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Working in the Interpretive Zone: Conceptualizing Collaboration in Qualitative Research Teams

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Introduction
The Myth of the Lone Researcher

The popular image of research, in natural and social sciences, has long been dominated by the figure of the lone researcher, a figure toiling independently to create knowledge for the field. The dissertation process that budding researchers undergo is, in its usual depictions, an extreme example of isolation in search of knowledge. This image of the independent scholar, however, glosses over the very social nature of the research process, making invisible the researcher’s connections to the participants of the study and those numerous others with whom the researcher worked during the course of a study and who made important contributions to his/her interpretation. This image persists despite the fact that much research is conducted by groups of researchers and that the interactions of those groups are fundamental to the ideas they develop about the topic. Indeed, until recently, research, even when produced among multiple researchers, often appeared under the name of the senior researcher, and the roles and voices of others, such as the “pods” of graduate students who gathered the data, were often submerged into one person.

This image is pervasive in both quantitative and qualitative forms of research, but for the purposes of this work, we are most concerned with its presence within forms of qualitative research.

As an example of the tenacity of this image, examine any of the standard textbooks on how to conduct qualitative research, and you will find little information on the subject. (See, for instance, Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984.) In the few references they make to the conduct of team research, these authors discuss group work from the procedural rather than the interpretive perspective. The widely used methodology text by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) contains only two brief references to team research. In the first, under the heading “Team Research and the Lone Ranger,” they state:

The great majority of qualitative research is what is termed Lone-Ranger research; that is, the researcher single-handedly faces the empirical world, going off alone to return with the results. (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 78)

They refer to a number of kinds of team research, providing a few brief hints for making group work more efficient, but offering virtually nothing on the nature of the interpretive process that groups undertake.

Eroding the Myth

Despite the impression given by qualitative methodology texts, the image of the lone researcher is being eroded. This erosion is part of a movement over the last two decades toward researchers’ deconstruction of their own practices. Recent thinking places more focus on the ways the researcher’s presence and interactions with the participants of a study serve to shape research outcomes (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). This shift occurs in tandem with increasing recognition, in education and other fields, of the collective nature of knowing and greater attention paid to social theories of development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Vygotsky, 1986). As a consequence, we have come to hear much more about the social nature of research, from discussions of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity to the development of collaborative research forms, such as action research. These developments address some of the concerns about the role of the social in the process of interpretation, such as the relationship of researcher to participant or participant to participant. We have not, however, adequately addressed the relationship of researcher to researcher and the role researchers’ interactions with other researchers play in the interpretive process and the co-construction of knowledge.

Because a significant body of qualitative research is now being conducted by groups and because the group is so significant to the process of interpretation, educational researchers ought to take a more direct approach to the study of issues in group dynamics. In our initial review of the qualitative methodology research, we identified only one paper specifically dedicated to the analysis of the

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process of conducting teamwork in qualitative research, (Liggett, Glesne, Johnston, Hsazi, & Schattman, 1994). The paper focuses on the process of teamwork, refers to members’ makeup (a variety of backgrounds and experience), acknowledges complexities amid multiple stages of research and volumes of data, and touches upon issues such as team members’ vulnerabilities and commitments to the research itself. It also refers to administrative issues about teaming, as well as to benefits and costs (time, money, and energy). However, like the rest of the qualitative literature, these authors fail to focus on the interpretive process itself. It is the interpretive process that is the focus of our article.

There is a body of methodological work in which researchers in the course of investigations into other methodological issues touch indirectly or accidently upon the issues of collective interpretation. Larcher describes a form of linguistic analysis called “redundancy analysis” that requires group interpretive processes for its implementation (Larcher, 1993). In describing an action research project, Schratz considers the role of “collective self-reflection” that occurred when a group conducting an action research project looked back on the history of their joint effort (Schratz, 1993). Collective self-reflection revealed decisive turning points in the project, including periods of strained circumstances or “blisters,” such as when members entered or left the group and the effect this had on the dynamics of team formation. These group processes, he demonstrates, were instrumental in shaping the end points of the project. Strauss (1987) provides insights into the group interpretive process through the analysis of a tape recording of a research seminar on data interpretation. These voices—Larcher, Schratz, Strauss—and their kin do not, however, form part of a comprehensive disciplinary focus on group interpretive processes.

