



The Journal Project and the I in Qualitative Research: Three Theoretical Lenses on Subjectivity and Self

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From the beginnings of qualitative research in the late 19th century to today, researchers have struggled to make sense of the notion of self or subjectivity; in other words, the I in the research. We ask ourselves: Who is the researcher? How is their notion of self present during research? How is research a site for contested notions of self? Who is the I in qualitative research? Keywords: Qualitative Research, Subjectivity, Qualitative Data Analysis Software, Arts-Based Research

It was the search for I--personal and professional—that led me to undertake the Journal Project, a study of 18 months of my personal journals written between the years 2006-2008. I studied I because I had gone missing (emotionally and spiritually) in 2006, about the time I was awarded tenure from my university. Instead of sailing ahead with my life--affirmed, confirmed, and safe in my feeling of personal and professional direction, I was riddled with angst, depressed, anxious, and lost. My response to this dilemma was to study the period of personal angst post-tenure, seeking to learn more about the I that had left the premises. The Journal Project is composed of some 300 textual entries that I analyzed in NVivo (Qualitative Data Analysis Software or QDAS) and using various arts-based techniques.

In this piece, I reflect upon three distinct notions of the I that consciously and unconsciously shaped my personal and professional perspectives as a qualitative researcher studying the self through the Journal Project: (a) the post-colonial I; (b) the I of solidifying post-modern subjectivity; and (c) the I of *curre* (Pinar, 1975). In conclusion, I consider the implications of these I's for my own work and for current discussions in qualitative research methodology.

Background

At the time I undertook the Journal Project (2008), I was in desperate need of my own I--What was it? Where was it? Why couldn't I find it/identify it/live with it? Who am I--the person, qualitative researcher, faculty member, teacher, and middle-aged female? Oddly, this cacophony rose in volume when I received academic tenure in 2006. Passing this academic milestone should have proved to me that my I was secure--and yet the very opposite was the truth. I felt anything but secure. I felt I was dissolving or dissolved.

In some cases my angst seemed like one of invisibility--as a qualitative researcher in my institution, I often felt challenged about my field, its relevance, purpose, and worth. This created a kind of professional invisibility for me.

As a qualitative researcher with a strange attraction to qualitative data analysis software, a technological innovation that was a very hard sell to many in this field, I often felt like I spoke a different language from the qualitative research peers I most admired.

As a woman in middle age, childless, and distant from my family, I felt not only invisible but incoherent--as if my pieces had not coalesced. As a teacher, I loved my students and the work we created together, but I feared I was doing them harm by leading them into the thickets of subjectivity and qualitative data analysis software. Were we going unsafe places? Was this a fair thing to do to them?

The I has been a moving target in qualitative research ever since post-modernism and the reflexive turn (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). I/you; me/them; us/you--Who are the subjects of our research? How do we construct them in relationship to ourselves? How do we position the self and the other within the changing discussions of paradigm, epistemology, and ontology? Of what relevance is the self for deciphering truth in qualitative research? Decade by decade, the perspectives of the I have changed within qualitative research--reshaping the genre of our products from classical accounts of tribal culture to insider accounts of urban life. As the I pressed forward in qualitative research, so, too, did the form of the accounts--from absent self to present self, from a self that learned from observation to selves that learned from interaction and transaction. In my personal case, although the I that was suffering seemed somewhat removed from this I that haunted the methodological literature, there was a link that I would uncover as I worked my way through the Journal Project.

It was in the midst of this post-tenure maelstrom (two years past the awarding of tenure) that I decided to undertake the Journal Project, a study of 18 months of my personal journals. By looking at the journals from the period immediately post-tenure I thought I might be able to better understand who was the I that I couldn't seem to find. Maybe I thought it would emerge from coding and analysis. The Journal Project aimed to be a scientific process that would diffuse the mists obscuring my vision.

