination that underpin my interpretation and, ultimately, my representation of what I learned about academic underachievement.

I conclude my work with the best constructions I can create, trusting that I have steered clear of such self-deception and self-delusion that would undermine my commitment to the reason, logic, coherence, and the like that I strive for. Lacking formal, internal tests that would substantiate the worthiness of my interpretations, I conclude with Becker that in social research there are no "'crucial tests of theories,' [and that] we don't prove things right or wrong, [so] the real test has always been how useful or interesting that way of looking at things is to an audience" (quoted in Denzin, 1989, p. 1). In short, it is the work of others to reject, modify, and reconstrue the researcher's selection of "fact" and the order and relationships that form the basis of the interpretation and its conclusions. In the spirit of Becker's observation, Denzin writes that "all interpretations are unfinished, provisional, and incomplete" (1989, p. 64).

PROBLEMATICS: The seeming comfort of holding that one's work in social research is, in some nontrivial sense, always in process, may displease those who hold to different standards of what it means to identify an interpretation as commendable. Commendability begins in my researcher's eyes. I write as well as I can, meaning to reach as cogently as I can the accepting eyes of others. Are there better tests of interpretive worth than the utility of my findings for the practice of others, taking utility to be "explanatory power or . . . capacity to inspire the work of others" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 38), and also "illumination" and "understanding" (Patton, 1990, p. 424)? I think not!

What I have written here does not acknowledge self-doubt about what other qualitative researchers and I do when we engage in acts of interpretation. Moreover, I certainly do not imagine that I have created a preemptive list of interpretive foibles that would, through their publication, preclude the criticism of others. In this paper's substantive narrative I intend to have indicated how researchers more or less proceed, certainly, how I proceeded. In the metanarrative I call "problematics," I intend to have described something of the invariably fact-seeking, assumption-laden, judgment-driven course of the interpretive process. To be forthcoming and honest about how we work as researchers is to develop a reflective awareness that, I believe, contributes to enhancing the quality of our interpretive acts.

Note

[1] The full extent of the journey and my interpretation is in the book from which this paper is drawn (Peshkin, 1997).

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