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# In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own

ALAN PESHKIN

*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. Acknowledgments and assertions are not sufficient. Beginning with the premise that subjectivity is inevitable, this paper argues that researchers 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. In this paper I demonstrate the pursuit of my subjectivity in the course of year-long fieldwork in a multiethnic high school.*

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We cannot rid ourselves of this subjectivity, nor should we wish to; but we ought, perhaps, to pay it very much more attention. . . . (1987, p. 172)

A. P. Cheater

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**A** dictionary definition (*Webster's Third New International*) notes subjectivity as "the quality of an investigator that affects the results of observational investigation." This "quality" affects the results of all, not just observational, investigation. It is an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation. Our persuasions vary in time and in intensity.

Though social scientists claim in general that subjectivity is invariably present in their research, they are not necessarily conscious of it. When their subjectivity remains unconscious, they insinuate rather than knowingly clarify their personal stakes. If, in the spirit of confession, researchers acknowledge their subjectivity, they may benefit their souls, but they do not thereby attend to their subjectivity in a meaningful way. This paper will demonstrate how and why researchers should be meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity.

I hold the view that subjectivity operates during the entire research process (Peshkin, 1982b). The point I argue

here is that researchers, notwithstanding their use of quantitative or qualitative methods, their research problem, or their reputation for personal integrity, should systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research. When researchers observe themselves in the focused way that I propose, they learn about the particular subset of personal qualities that contact with their research phenomenon has released. These qualities have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what transpires from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement. If researchers are informed about the qualities that have emerged during their research, they can at least disclose to their readers where self and subject became joined. They can at best be enabled to write unshackled from orientations that they did not realize were intervening in their research process.<sup>1</sup>

## Awareness of Subjectivity

Subjectivity is not a badge of honor, something earned like a merit badge and paraded around on special occasions for all to see. Whatever the sub-

stance of one's persuasions at a given point, one's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed. It is insistently present in both the research and nonresearch aspects of our life. As conventional wisdom (see Freilich, 1970, p. 568; Reinhartz, 1979, p. 141; Stein, 1971, p. 143), this view of subjectivity takes its place among other usually unexamined maxims of research, such as "rapport is good," "random samples are wonderful," and "informants can mislead." By remaining conventional wisdom, our subjectivity lies inert, unexamined when it counts, that is, beyond our control while actively engaged in the research process.

I became acutely aware of my own subjectivity in the course of writing *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School and Community* (Peshkin, 1986). The research I did for this book continued the studies I have conducted since 1972 on the community-school relationship in different environmental settings. Long interested in the concept of community, I looked at the nature of community in the fundamentalist Christian setting of Bethany Baptist Academy. I had previously done so in rural Illinois (Peshkin, 1978, 1982a) and, most recently, in multiethnic "Riverview," California, the locus of my pursuit of subjectivity in this paper. But as regards my awareness of subjectivity at Bethany, I began writing Chapter 1 of *God's Choice*, no more and no less alert

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to my subjectivity than most of us ordinarily are, when I confronted it in a way that I never had before.

What I realized was this: Mansfield, the village site of previous research, was no more nurturant as a community than was the community I studied at Bethany. Moreover, Mansfield High School contributed no more to promoting a sense of community than did Bethany Baptist Academy. Yet I found that I was not addressing community and school at Bethany in the strong, positive terms I had easily found to describe Mansfield. Struck by this differential generosity (explained in Peshkin, 1985), I knew that "I had indeed discovered my subjectivity at work, caught red-handed with my values at the very end of my pen" (Peshkin, 1985, p. 277).

Having stumbled upon my own subjectivity in this way, I drew two conclusions. First, I decided that subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers' making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected (Peshkin, 1985, pp. 276-278). Second, I decided that in subsequent studies I would actively seek out my subjectivity. I did not want to happen upon it accidentally as I was writing up the data. I wanted to be aware of it in process, mindful of its enabling and disabling potential while the data were still coming in, not after the fact. Here are the results of what I did.

