What am I to them? Notes on inter-subjectivity and the challenges of getting the story right as an outsider
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Much of what I want to discuss today is embodied in an interview I conducted last November with a middle school teacher of English as a second language, who I will call Joshua. I make it a habit in my interviews to ask at the outset if respondents have any questions for me. Joshua did have questions, among them two that I have heard often: “How did you end up choosing this city for your research?” and “Have you taught?” By the way, the first question has a long answer, which I won’t detail here; the short answer to the second question is “No, I have not taught.”

Once Joshua seemed ready to begin the interview, I turned on the tape, at which point he promptly pre-empted my first question to say:

Joshua: May I start this interview by saying, your only hope of truly understanding the dynamics and this whole problem that exists between principals and staff is to be a teacher yourself for a little while. Otherwise, you simply—it’s like the World War I model, which is the model we work under, where the general sits a hundred miles from the front making policy for the soldiers who are dying from the trenches.

Matt: And what is it particularly about being a teacher that I would need to understand?

J: What it is we go through and what it is we do and what sort of problems we have, which the principal in the desk doesn’t experience or see. She has a whole different set of issues and concerns that... somebody’s sitting on top of her loading her with things that she needs to do and take care of and pay attention to, which very often have absolutely nothing to do with what’s going on in the classroom.

Joshua proceeded to identify over-crowded classrooms as the major issue facing teachers:

J: …you should go in one of these classes that have 30 plus, see what it’s like.

M: I’ve been in them.

J: Yeah, those kids need a lot, do you notice? They need attention, you know. They need a lot of individual attention. They don’t need to be so close to one another. When you put kids in such close physical proximity, you can’t have any kind of disciplined academic work. You just can’t. They’re just going to be socializing.

M: I don’t disagree with that. I tutor in a writing class, back in San Francisco. It’s the same situation. There are thirty-five kids in a room made for twenty.

J: So you know what it’s like.
I would like to suggest that this brief exchange captures several important features of being an outsider in a research setting. In particular, it illuminates two things: (1) inter-subjectivity (that is, who I am in relation to the participants in my research); and (2) my potential for getting the story right (that is, what I am able to hear and learn as an outsider).

**On inter-subjectivity…**

Discussing the issues of being an outsider matters to me because it has been a persistent feature in my professional and research endeavors. I will draw today on two qualitative research projects I have undertaken as a graduate student:

1. The first was a pilot study of four principals in reconstituted schools, consisting of multiple interviews with the principals and observations of them when they met regularly to share concerns.
2. The second, my dissertation research, is a study of leaders in six middle schools placed in a probationary status because of low student achievement. I have been interviewing school administrators, teachers, and students, shadowing school leaders, and sitting in on a range of school activities.

In each case I have been an outsider. That is, a set of characteristics sets me apart from my respondents, particularly the principals: I am young (on more than one occasion a teacher yelled down the hall at me to put my backpack in my locker and get to class), I am white, I am a researcher, I have not taught, and my primary work in education has been state-level policy work. By contrast, the principals tend to be education veterans, including a number of years of classroom experience. They are older, some close to retirement. Many are African-American. And as life-long practitioners, very few of them have experienced the role of researcher.

I have acutely felt a sense of being an outsider in my current study, in part because I conducted my research in a location far from home. I have been mistaken for many things by students and teachers in the schools. Some of the questions are to be expected: Are you our substitute? Are you here to evaluate Ms. Smith? Do you work for the district (that one was a common one from teachers)? A few were more unexpected. One student who saw me in the halls a lot, waiting to conduct interviews, asked if I was a bathroom inspector. Another asked: are you some kind of corporate spy?

All of these perceptions of me raise more general questions: Who am I when I am in this research setting? And, who am I to them?¹

The first question—Who am I?—asks me to explore my subjectivity. There are certain

¹ This is a question that Professor Alan Peshkin encouraged me and my classmates to consider in doing qualitative research.
characteristics that are particularly important in how I view others and settings.

For example, I pay my bills in graduate school by working on a project related to standards-based school reform. The district where I conducted my research is ostensibly undertaking standards-based reform. Because of this, I find myself looking for standards in my observations and interviews. I check the walls for examples of student work, I listen for teachers to articulate ways in which they are teaching to standards. This emphasis on standards affects how I view and judge the settings and people with whom I interact, as do several other aspects of my subjectivity. But, for the purposes of this paper, I want to turn to second question—who am I to them?—since important reflections on being an outsider lie in this idea of inter-subjectivity.