In trying to make the study legitimate in my own eyes, if not in others', I searched for a larger framework than the one that was most obvious to me. In what I refer to as the 'pre-analysis' period, when I was trying to situate the study in a formal way, I tried many approaches. I tried making it a study of women in academia--how do women create themselves in the academy? (I am in angst about my professional choices--this must be reflected in the journals). I tried making it a study of technology in qualitative research--how can qualitative research software be applied to deeply personal materials? (I would use qualitative data analysis software! So what, I responded to myself, I have been doing that for ages. Why wouldn't I use it?) I tried making it a study of arts-based research--how can arts-based research be connected to qualitative computing? (I was moving deeper and deeper into arts practices, and I wrote about this direction in the journals...it must be connected somehow!)

The problem was that none of these topics was really about the journal material. Rather, they floated around the edges, and yet the heart of the problem still seemed to be untouched. Who am I as a qualitative researcher, academic, member of an institution? How do I find myself? Where have I been hidden? Why, I wondered, is this problem so pressing at this time when I should feel secure and affirmed?

I am certainly not the first female scholar who has felt herself drowning in the academic sea. As I conducted this work I found myself morbidly attracted to texts of other similar sufferers: I re-read Mary Catherine Bateson's work describing her journey patching together a career from seemingly disparate materials (1989). I also turned back to review Jane Tompkins' *A Life in School* (1996), another tale of an academic

unmoored. These works resonated with me, but did not provide me with the clear path for which I had hoped. Janice Rushing (2006) offered insight into post-promotion depression. Carolyn Ellis' *The Ethnographic I* (2004) also offered powerful insights, as mentioned throughout this paper.

The despair I felt was, I guess you could say, spiritual in nature, of the sort that has been addressed by Kidd (1996), Lamott (2007), McDonnell (1974), and Palmer (1998). While supportive, I did not find the specific answers I was looking for in these works either.

However, the quest for references, citations, or precursors can be endless for an academic, and at a certain point I realized I had to give up the pre-analysis thoughts, which seemed to be going nowhere fast, and just begin the slow process of excavating the journal material and trying to make sense of it.

Methodology

The excavation process was multi-layered. It included:

1. Two hours a week for three years to digitalize the hand-written journals, code the entries in NVivo, and conduct basic interpretive tasks. This took place on Thursday afternoons at Dado Tea in Harvard Square (Cambridge, Massachusetts).
2. A weekly art class called "Contemporary Practices" that gave me the tools and spark to translate the themes of the Journal into new forms and compositions using arts media. The class introduced me to the study of process in art by looking at the work of other artists and their creative processes, undertaking explorations of process, and sharing as a group our experiences of process with different media and challenges. I learned to understand the creation of art as an interpretive process. This class, a fairly stable group that persisted over several years, served as an ongoing interpretive meeting; that is, a group of researchers engaged in a similar topic and joining forces to debate the meanings gleaned from the materials of the study. Interestingly, working with the ideas and concerns of the arts placed me squarely in the midst of strong emotional material, providing me with a means of cornering, coping, and reworking that material in symbolic form. As a result, I think I was better able to understand issues of struggle related to making sense of and expressing complicated emotional concerns. Working hands-on with art materials provided an opportunity for a mind-body link to the notion of interpretation. These qualities of the art experience gave much to me as a qualitative researcher and my search for interpretation of the materials in the Journal Project.
3. Weekly therapy sessions. Therapy, at its best (and I do think I have been blessed with a highly skilled and reflective practitioner), is an act of excavation, interpretation, and reintegration. Like the meetings of the arts group, the experience of working one-on-one with a therapist is a form of

an interpretive meeting. We are engaged in the examination and interpretation of the same set of materials. Like two researchers on the same project, we keep worrying the data for what it can give up of its meaning. In this case, journaling and therapy combined to form multiple interpretive layers. Both were a means of bringing out the material that was stored in the journals. As I moved into the Journal Project, I was revisiting the emotions and events of the past that had emerged as a result of the intervention of therapy, and then journaling again on the experience of reviewing that material. The experience of the review of the materials was then reintroduced to therapy where another layer of interpretation could take place.

