

THE "I" IN INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH: POSITIONALITY IN QUALITATIVE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article problematizes "objectivity in research". It proposes that since research is inherently influenced by powerful forces that exert pressure on the researcher, e.g., the participants, authorities in the academic institution, and other stakeholders of the study, research is therefore subjective and political. The author then suggests that instead of "hiding behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 109), the researcher must describe her/his positionality, i.e., the researcher's stance in relation to significant others in the research and how such influences the dynamics of the research process and the writing of the research paper. With such a section on positionality, the reader is in an informed position to critically evaluate the research output.

Interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and the self of the researcher.

— Norman Denzin, 1994, p. 510

If objectivity refers to an "alleged neutrality" on the part of the researcher, then there is no such thing as objectivity in research. The choice of the research site and the participants as well as the framework and theoretical perspective within which the data are interpreted, the research questions raised, the methodology selected, and the inclusion or exclusion of data and artifacts deemed relevant or irrelevant by the researcher during data collection – these are all framed by the researcher and those who exert power over the research process. For instance, if such researcher is a graduate student, such decisions could most likely be influenced by figures occupying powerful positions in the

academe—the adviser, the panel members, the dean, even the head teacher, or school director who determines whether the researcher is allowed access to a group of participants and who may prescribe conditions for the collection of data in the prospective research site.

This is not to say, however, that the researcher is rendered powerless by the research process. In fact, the researcher constantly negotiates with other stakeholders in making significant decisions during the study. The research process is therefore pregnant with multiple “T’s”—the multi-voices of subjective forces constantly negotiating and repositioning each other in the conduct of research and in the writing of a scholarly paper for consumption by the academia and other concerned audiences. All research therefore is subjective; all research is political.

As such, researchers need not “hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 109). The challenge is for the researcher to inform one self of the way one’s identity as a researcher as well as the influence of powerful others might influence the research process and product, and to inform the readers about such subjectivity. In other words, the challenge is for the researcher to determine how her/his positionality influences the way s/he collects and interprets data, how s/he presents the research findings (Villenas, 1996), and how s/he articulates the research output for the consumption of a journal readership, a workshop or conference audience, or any significant entity, e.g., the funding agency. “How” in this context, does not only refer to the format used or the organizational structure of the paper. More importantly, it refers to the writer’s projection of his/her stance as researcher-writer vis-à-vis the research process and output. For instance, one must question how the relationship between the researcher, the participants of the study, and other stakeholders of the research explicitly or implicitly influence the researcher’s interpretation and presentation of the data.

The writing process itself is highly political. What is communicated to the reader is mediated by the language used in

presenting the research process and product. The research paper is therefore also framed by the writer's (or the editor's) proficiency in that language particularly his/her maturity in projecting his/her voice; i.e., language, vocabulary, style, or attitude towards the subject that distinguishes him/her from other writers who may be working on the same subject. Thus, the ability to effectively project one's positionality can only be achieved by a mature, reflective writer since writing in itself is an act of discovery (Richardson, 2000, p. 929).

Positionality, in qualitative research, refers to the researcher's stance in relation to significant others in the research and how such influences the dynamics of the research process and the writing of the research paper. This signifies that research and all its elements are dynamic - not static. Each element exerts power over the other. For instance, one cannot claim that the data from the research site are "neutral" elements waiting to be "collected" by an "objective" researcher. One also cannot claim that the persons or community from which the data are collected are "subjects" that await the "treatment" of some "uncontaminated data" from a "sanitized" researcher. The participants in such community or site are no subjects. Nor are they passive, neutral elements of the process that await dissecting. If the participants are passive, it is because they choose to be or are perceived to be so by the researcher. That they choose to be "passive" may be influenced by their relationship with the researcher as well as significant others in the community who exert power or influence over their decisions, or their previous experiences with research in general or researchers in particular. A more localized example would be some of the exit interviews conducted in the recently concluded national elections. That the interviews conducted did not accurately predict the outcome of the elections could be influenced by the political climate of the community. In a forum at the ABS-CBN during the election period, some analysts explain that the interviewees claimed they voted for X when they actually voted for Y because they feared being perceived by the interviewer

as intellectually inferior. This phenomenon, sometimes called “the observer’s paradox”, happens when interviewees or respondents answer the questions to please or impress the observer/researcher. Since objectivity could not be ensured in the data collection and even in constructing interview or survey questions, despite filters or techniques employed to avoid “leading” questions, it is therefore imperative that the researcher describe her/his subjective position in the research process.