I have encountered two notable responses to my presence as an outsider. The first is from those who have low expectations for my contribution to knowledge. Witness Joshua’s comments. To Joshua, I am someone who lacks the ability to understand the dynamics of his situation because I have not walked in his shoes. Interestingly, when I offer a personal experience similar to his own, the distance between us diminishes. He recognizes that I can understand his challenges based on my time in a classroom as a tutor.

Nor was this a unique occurrence. After observing the classroom of Sheila, an eighth grade language arts teacher who organized the school’s reading and writing staff development activities, I returned to her classroom the following day for an interview. “I have to tell you,” she said, “I wasn’t going to talk with you. But then I saw your reaction to the children and I changed my mind.” Specifically, during the casual classroom observation, I had engaged two or three students around their work. Through that act (which was not done for that purpose), my status to Sheila shifted from an unknown at best and detached researcher at worst to an individual who could relate to her students. And it made the difference between getting and not getting an important interview.

With Joshua and Sheila, the challenge is to bridge the perceptual gap, to make myself appear more like an insider (keeping ethical considerations firmly in mind). I have had many cases where I was unable to develop a relationship with a participant, and thus remained an outsider in their eyes. It is clear to me that bridging that gap is vital to the quality of the information gained through research.

In contrast to the responses of people like Joshua and Sheila were participants who had heightened expectations for my contribution. A number of people have viewed me as a potential voice of reason—“finally someone who can hear and articulate the real problems here.” Banks Middle School is a good example of this case. There is a new principal at Banks who has managed to alienate a number of teachers by making decisions without consulting the staff and by making unprofessional comments about teachers in private conversations with other teachers.
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The principal, meanwhile, feels that the staff has judged her unfairly, believing the opposition to her to be based on the content of her decisions, rather than the process she uses to make them. Both sides have expressed their hope that my write-up will clear the air.

In other cases, participants have seized on my presence as a chance to garner my assistance. At Landmark Elementary School, the principal asked me to draw up a memo describing the energy, commitment, and skill of his staff; he wanted to include the memo in an application for membership in a school reform network.

My experiences at Banks and Landmark have challenged me to clarify my role as a researcher and to think carefully about appropriate reciprocity and disclosure of information. I have developed my own criteria for judging how and when to provide assistance to schools, as well as when and how to address “dangerous knowledge,” such as the conflicting perspectives I heard at Banks. But such criteria are personal; what I wish to impart as important is the act of reflecting on my relationship with respondents—reflecting, that is, on our inter-subjectivity—in order to find appropriate responses to the situations I encounter as a researcher.

On getting the story right…

An obvious assumption of my being an outsider is that there are limits on what I can learn. There is, of course, some truth to this assumption. But before exploring limits, it is worth considering the opposite; that is, what are the learning advantages of being an outsider?

One advantage stands out. From the outside, there is less of an “assuming ear.” Like doctors or soccer players or stage actors, educators have their own short-hand for highly meaningful ideas. Reform terms like “shared decision-making” and “cooperative learning” are loaded with meaning, as are more commonplace phrases like “teacher evaluations” and “respect for students.”

I have heard conversations among principals about “the union” in which it appears that there is a monolithic understanding of the teacher union’s power and position in the district. But, in interviews, simply by following up a principal’s comment with the question “what do you mean by the union’s power?” I have elicited perspectives that vary in important ways. The point is that insiders might skip over a comment which has a short-hand meaning to them, when it may be that the speaker does not share precisely that meaning. This is what I mean by the assuming ear, and it applies to every dimension of insider/outsiderness—local versus foreigner, man versus woman, educator versus non-educator.