4. My appointment as an Associate for the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, Center for Women and Work (CWW) (2008-2010), with the task of working on the Journal Project and sharing the results with the other Associates. Figure one provides an overview of the journal entries that were analyzed for this project.

Table 1. Table of Journal Entries

The Data: My personal journals 6/2006-3/2008

	2006	2007	2008
January		14	13
February		8	13
March		16	10
April		20	
May		9	
June	8	12	
July	20	20	
August	21	20	
September	8	20	
October	8	21	
November	4	17	
December	8	13	
TOTAL: 303	77	190	36

Under the care of Meg Bond, CWW founder and director, the associates met regularly across the Fall and Spring semesters. Every session provided opportunities to share updates across the group and then dig into the work of one member and their CWW project. Here again, I had the opportunity to participate in yet another kind of interpretive meeting. The group was highly interdisciplinary with members from different schools of the campus. Every session and discussion provided me with new perspectives on the research process as it might unfold with different materials, different disciplinary

perspectives, and different methodological approaches. CWW provided me with the first opportunity to go public with this material, and I am grateful to the willingness of the members to entertain this kind of experimental approach. The opportunity to work with others with concerns about gender and academia was helpful in allowing me to work through the Journal Project material in a richer manner.

Because of the pre-analysis problems described above, the journal entries were analyzed without an explicit a priori theoretical framework (anathema if I had been a doctoral student in some programs), but a necessity in this case.

In retrospect, I realize my search for the I had been, in part, a figment of my imagination as a qualitative researcher, meaning that the struggle was not only internal but also one of finding my relationship to the I in qualitative research. This is what led me to considering the antecedent methodological I's that had consciously and sub-consciously shaped my perspectives on I.

Three Frames for the I

The late post-colonial I. As a student of the late Alan (Buddy) Peshkin, this is the I that I identify as my methodological starting point (Henne & Davidson, 2007). I was a student of Peshkin's as he completed *The Color of Strangers; The Color of Friends: The Play of Ethnicity in School and Community* (1991) and as he conducted and completed *Places of Memory: Whiteman's Schools and Native American Communities* (1997). I lived his words about subjectivity and self. They were spoken in class, read in draft form, discussed in graduate student meetings at his home (over the wonderful brownies supplied by his wife Maryann), and reiterated in conversations where we intersected at conferences. Truly, Peshkin's notion of self and subjectivity were part of my very being.

The Peshkin I is no more clearly defined than in the abstract to "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own" (Peshkin, 1988):

It is no more useful for researchers to acknowledge simply that subjectivity is an invariable component of their research than it is for them to assert that their ideal is to achieve objectivity...[r]esearchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress. The purpose of doing so is to enable researchers to be aware of how their subjectivity may be shaping their inquiry and its outcomes. (p. 17)

This Peshkin I separated subject from object and identified the subject as outside of the self. Thus, in undertaking a study, one would choose a topic, and then ask oneself: How had I experienced it? What were my assumptions about it?

It was also my duty, as I learned through the Peshkin perspective, to keep an eye on the self as I made my way through a study. This I was a kind of special resource, but it also needed to be watched and controlled. Under this view of the I, subjectivity is informative.

I refer to Peshkin's I as late post-colonial because I see it as located at the boundary between traditional modern qualitative research and new forms that raised questions, confronted, and challenged many of those orthodoxies. Small concrete particulars occurred as a consequence of the I of Peshkin and others like him. For instance, qualitative researchers began to shift out of the third person and to use the pronoun I in their professional writing. This was not a small challenge to academia, as I still encounter resistance to this deviation within my own institution.

When I sought desperately for a rationale for the Journal Project, I was actually in struggle with Peshkin's perspective, and that was not easy as it had the Freudian overtones of a Father/Daughter struggle. If I followed his lead, I would need for the topic that anchored the study to be on the outside (of me) for the model to work. Unfortunately, the center of the study was me—outside and inside—all of it.