This lack of intentional focus on group interpretive processes among the literature of qualitative researchers in education is surprising as group-conducted studies are a ubiquitous feature in education and the social sciences. Indeed, when we began our exploration of the issue, each conversation with our university colleagues provided us with new examples of the diverse ways that different kinds of disciplinary groups were involved in interpretive processes and the ways that different disciplines had grappled with issues of group interpretive processes. Our list is long and continually growing. It includes examples from specific fields: organizational and developmental psychology, the sociology of science, feminist studies, and drama. The field of education, in particular, offers many examples, from studies of inquiry learning in math, science, and English and investigations of team teaching to examples from collaboratively based research approaches such as action research. These conversations with colleagues, and our subsequent investigation of their suggestions, demonstrate to us that the question of the interpretive processes of qualitative research teams is clearly an idea whose time has come.

The Interpretive Zone: Conceptualizing Interpretation As a Collaborative Act

Our driving concern with the nature of group interpretive processes within qualitative research teams stems from our own experience as members of such teams and, in particular, as co-workers on an ethnographic study of arts in education, a study in which Bresler served as principal investigator and team leader and Wasser as team member. This paper grew out of our increasing curiosity with the ways in which we were using the group as an interpretive tool and with our growing dissatisfaction with current discussions about this issue. Our investigations of this subject eventually led us to formulate the concept of “the interpretive zone,” which we use as a mental placeholder for the conceptual location of group interpretive work. The interpretive zone is the place where multiple viewpoints are held in dynamic tension as a group seeks to make sense of fieldwork issues and meanings.

The purpose of this article is to put flesh on the notion of the interpretive zone. To do so, we begin with a consideration of the theoretical frameworks that we believe contribute much to this idea. Next we draw upon our own case study experience as co-members of a qualitative research group to explore what could be applied to this notion. We conclude with a discussion of the interpretive zone, antecedents for the term and a consideration of the implications of this term to qualitative research methodology.

Theoretical Frameworks

There is much research available from which we can begin to build the philosophical and theoretical basis for understanding group-conducted interpretive processes and from which we might begin to construct a vision of the “interpretive zone” as a methodological entity. In the next section we will focus on three major categories of work that seem particularly relevant: (1) research into the social nature of learning and the social construction of knowledge, (2) forms of group work in research or educational activity, and (3) work that discusses how collaboration affects interpretation.

The Social Nature of Learning and the Social Construction of Knowledge

Research into the social nature of learning—and its corollary, the social construction of knowledge—such as that conducted in developmental psychology, curriculum and instruction, and the study of work provides insights into the ways learning unfolds as a social act in social settings, how knowledge is held by multiple group members, and the individual and social processes of interpretation that form the frameworks for epistemologies. (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Vygotsky, 1986; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992; Wertsch, 1991). This work owes much to recognition of the transactional or intertextual nature of knowing as a social act (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Dewey, 1934).

Researchers in the sociology and rhetoric of science bring insights into the means by which knowledge is collaboratively hammered out in laboratory groups and across diverse policy boundaries, as well as through publication processes that raise important questions about such issues as: What are the images one holds of group collective work? How are these images rhetorically constructed? (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1993; Star & Griesman, 1989).

Issues of interpretation cannot be separated from issues of values. Feminist research is a rich source of ideas and theories in this realm, alerting us that different ways of constructing knowledge produce different kinds of knowledge and raising the inescapable question: How does gender—and other significant historical, political, or social
features—leave its stamp on the processes and products of a group’s interpretation (Haraway, 1991; Weedon, 1987)?

**Forms of Group Work in Research and Educational Activities**

There is also much knowledge about the forms interpretive groups can take. This category of information would include the technical and procedural aspects of organizing group work, what methodological tools might be used by groups, and the roles group members might play. Looking within arenas of educational research for our examples, action research, for instance, offers diverse models of collaborative work jointly shouldered by teachers and researchers. Studies in this field provide knowledge about the development of individual and group perspectives and roles; the distribution of leadership; and the issues of multiple voices, power, and status (Bikel & Hartrup, 1995; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; and Oja & Smulyan, 1989).

Group interpretive processes have also been explored in educational research projects that use participants as co-researchers (Spindler & Spindler, 1993; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). In these cases, members of videotaped classrooms were invited to interpret their own and others’ classroom practices and, in this way, the focus groups’ interpretive processes became a methodological tool for researchers.