### Subjective I's<sup>2</sup> Uncovered

Throughout 11 months of fieldwork<sup>3</sup> in Riverview High School, a multiethnic school of 1,600 students, I pursued my subjectivity. How did I know when my subjectivity was engaged? I looked for the warm and the cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid, and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs. In short, I felt that to identify my subjectivity, I had to monitor myself to sense how I was feeling. When I felt that my feelings were aroused, and, thus, that my subjectivity had been evoked, I wrote a note on a 5" x 8" card, the researcher's friend. Perhaps equally (or more) useful, Smith (1980) kept a diary to document her "feelings and reactions": She wrote, for example,

about "spinning into the realm of the irrational" (p. 8) and "a weight on my chest and a tightening of my throat" (p. 9). I preferred to record my sensations as I was experiencing them, a matter of personal taste, as is so much of fieldwork procedure.<sup>4</sup>

The results of my subjectivity audit are contained in the following list (a) the Ethnic-Maintenance I; (b) the Community-Maintenance I; (c) the E-Pluribus-Unum I; (d) the Justice-Seeking I; (e) the Pedagogical-Meliorist I; and (f) the Nonresearch Human I.<sup>5</sup> These discretely characterized I's are, in fact, aspects of the whole that constitutes me. They are no more truly discrete than the organs of my body are independent of each other. These I's comprise a subset that emerged under the particular circumstances of Riverview High School. In another school, a different subset would possibly emerge, even containing I's that do not overlap with those I learned about at Riverview. That I's may change from place to place I call "situational subjectivity." By this concept I suggest that though we bring all of ourselves—our full complement of subjective I's—to each new research site, a site and its particular conditions will elicit only a subset of our I's.

In the following paragraphs, I describe each of the six I's and conclude each description with a brief discussion of its actual and imagined impact on my research.

The appearance of the Ethnic-Maintenance I was unsurprising, for I knew of it long before I went to Riverview. This, of course, is my Jewish I, the one that approves of my own retention of ethnicity. In fact, being Jewish shapes my life. When I saw ethnic-maintenance behavior in Riverview, I identified with it; I got a warm feeling from it. I saw people doing something that I realized that I do myself, and I valued it.

In the course of trying to understand ethnicity, I encouraged Jessie Pacheco, a Mexican woman, to tell me when she feels most Mexican. She described Cinco de Mayo and other celebrations. "On such occasions," she said, "I wear clothing that I never wear at any other time of the year. I walk into a large meeting hall"—and her eyes opened wide as if she actually saw herself as she spoke—"I walk into that room and I see my people." "My people"—I know what Jessie Pacheco means when she says this. Though I do not have oc-

casions to wear such special clothing, I could truly walk into that large hall with her and feel what she feels.

When I met Barney Douglas, a black man, and heard him describe the Black Cultural League that he himself founded some 20 years ago, I relived with him his causes. They were causes pursued on behalf of his people, including the celebration of "Juneteenth," an event that we do not hear about in the North. It is June 19th, or thereabouts, the time in 1863 when blacks in the South realized that the Emancipation Proclamation had freed them. Barney Douglas organizes Riverview's annual Juneteenth celebration. It is a picnic-carnival affair held in a large park. He, like Jessie Pacheco, can come to this park, see the faces of his people, and be satisfied that something central to his life is being perpetuated. I identify with Douglas when he does this. Finding the Ethnic-Maintenance I, as I have indicated, was no surprise. I sensed it often, because Riverview, being the multiethnic place that it is, contains many Jessie Pachecos and Barney Douglasses.

The distorting hazard of my Ethnic-Maintenance I is that, in valuing the behavior of those who chose to perpetuate their ethnic identity, I may ignore the lives of those who chose not to. Thus, I could perceive the school through one set of meanings while failing to give credence to the meanings of people whose concerns direct them toward assimilation.

Given that I study communities and their schools, it also was no surprise to encounter the Community-Maintenance I. I felt this one in various places, perhaps nowhere more strongly than at Mario's Snack Shop. Although I just happened upon it one day after a long morning walk, it became a place I stopped for coffee every day thereafter for 2 months. Mario's is the meeting place for descendants of old families, the Italian fishermen who came to Riverview decades ago. Riverview remains an Italian community in many ways, to none more so than the regulars who gather at Mario's Snack Shop for coffee and talk every morning.