The I of solidifying post-modern subjectivity. I was introduced to autoethnography as I was initiating the Journal Project. I picked up Carolyn Ellis' book *The Ethnographic I* (2004) at a meeting of the International Conference on Qualitative Inquiry, and quickly devoured it. It was heady nectar for someone in the throes of subjectivity anxiety. I knew immediately that it held a part of the answer to my dilemma about the location of my research and its notion of I.

I took the bold step of immediately putting the book on the syllabus of my qualitative research doctoral class, making it a foundation text for the semester. The student groups that have encountered this text, imbibed it, and worked with me to make sense of it have played a tremendously important role in helping me to integrate these perspectives (Davidson et al., 2006). Integrating Ellis' I through my students, as opposed to my experience with Peshkin's I (a more hierarchical encounter) was much more of a peer experience—Me and Carolyn, not Me and Dad.

But what kind of I is Ellis and her associates putting forward in autoethnography? Ellis, I believe, takes Peshkin's notion of subjectivity as resource to a deeper place, elaborating the role for the I through this move. The I of autoethnography asks us to look within and to learn what is of interest to us as a means to help us identify our topic and define where it will be located. We must seek to understand what draws us in, interests us, and why. I is part of the mutual shaping of the topic, not just a resource for deciphering the ethnographic process.

In autoethnography, as we investigate our topics (rather than monitor ourselves as if we were an unruly force), we seek out the connections and disconnections that exist between our views and the views of others that have experiences in relationship to the topic of interest. We seek to make active integration of our views and theirs.

In her delightful novel of teaching qualitative research, Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography to her class of graduate students in this way:

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness,' I read from my notes. "Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle 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. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.” (pp. 37-38)

A concrete example of the implications of these changes that occur with the Ellis I can be seen again, in written form. As the I shifts, so too does the representation; no longer do we have to be shackled by the writing expectations of the classic ethnographies (or the subsequent emerging post-modern view of subjectivity). We can now explore ways of expression that may be truer to the experience of the I, or better able to evoke the experience for the reader.

At the time I encountered Ellis, and was in the throes of the Journal Project, I felt strongly that the I of autoethnography had the interest of the larger world of qualitative research, and thus, I reasoned, it was where my I should be located now. However, while the Ellis I allowed me to go beyond the limits of the Peshkin I, it still shackled me. I desperately wanted my work to be autoethnographic, but, in my heart of hearts, I knew I was cheating. The I of autoethnography was still the I of the outsider. The question remained: what can the I tell us about this topic we have chosen? My problem was that in my shameless study of self, I didn't have an I. I was trying to find an I in a mass of material that was written by me and about me, but seemed to be strangely estranged from me. Perhaps it was not surprising that when asked about the project I found I mumbled when I said it was autoethnographic or I quickly agreed with others that my I wasn't strictly so.

As I wrestled with the problem Ellis posed for me, I tried to come up with examples of autoethnographic work that would be more in line with what I was doing, but it seemed that in many cases (Rushing, 2006, for example, or Chang, 2008), the autobiographical self soon became a “real” outside topic in which autoethnography could then resource. But what if I is the topic? the inside and the outside?

Currere. When I first began to consider the journal project, I found myself drawn to the work of curriculum theorist William Pinar, and in particular, the notion of currere that he developed in the mid-70s while working with Madeline Grumet (1975). Currere stresses the importance of the autobiographical in the development of curriculum and the teacher or researcher.

Once the Journal Project became a reality, however, and I moved into the work of digitalizing, coding, and interpreting, I found myself turning my back on Pinar and this branch of curriculum theory, worrying that his work was outside of the realm where many qualitative workers were located. If I went this direction, I reasoned, I would have to align myself within curriculum theory. How could I be that now, at my age, when for so long I had been a qualitative researcher (even though I had a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction—go figure!) With currere, as with the autoethnographic approach, I found myself balancing theories by their popularity and their capacity to legitimize my work, not through their conceptual perspective, but by their political relationship to real people, journals, institutions, and disciplinary organizations. This dilemma mirrors a problem that is central to the Journal Project; that is, the struggle to hold onto an

authentic self in the midst of conflicting forces from the larger world and to develop a voice that would truly be my own.