For example, when I conducted a study on the complex instances of silencing and marginalization experienced by students, faculty, and administration in a *barangay* high school, I had to describe my position both as an insider and outsider of the research site. I may be perceived as “an outside observer” – someone wearing the cloak of academia who has thoroughly familiarized herself with significant theoretical perspectives for the collection and analysis of data to comply with a major academic requirement for graduation. On the other hand, I may also be seen as “an insider” – someone who grew up in the same locality and who personally know many of the participants, but someone whose research agenda is politically motivated. Such description provides the reader an awareness of the emic (inside) and etic (outside) perspectives I bring into the collection, analysis, and reporting of the data. When readers are informed about the subjectivities of the researcher-writer, they are in a more enlightened position to critically evaluate the research output. Such transparency is particularly required of ethnographic researchers.

In the introductory part of my paper, I included a section on my positionality as a researcher. The section reads:

Positionality

I am in “a project of telling a life” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746). Researching in a community that I am so much a part of provides me with both emic and etic perspectives; i.e., an insider and outsider point of view on behaviors. I grew up in a *barangay* (village), and completed high school at a municipal high school.

Many of the participants in this study, including the parents, teachers, students, *barangay* head, and the school principal are friends and acquaintances. My interest in the site for research is not incidental; I have participated in conversations among parents, teachers, and students concerned about the future of Paglaum Extension School. Because I know the site and the participants well, I cannot "hide behind the cloak of alleged neutrality" (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 109). The challenge is to inform myself on how my identity as a "native" researcher might influence the way I position myself and other participants of the study, and how this positionality may influence the way I collect, interpret, and present my findings (Villenas, 1996). I need to develop the sensibility to describe stories with reflexivity, so that I will not fall into the trap of othering the very people I seek to represent.

In addition to describing who I am in relation to the research project, I also described myself as a neophyte as regards the qualitative research in general and ethnographic research in particular. I then briefly described the nature of ethnographic research and discuss the theories that inform my study and frame the selection, collection, and analysis of the data. The goal is to make readers see the researcher's attempt at transparency so that they could more critically evaluate the validity, reliability, generalizability, and transferability of the research output. Below are excerpts from my scholarly paper that describe the research orientation I employed in the study:

Ethnographic Research

Tedlock (2000) defines ethnography as an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and

personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives (p. 455).

Ethnography is not field technique. . . . Field techniques in-and-of-themselves cannot an ethnography make. A researcher could use techniques associated with ethnography such as triangulation, yet “not come up with an ethnographic study.”

Ethnography is not length of time in the field. . . . “Length of time doing fieldwork does not, in-and-of-itself, result in ‘better’ ethnography or in any way assure that the final product will be ethnographic. Time is one of the several ‘necessary but not sufficient’ ingredients of ethnography. . . . Based on any one researcher’s skill, sensitivity, problem, and setting, optimum periods of fieldwork may vary as much as the circumstances for pursuing it.” Although “blitzkrieg ethnography” (Rist 1980) is discouraged, prolonged engagement in the field without recognition of the need for detachment can also be problematic (Wolcott, 1978).

Ethnography is not simply description. . . . Good description can lead to ethnography, but the good ethnographer is capable not only of good description but also of recognizing what elements most warrant attention. Some ethnographers provide detailed accounts “but falter in the essential and related task of trying to make sense of what they have observed” (pp. 38-42).

I further discussed in my paper that ethnography as an approach to research has taken several forms. Moreover, I mentioned that the approach I employed can be viewed as a combination of the following: auto-ethnography, reflexive ethnography, native ethnography, and critical ethnography. I then described each of the forms and presented a conceptual map that aims to show their interrelationship:

Auto-ethnography is a genre of research and writing that focuses on the self examination of the researcher’s “multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.” (Ellis &Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The ethnographer takes the risk of being vulnerable as she undergoes what Ellis theorizes as “a process

of emotional recall" in which one brings herself emotionally and physically to focal points in her life" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752). This "systematic sociological introspection" requires what Behar (1996) calls "the vulnerable observer". According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), this process requires ethnographers to... "gaze, first, through an ethnographic wide lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations.... In these texts, concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness are featured, appearing as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture, which themselves are dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought, and language." (p. 739)

When the researcher/writer allows herself/himself to be vulnerable, the reader often responds vulnerably and engages actively in the on-going discourse. For Behar (1996), this is a significant aspect of ethnography because a social science "that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 752).

What distinguishes native ethnography from any other form of ethnographic research is the colonial, marginalized experience of the researcher. In fact, this subjugation may not only be economic. The researcher may have experienced subjugation by other researchers who have manipulated her/him into becoming "subject" of the dominant discourses. Armed with both emic and etic perspectives, native ethnographers usually question those who attempt to interpret the lives of their communities (e.g., Rodriguez, 1983). As bicultural insiders and outsiders, native ethnographers such as Motzafi-Haller (1997) and Trinh (1989) "problematize the distinction between observer and observed, insider and outsider" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 741).