The talk of the regulars ranged from nostalgia for golden days past to review of issues and opportunities extant in their town today. Clearly, they saw Riverview as *their* town. These fierce loyalists had sharp words for old friends and former neighbors who fled

from Riverview to nearby towns when times were bad following Martin Luther King's assassination. The talk of the men at Mario's took me back to the midwestern village of Mansfield, where I had first discovered my attachment to community and concern for its survival. Two tables of farmers sat everyday in Mansfield's only restaurant. An important sense of community was perpetuated there, as it was every day at Mario's Snack Shop, and I reveled in it. The subjectivity of the Community-Maintenance I was engaged each morning at Mario's.

By taking direction from my admired sense of community, I tied myself to the Riverview of native oldtimers, a substantial, visible group but far from being a majority. Most particularly, this subjective I distracted me from Riverview's continuing flow of newcomers, whose agenda was low on nostalgia and high on political housecleaning for the city and on significantly improved test scores for their children.

I uncovered the E-Pluribus-Unum I, and experienced it every day, during all the before, in-between, and after class times at Riverview High School. The visual impression of the school captivated me from the first time I went there to the last. Its sea of faces encompassed a student population that was white (33%), black (33%), Hispanic (20%), Filipino (12%), and the rest American Indian, Vietnamese, and so forth. I had never seen such diversity; indeed, it did not exist to the same degree anywhere else in the community. One could see a semblance of diversity in any of the large local supermarkets, but nowhere other than the high school was every variant of Riverview human being assembled daily for about 7 hours. This was one fact.

The second fact was that this heterogeneous human lot was not simply there in the same physical setting, it was there in the way local people called "mingling." Students referred often to mingling; teachers did, too. I needed to verify whether what I thought I saw—kids from the different ethnic groups truly being together—was my hope springing eternal or was really happening. So in the course of interviews with numerous students I asked about cross-group social interactions. They were a reality. To be sure, black students hung around with other black students, and Filipino boys bunched together over here and Mex-

ican girls over there. There was ethnic clustering, what one would expect to find anywhere, because birds of an ethnic feather still flock together. But, in addition, an ordinary, routine fact of life was the mingling: Any type of interaction that could take place between students of the same ethnic background took place between students of any ethnic background. All the time and with everybody? No. Riverview is not Utopia; there are still problems, still elements of prejudice, fear, and hate. These exist.

Nonetheless, I saw students together in ways that I found wonderful. I uncovered my E-Pluribus-Unum I, and one more manifestation of my subjectivity. It is somewhat contrary to the sense of the Ethnic-Maintenance I, but for now I do not mean to reconcile my I's; I just mean to note those that I have identified.

At a later time, however, when I am ready to create my narrative about Riverview, I will need to decide how to present the "stories" that can be derived from maintaining ethnicity on the one hand and from mingling on the other. More than this, I will need to be cautious about overstating the magnitude of mingling among Riverview's 1,600 students, for verifying that it exists in general—a matter I find personally satisfying—is not equivalent to establishing that it is an abiding fact of student life in particular.

The Justice-Seeking I is one that I learned about shortly after coming to Riverview. In fact, I learned about it and kept learning about it because the events that alerted me to it were commonplace for every Riverview adult and most Riverview children.

One night, for example, I went to a parent-teacher meeting in the high school lunchroom. Ten of us were present, nine parents and I. The woman who presided over this group said, "Well, we don't seem to have a quorum. Why don't I introduce Dr. Peshkin? He can tell us what he's doing here." I discussed my work briefly, asked no questions, and sat down. For the next hour I heard the parents talk about their town and how residents from nearby towns denigrate it and them.

What did denigration sound like? It sounded like this: "My daughter has friends who live outside of Riverview. She can go to their houses to sleep overnight, but they cannot come to

Riverview to sleep with her in our house." And also like this: "We go to a shopping mall in the next town over, and when I'm filling out a form of some sort and the clerk sees that I have filled out Riverview, she says, 'What! You're from Riverview? Oh, my God.'"

After some months of living in Riverview, I had my own personal contact with denigration. I was shopping in a store in a nearby town. When the saleswoman realized that I was not a local person, she asked what brought me to California. I told her I was from the University of Illinois, living and doing research in Riverview. "Oh," she said, "are you there to study pollution or crime in the streets?"