I completed the first round of analysis and begin to talk with others about the project (Davidson, in press, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). It was then that I was offered the opportunity to review a wonderful new book by Alison Pryer (2011) called *Embodied Knowledge: Meditations on Memoir and Education*. Pryer is herself a product of the University of British Columbia, where Pinar resides and teaches. In reading her work and writing about it for *International Journal of Arts in Education* (Davidson, 2011a), I found myself coming full circle back to the ideas of self that reside in Pinar's reconceptualist curriculum theory stance. As Pryer presents it, the I here resides closer to memoir. It is enmeshed with the notion of pedagogy by asking what am I learning? What am I studying? What is the context of that learning? What is the history of this moment? How is the learning part and parcel of me? How do I become I through the process of my learning?

Adjacent in my mind to Pryer was the work of Hedy Bach (1998), also a graduate of University of British Columbia's Curriculum and Instruction program. She wrote compellingly about the I in her study of four teenage girls from the point of view of the curriculum of gender in which they engaged—acting and being acted upon as teens in a gendered world. Moreover, Bach's I included photography and poetry, and I was drawn immediately to the use of art in the expression and representation of the research I Bach presented.

Ironically, while I had held Pinar and currere aside as I conducted the Journal Project, I had made active use of his ideas in a project I was conducting in which I used autobiographical digital story telling with undergraduate educational minors, probing the impetus for their decision to teach. The digital stories contributed to a transformative experience for students in the class as they uncovered the past, identified ongoing themes, and reweave these ideas into a new narrative of the future as an educator. Experiencing the students' explorations of self and subjectivity was an invigorating process for someone with doubts about the I, and inadvertently, it was teaching me about the power of Pinar's I.

Through my experience of writing and then studying the journals, and applying multiple kinds of analysis tools, the I as learner was built and rebuilt many times. The final outcome was not a thing/an I, but a process, a coalescing, a greater coherence. Politics and academic positioning aside, the I of Pinar coming from curriculum theory had a lot of resonance with me. Subsequently, I found myself circling back to his work to read his original piece on currere, "The method of 'currere'," delivered as a paper at a conference of the American Educational Research Association in 1975. I found myself laughing as I printed out a digital copy of the original paper, stored online, but still in the original typewritten state with handwritten cross-outs, underlinings, and additional compliments, I would assume, of the author.

Pinar's approach is composed of four-steps: (a) regressive; (b) progressive; (c) analytical; and (d) synthetical (1975). In the regressive stage, "One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and hovers over the present..." (p. 8). This is necessary because "in all likelihood one is in the past while in the present" (p. 9). Alternatively, the progressive phase asks you to look into the future—what are your interests? Where are they taking you? The analytical phase asks you to set the two side by side and comparatively

examine the impulses, interests, and perspectives. This is the lens of the present. As Pinar states, “Bracketing what is, what was, what can be, one is loosened from it...”(p. 13). In the final stage (synthetic), you are asked to put aside all three and speak now in your own voice--“What conceptual gestalt is finally visible?” (p. 14) In using the term gestalt, Pinar is asking us to think of the self as fully embodied--intellectual and physical together--“It, all of it--intellections, emotions, behavior--occurs in and through the physical body.” (p. 15)

Pinar claims that his method helps to reduce “role distance” for the educator or researcher (1975, p. 15). The autobiographical impulse, as he sees it, is more than simply indulgent. Rather, it allows for a new kind of generalization within and across individuals and their educational experiences; that is, a richer form of knowing.