Critical ethnography is distinct from other forms of ethnographic inquiry because of its underlying emancipatory agenda. This form of ethnography aims "to help people imagine

and create better worlds". Critical ethnographers argue that mere description of the experiences of the participants might only perpetuate hegemonic practices and "contribute to maintaining the existing power relationships... that may be oppressive to some members of the community" (Egan-Robertson and Willet, 1998, p. 7).

Critical researchers attempt to expose "the way power reproduces itself in the construction of human consciousness" through what Lather (1991, 1993) theorized as the "catalytic validity" of research. *Catalytic validity* refers to "the degree to which research moves those it studies to understand the world and the way it is shaped in order for them to transform it... Research that possesses catalytic validity will not only display the reality-altering impact of the inquiry process, it will direct this impact so that those under study will gain self-understanding and self-direction." (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 297). The resulting ethnographic report must reflect such political stance. Denzin (1994) points out that "... a critical text is judged by its ability to reveal reflexively ... structures of oppression as they operate in the worlds of lived experience... The text thus creates a space for multiple voices to speak; those who are oppressed are asked to articulate their definitions of their situations... A good critical, emancipatory text is one that is multivocal, collaborative, naturalistically grounded in the worlds of lived experience, and organized by a critical, interpretive theory" (p. 509).

A recent innovation in critical ethnography, reflexive ethnography, views the ethnographer as an integral part of the object of the investigation (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 301). This form of ethnographic research focuses on the researcher's personal experiences and how "it illuminates the culture under study." The continuum ranges from the researcher's writing about her personal experience [ethnographic memoir] to ethnographies where both the researcher's and the participants' experiences are studied [ethnographic dialogue] to "confessional tales" where the researcher's experiences of conducting the research is the focus

of the investigation. This study seeks to present both the researcher's and the participants' experiences.

Feminist studies are influential in the legitimization of this "autobiographical voice associated with reflexive ethnography" (e.g., Behar, 1996; Behar and Gordon, 1995; Krieger, 1991, 1996; Richardson, 1997). These studies show that the researcher's personal experiences are deeply embedded in the research process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, pp. 740-41). In this study, I went into the site informed by my identity as a researcher doing a native auto-ethnography that is reflexive in nature and informed by critical ethnographic inquiry. I am a participant-observer, an insider-outsider. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

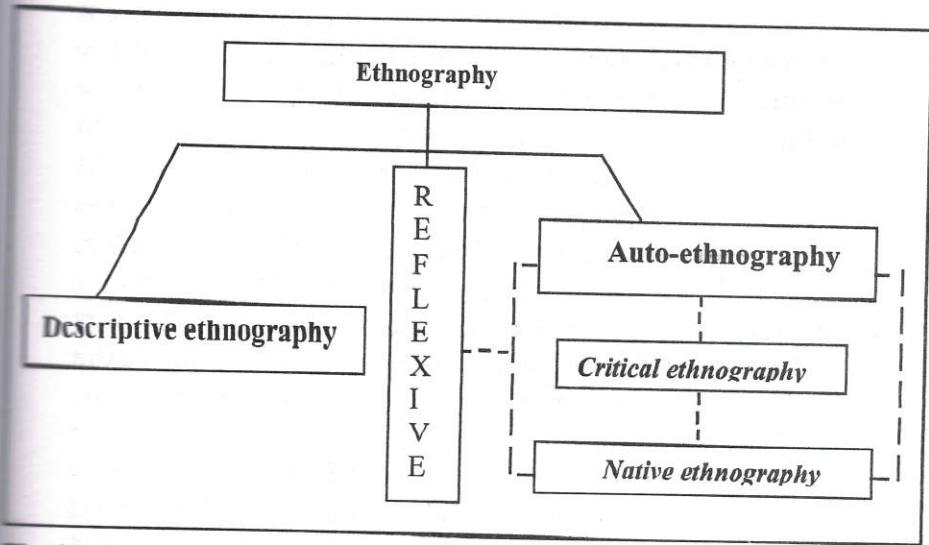


Fig. 1 Relationship of ethnographic perspectives that inform the study

After discussing the research perspectives used in the study as well as my positionality as a participant-observer, I presented terms in qualitative research that may not be exactly analogous to similar terms used in quantitative research. The assumption is that some of the readers may be familiar with the above terms in the context of quantitative research. As

such, terms such as validity, reliability, and generalizability need to be defined in the context of qualitative, ethnographic research:

Validity, reliability, and generalizability in critical autoethnography

In the article, *Autoethnography, personal narrative and reflexivity*, Ellis (2000) narrates a dialogue between her and a graduate student about the process of doing an autoethnography. The student, a novice researcher like me, raised issues that confound researchers with a quantitative orientation: validity, reliability, and generalizability. When asked how autoethnographers ensure the validity of their report, Ellis (2000) points out that researchers from different orientations view validity differently. For Ellis, defining validity requires one's perspective of language. Language, according to Ellis, "is not transparent and there's no single standard to truth." From this standpoint, Ellis posits that "validity, means that our work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers the feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible." Validity may also be judged "by whether it [the research paper] helps readers communicate with others different from themselves, or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own" (Ellis, pp. 750-51).