Avoiding the “assuming ear” requires vigilance and it is a rare transcript of my own interviews that I read without berating myself for missing a follow-up question. The interchange with Joshua ends with his with his question “So you know what it’s like.” In that case, my ear assumed a shared meaning of “what it’s like” and I moved on to another question. The fact is, I am not certain I know what Joshua thinks “it’s like.”
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Now to the limits on what an outsider can learn. One of my primary informants, an assistant principal, gave me unfettered access to her work and convinced the principal to do the same. Among other things, I was allowed to come into their offices as I pleased and to sit in on their frequent one-on-one meetings. These interchanges, conducted frankly, exposed some of the ways in which decisions at the school are really made. They were data I gained only because I had developed a relationship that was not common to my outsider status; in this case, I crossed over to being an insider. The fact that I did not have such access in other schools drove home the point that relationships matter and they are based on diminishing the distance between researcher and participant.

Limits on what I can learn are also based on my own ability to interpret what I see, which brings us back to the issue of subjectivity and to my initial conversation with Joshua. Is he right that I can not understand his situation because I am not a teacher? Am I able to adequately interpret the actions of veteran, African-American principals? These are hard questions and they do not have simple answers.

However, even as an outsider, there are strategies to help get the story right. I have used two. The first is reliance on the emic perspective. Alan Peshkin writes about the importance of understanding and articulating the point of view of the respondent, the emic: this point of view is “foundational for our characterizing what the actors understand about what they have done and are doing, about the events of note, about the meanings and intent of the guidelines, and about the outcomes or consequences of what is going on” (Peshkin, no date). Research from the outside requires openness and special attention to the emic perspective. This can mean being systematic about scanning the room of a meeting to note non-verbal reactions, or positioning yourself near certain people, or including long passages of interview text with limited editing to allow a respondent’s voice to be heard. I got a good lesson in the value of paying attention to the emic perspective through the chance event of sitting next to one of my respondents at a meeting where he received several pieces of bad news. Here’s what I wrote in my journal about it (Wilson’s the main respondent, Chamberlin another principal, Sosa their boss):

[S]itting at Wilson’s side… I could hear more than I have on other occasions. Wilson’s mutterings, for example, held insights beyond what he chose to verbalize to the group; in fact, on several occasions, he turned and expressed his frustration to me directly, with a comment or a look. The mounting tension and frustration was palpable with each new pronouncement from Sosa about the deadlines the principals had to meet. I experienced these pronouncements the way Wilson experienced them, as another blow, another burden. On previous occasions, I listened to Sosa’s pronouncements and scanned the room for non-verbal reactions. Yesterday, such scans weren’t necessary; I was on the receiving
end, reinforced in my reception by Wilson’s body language, his sighs, his words, his grunts… and by the reassuring words passed from Chamberlin to him (she was on my left, he on my right). [Also] I could see better how others reacted to Wilson. Chamberlin was his confidant, assuring him that he could meet the deadlines. Some of the others were clearly unsympathetic, hoping he would end his tirades so the meeting could move on. Sitting at his side, almost meeting the gazes of others around the table when he spoke, I could see the reactions so clearly—again, the sighs, eyes rolling, Sosa leaning forward to cut in and respond.

By this focus on the emic, I closed the distance between Wilson and me and was thus able to see and experience something of his relationship to the others and to his environment.

The second strategy I have used to get the story right is to build up a store of informants, individuals who possess the insider knowledge that I lack given my own position as an outsider. Informants have been invaluable to my understanding of complex situations, filling perceptual holes and rounding out stories. Indeed, in choosing informants (to the degree that you can choose them), I have sought out individuals who are insiders where I am distinctly an outsider—as a non-educator and as a White.

But, in using informants, I have had to ask the same question I raised earlier—who am I to them?—and an additional question—who are they to me? Again, my journal offers some thoughts on this issue of inter-subjectivity:

[J]ust as I must take the pulse of my own subjectivity, it behooves me as a qualitative researcher to know the subjectivity of my informants. What are their obvious biases? What does their professional training predict about their perspective? How about their official position? What are their goals? And, of utmost importance, what do they get out of talking to me?

Considering these questions helps develop a clearer picture of the nature of information they provide to me and it helps me also conceive of an appropriate relationship that benefits us both.

Final Thoughts
This paper is a personal reflection on being an outsider. It illustrates some of the trade-offs of being an outsider and it offers a few tips for negotiating research as an outsider. Mostly, though, I wish to affirm that research is about relationships between researchers and participants. As such, it is good to reflect on one’s own subjectivity in the course of research, but it is not enough. Rather, what is needed is an examination of inter-subjectivity.
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References