This denigration stems primarily from the fact that Riverview is the only town in its part of a very large county that allowed black people to find housing and live there. Blacks now live elsewhere in the county, but until quite recently they were concentrated in Riverview. Riverview's almost totally white neighboring communities once took pride in forbidding blacks to remain overnight in town.

Because Riverview's denigration distressed me, I was moved to investigate it as systematically as I could. Throughout the time I was learning about this phenomenon, I knew my sentiments would somehow figure in my writing; I knew, therefore, that I would need to take account of them. Although feelings of distress helped focus my inquiry<sup>6</sup>—a positive outcome—they could make me defensive in a way that would not facilitate my analysis and understanding of denigration.

The Pedagogical-Meliorist I, a new and surprising expression of my subjectivity, emerged while I was sitting in the back of classrooms. Although much of my professional life entails watching teachers at work, never before had this I been aroused, but not because the teaching I'd previously seen was admirable. Mansfield and Bethany were not citadels of academic excellence. The Pedagogical-Meliorist I emerged from seeing ordinary-to-poor instruction given to youngsters who would suffer, I imagined, as a consequence of that instruction.

When I observed teaching I did not like in rural and Christian schools, I confined myself to concluding that I did not want my own children to attend such schools. I never believed that the rural or Christian children would be

penalized in the way I anticipated many Riverview High School children would, and that was because I had never before seen children taught who were of the poor underclass of America. Of Riverview High School's 1,600 students, 27% are from welfare families. Day in and day out, I sensed that many would pay a high price at the hands of uninspired teachers. To be sure, I did not believe that if the instruction were sound, these children would be catapulted out of the school's low academic track, out of their poverty, and into the good life. When I saw the performance of many teachers, however, I concluded that they contributed to the array of complex factors that perpetuate poverty.

As I sat in the back of classrooms, I felt that I wanted to remedy the poor teaching I observed. This surprised me because among the first things I explain to any of my study's school personnel is that I am neither evaluator nor reformer. I come neither to judge whether they teach well or poorly, nor to make them better than they are. I go to great lengths to establish who I am not, so that my behavior can reinforce daily who I am. Accordingly, I am careful to be interested yet nonjudgmental and uninvolved with a school's instructional program. Nonetheless, I had judged and I wanted to be involved so that I could redress pedagogical wrongs. My feelings were engaged, my subjectivity was present, and I frequently thought, "How can I help improve the instruction of those I deemed ineffective teachers?"

When I found myself planning with the basketball coach how to promote the academic success of his players, who typically starred at Riverview High but failed to make it to 4-year colleges, I realized that thought had become father to deed. In this victory of subjectivity over reason, I risked undermining the integrity of the nonjudgmental persona I had constructed to ensure teacher comfort with me in their classrooms. I also risked mixing roles, as when "field workers hope to strike back through their writing" (Glazer, 1972, p. 59). Striking back and reforming may be worthwhile endeavors, but they were at odds with the intentions of my research project.

My final I, the Nonresearch Human I, is another one I repeatedly experienced. For example, when my wife and I first arrived in Riverview, the Community Women's League invited her to

be an honorary but full participant even though its members knew she would live in town for one year only. They took her in and made her feel at home, as did many others. One day my wife and I passed by the home of parents of a Riverview High School teacher. The teacher happened to be there. We met his parents and spent 2 hours with them. These 2 hours were repeated again and again in Riverview, with people saying by the warmth of their reception, "How nice for us that you are here. How nice that you are in our lives."

This particular subjective I softens one's judgment; the others distort in a certain direction. Its by-product is affection, which tends to reduce the distance between self and subjects that scholars presume is necessary to learn and write about a person, place, or institution. If affection and dispassion are not antithetical, it still seems probable that affection could block the sharp, harsh light that dispassion usefully generates throughout one's research process. In the large space between feelings of a love affair, at one pole, and of a let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may outlook, at the other, there is ample room for an affection that serves to remind one of obligations to his respondents, and for a dispassion that, as horseradish does in the nasal passages, clears his vision.

Other subjective I's may be uncovered when I begin to write, but these are the six of which I have taken note to date.