When asked how reliability checks are conducted, Ellis explained that "since we always create our personal narratives from a situated location, trying to make our present, imagined future, and remembered past cohere, there's no such thing as orthodox reliability." Reliability checks, however, can be done by conferring with the people involved in the research and acknowledging their interpretations (p. 751).

Generalizability is determined by what Stake (1994) calls "naturalistic generalization", which means that the ethnography "brings 'felt' news from one world to another

and provides opportunities for the reader to have a vicarious experience of the things told." Although ethnographers study particular participants, the experiences of such participants are also "typical and generalizable, since... [people] participate in a limited number of cultures and institutions. A story's generalizability is constantly tested by the readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751).

Part of my subjectivity as a researcher is the theoretical perspective and epistemologies that inform data interpretation. Since different researchers may interpret the same data by using variable theories, they must thoroughly discuss the epistemologies or the theories that inform the interpretation of these data. With this, the reader is made aware of the context of interpretation and could take the research report with such limitations in mind. In my study, such theoretical perspectives include a) post structuralism as an approach to inquiry; b) the conception of power, agency, and identity from a post structural perspective as applied to pedagogy (Bourne, J. 2001; Davidson, 1996; Delpit, L., 1993; Eckert, P., 1989; Fine M., Weis, L., Centrie, C., & Roberts, R., 2000; Freire, P., 1998; Kamberelis, G., 2001; Giroux, H. A., 2001; McKay, S., & Wong, S., 1996; Norton, B., & Toohey, K., in press; Peirce, B., 1995; Phelan, P., Davidson, A., & Yu, H.C., 1993; Stanton-Salazar, R. D., 1997; and Stevenson, R. & Ellsworth, J., 1993); c) the concept of literacy not simply as a decontextualized ability to read and write but as mastery of secondary discourses (Gee, 1996, 1998); and, d) the conception of learning as peripheral legitimate participation in a community of practice (Wenger, 1996, 1998). Such theories could be subsumed in what is traditionally labeled conceptual or theoretical framework. However, a growing number of qualitative research articles forego the use of such label. Instead, the heading specifically

cites the theory itself, e.g., *Literacy as Mastery of Secondary Discourses*. I wish to include here a summary of the above theoretical perspectives; however, since the purpose of this article is primarily to justify the importance of describing the positionality of the researcher as well as to outline some of the features and research terminology as used in interpretive qualitative literature, I will postpone the discussion of such concepts in another article.

For the purposes of this paper, it should suffice for me to point out that since the research process is framed by the constant negotiation and positioning of powerful stakeholders, the researcher needs to describe his/her positionality in writing the research output. This can be done in variable ways. In my research output, I did this by a) describing myself as an insider and outsider in relation to the participants of the study, i.e., from an emic/etic perspective; b) discussing the research approach used; and, c) briefly discussing the theories and epistemologies that frame my interpretation of the data. The purpose for such a section is to raise the readers' awareness of the subjective nature of the research process and to allow for a more critical reading of the research report. Presenting one's positionality as a researcher-writer could better inform the reader as to the catalytic validity, generalizability, and reliability of the research output.

All research is situated; all research therefore is subjective. This claim extends to quantitative research as well since the regurgitation of statistical data can only be made contextually meaningful by the interpretation the researcher makes. Such interpretation, on the other hand, is informed by the multi-voices of the researcher: the works of other researchers s/he had read or mentioned in the literature review or in the theoretical framework; the methodology s/he chooses based on similar or related studies done previously; and the positioning of the various stakeholders of the research. Because of this, all research reports might, in the future,

require a section of positionality, where the author-researcher can find what Bhabha (1994) terms as the "third space" where s/he could critically evaluate the subjectivities of all participants of the research (the researcher included). This third space would then serve as a liberating space where the researcher could discover his/her positionality and inform the reader of his/her vulnerabilities. For as Behar (1996) in Ellis & Bochner (2000, p. 752) points out, it is only when the reader sees the vulnerabilities of the researcher-writer that the reader would most likely allow the self to be vulnerable and penetrable by the painful, unjust realities of the people that the research seeks to liberate. When research begets liberating possibilities, when it moves the researcher-writer, the participants, and other stakeholders as well as the reader into action, when it is able to transcend the proverbial 200-page paper that collects dust in some desk or library, it shall have been worth its name.

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