The notion of *currere* made sense to me for several reasons. First, it was temporal in nature--juxtaposing the past, present, and future to create a composite whole, and the journal entries were exercises in just this form of activity. Second, it acknowledged the embodied nature of knowing in a deep and responsive manner, and the journal entries were full of the anguish of disassociation--the painful experience of body separated from mind. Third, it seeks personal integration with the aim of moving forward in a professional understanding. My search for the I was personal and professional. *Currere*'s temporal and embodied stance gave me a means for making sense of the densely subjective material of the journal entries. Most important, *currere* gave me permission, or so I imagined from my interpretation of it, for the kind of study the Journal Project had turned out to be. Permission, blessing, or benediction was something for which I felt a deep need.

Discussion and Implications

In simplistic terms, Peshkin is an observing I; Ellis is a discursive I; and Pinar is an integrative I. Chronologically these three I's began with a notion of subjectivity as a resource, but needing strong oversight, a position commensurate with the end of post-colonial approaches to qualitative research. As post-modernism consolidates its notions of subjectivity and self, the notion of I comes into a deeper reflexive relationship with 'the other', as we say so quaintly in qualitative research. Finally, the I of Pinar takes us to an I that is an intertwined component of the curriculum, which in my case was the curriculum of self--researcher and educator.

My Journal Study followed the path of this circle of I's in qualitative research--from distant observer, disassociated from my own physical and mental self to embodied participant, actively working at the learning of self, to the I that is a co-creator of the curriculum of self.

In so doing, the circle of I's follows a trajectory, similar to the discussions of subjectivity in the last two decades of qualitative research. I am surprised when I look back at my struggle of working my way through these positions to realize just how complicated, painful, and time consuming it was to make this small amount of progress. Somehow, I had the fatuous notion that I was more self-actualized, certainly as a qualitative researcher, and that the discussion of subjectivity, which I had engaged in as a graduate student and in the following years, should not have really been that hard to encounter when the material was deeply and absolutely the subject of myself. If nothing

else, the search for I has demonstrated to me how strongly intertwined self and profession are, and how important self-scrutiny, self-reflection, and self-renewal are to furthering my organic destiny and my path within this field. Why would it not be so?

Conclusions

Simultaneously as the traditional analysis of the qualitative research materials composing the Journal Project, similar to Hedy Bach (1998), I was also creating mixed media/textile art pieces in a parallel strand of arts-based inquiry. The art pieces responded to or represented concerns arising through the analysis of the journal entries. These two pieces provide illustration of the before and after views of the experience of the Journal Project that I believe put the struggle of the I in visual perspective.

Figure 1. Disassociated



The piece “Disassociated” presents several kinds of tension. First is the tension of primary colors—red and yellow. Second is the tension of materials—a woven fabric (an old tablecloth with small embroidered flowers) and a felted fabric (a surface of various kinds of red and complementary wools into which is embedded a red lace woman’s undergarment). Third is the tension between wholeness and parts. The tablecloth is whole; the felted fabric is cut into smaller pieces that are sewn to the tablecloth in a chaotic and random manner. The overall impression is of shards of bloodied glass

against a calm domestic background. Through these tensions emerge the experience of “Disassociation”, a significant theme in the journal entries, particularly in the earlier portion of the journals studied.

Figure 2. Woven Piece



In contrast, “Woven Piece”, which represents a concluding phase in the experience of the Journal Project, has a less jarring color palette—muted whites and greys, rusty reds, and blues. The diverse materials have been worked over many times, until it is not clear what some of the items are. People who lean forward to take a closer look are surprised to see that felt is combined with well worked paper, silk is combined with felt and handspun, and rusted metal provides some of the framework. “Woven Piece” provides me with a glimpse of the I as it passes out of its worst phase of angst, momentarily stabilized (or re-stabilized), in preparation for the next stage of the journey.

These two art pieces are also reminders of one of the most important things I take away with me from this exploration of the I, and that is the importance for me, and for qualitative research, of self and subjectivity, and also of art as a uniquely qualified tool with which to explore and express the notions of subjectivity that accompany any research project. As in the final stage of *currere*, I now speak in my own voice, roughened and irregular as that may be. Its timbre and tone, the choice of words and syntax are uniquely my own, a product of a process that is temporal, embodied, and blessed.

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