### Tamed Subjectivity

An unnamed author wrote in a *New Yorker* column, while reflecting on what he had learned from the then recently deceased writer E. B. White, "I think I half believed that if some editor or reader caught a glimpse of me in the underbrush of my own prose, he would order me out of there forthwith" (*New Yorker*, 1985, p. 33). One point of this paper is to say that I have looked for myself where, knowingly or not, I think we all are—and unavoidably belong: in the subjective underbrush of our own research experience. Having found myself there, I can certainly expect when I write about Riverview to find myself as well "in the underbrush of my own prose," where I will continue the process of taming my subjectivity.

Another point of this paper is to demonstrate a procedure that I recom-

mend strongly to all researchers. Perhaps, at some level, researchers already are aware of their subjectivity and its possible impact on their work. I advocate the enhanced awareness that should result from a formal, systematic monitoring of self. Speaking personally—but meant generally—I see this monitoring as a necessary exercise, a workout, a tuning up of my subjectivity to get it into shape. It is a rehearsal for keeping the lines of my subjectivity open—and straight. And it is a warning to myself so that I may avoid the trap of perceiving just that which my own untamed sentiments have sought out and served up as data. If trapped, I run the risk of presenting a study that has become blatantly autobiographical. "Autobiographical" here is used in the sense that Geertz captures in his observation that "All ethnography is part philosophy and a good deal of the rest is confession" (1973, p. 346), and that Smith acknowledges when she writes, "If this distortion and projection had not been identified I would still have written a reasonably good account, but it would have been too much about me" (1980, p. 5). I also run the risk of presenting a study that has assumed the form of an "authorized" statement. "Authorized" is a term used to characterize biographies that the biographer has been invited to write by the subject or by his or her heirs. The "in-house" stamp of authorized work conveys the sense that the writer not only has permission to write, but also has the subject's best interests at heart. By unwittingly assuming the role of special pleader, defender, or lauder, I may move away from the cooler edges of the world I investigate to its emotional core, where hazards of overidentification or going native lie.

A further point of this paper is not the absurd one of saying, "Here am I, holier than thou and released from my subjectivity because I have owned up, whereas you, being unrepentant, remain afflicted." The point is this: By monitoring myself, I can create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined. I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do, rather, enable myself to manage it—to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome—as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data.

For example, when I caught my lack of enthusiasm for the contributions of

Bethany Baptist Academy, I was alerted to the need to avoid the negativism which, unconstrained, would have tainted my intended portrayal of the school in the terms of the Christians who used it. Untamed subjectivity mutes the emic voice. Further, knowing that I am disposed to see—and, no less consequential, not see<sup>7</sup>—in the particular ways directed by each of the six I's, I can consciously attend to the orientations that will shape what I see and what I make of what I see. By this consciousness I can possibly escape the thwarting biases that subjectivity engenders, while attaining the singular perspective its special persuasions promise.

### Notes

I would like to thank Liora Bresler, Golie Jansen, Maryann Peshkin, and Carolyne J. White for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup>Mary Lee Smith (1980) makes a similar point in her sensitive, insightful paper written about her awareness of self in the course of two research projects.

<sup>2</sup>Dale Minor also refers to the subjective I: "Maintaining the fiction of the reporter as an eye without an I is not in the best interests of sound journalism" (1970, p. 196), as does Krieger: "The subjective 'I' of the author is hidden in the book . . ." (1985, p. 321).

<sup>3</sup>This project was conducted with support from the Spencer Foundation and from the

University of Illinois' College of Education, Bureau of Educational Research, and University Research Board.

<sup>4</sup>Sociologist Susan Krieger presents another subjectivity auditing procedure worthy of careful attention (1985).

<sup>5</sup>The names selected for each of the first five I's were ones I thought best fit the particular sentiment I had been perceiving and that I described in the account I kept each time a sentiment was evoked. The sixth one, the Non-research Human I, is taken from the distinction anthropologist Morris Freilich (1970) makes between the human and research self.

<sup>6</sup>Similarly, Erickson writes, "one must not only suppress a sense of outrage while in the field, but still stay in there and take advantage of one's rage, using it as a barometer to indicate high salience [emphasis mine]" (1984, p. 61; see also Smith, 1980, p. 9).

<sup>7</sup>Rubin refers to "blind spots . . . a product of our self-protective instincts" that lead people to cover "the gaps with smoke screens and fictions" (1985, p. 9).

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