Research on team teaching, collaborative ventures between two or more teachers, offers another window onto group processes in educational realms. Researchers in this field investigated many issues bearing on our topic, such as the factors that might divide or unite group work and what happens when group members with different specialties work together, teach diverse subject areas, or share common planning time and a common set of students (Friend & Cook, 1992; Lee, 1992; Nowacek, 1992; Zorgfass & Remz, 1992). These studies not only uncover the benefits of team approaches, such as improved teaching, opportunities to share frustration, and support for risk-taking, but also indicate the role teams play in supporting better teaching. For instance, brainstorming with fellow team members may lead to improved curriculum (Clifford & Friesen, 1993; Lee, 1992) and team teaching may lead to new roles for teachers (Lee, 1994). Research on team teaching indicates the problems groups face, such as conflict around territorial boundaries (Adams, 1992; McNairy, 1988), problems when members lack interpersonal skills (Adams, 1992), or what happens when no time is budgeted for communication and planning (Freeman, 1992; Friend & Cook, 1992).

**Forging Collaborative Interpretations**

We can also glean insights into the nature and characteristics of the processes by which groups make meaning, and it is from anthropology proper that some of the most interesting and directly relevant work on the nature of collaboration can be found. Stephan Gudeman and Alberto Rivera, collaborators since 1976 on projects related to rural communities in Central and South America, liken their vision of collaboration and their notion of doing anthropology to conversation. Their vision of anthropology as conversation emphasizes sustained dialogic interaction over time, values multiple perspectives from field workers and field participants, and urges anthropologists to place greater value on the entire process of the study as the ethnography, rather than simply identifying the written product at the end as such (Gudeman & Rivera, 1990, 1995).

Elizabeth Kennedy, reflecting on collaborative experience as member of a husband-and-wife research team, a multi-disciplinary faculty group, and a 14-year research and writing partnership, raises issues about the differences that distinguish one collaboration from another and the multiple emerging roles within collaborations in relationship to time, commitment, and skills. She also brings to the fore the issues of costs and benefits—does collaboration really make for a better product? Another issue is how should the dynamics of a collaboration be captured by a text (Kennedy, 1995). Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham, an anthropologist and fiction writer husband-and-wife writing team, also raise the costs-and-benefits question: “What difference does collaboration make in research, writing, or both? And what differences does the particular kind of collaboration make—whether it is purely professional, purely personal, or some combination of both?” (Gottlieb, 1995, p. 6). In their joint writing project (Gottlieb & Graham, 1993), they struggled between Gottlieb’s concern with factual accuracy and proper research presentation and Graham’s desire for a good story line and clear, interesting prose to create a joint interpretation of their African experience. Graham refers to this process as, “the exhausting dailiness of co-author’s negotiations, as they conduct field-work on each other’s stylistic and imaginative territories (Gottlieb & Graham, 1993, p. 9).”

**Forming an Image of the Interpretive Zone**

Looking across these diverse discussions, we began to assemble a picture of the issues that would form the basis of our notion of the interpretive zone. If the interpretive zone is the crucible where researchers sift, sort, and consider the meaning of the fieldwork, and, indeed, as we believe, if the group is a tool for that reflection, then we will be deeply concerned with the quality and characteristics of that reflection. How do we conceive of collective intelligence or, conversely, the role of collaboration in learning? Within groups, what are the processes by which ideas are explored? At what junctures are new considerations added, rejected, or rewritten and how? How does leadership and followership shape this process? What kind of a place is the group as a convergence of diverse personal and professional landscapes? How does the group take shape and how does the collective identity become a feature in the interpretive process? What are the disciplinary and institutional contexts for researchers and field?

The different strands of research discussed here helped us to locate and frame questions that are foundational to the notion of the interpretive zone. As do many of the authors we cite, we have come to see the group as a critical methodological tool, one that deserves active consideration rather than simply passive acknowledgment.

**What Is Missing?**

In summary, there is much we know about the interpretive process as it unfolds in groups. This includes theoretical and practical work on the nature of groups and interpretation from diverse fields. In addition, as we alluded to in the introduction, there is a vast body of theory and research on issues related to individually conducted qualitative re-
search, including notions of how individuals conduct that research and the methodological implications of their work. Of particular interest to our topic would be the discussions of reflexivity, poststructural concerns of self and other, and the idea of emergent perspectives.

We lack thick descriptions and analyses of the interpretive processes of qualitative research teams. We often assume that what we know of the ways that individuals conduct qualitative research can be transferred to what groups do, but we have not truly considered the differences between these two situations and the fit or lack of fit between them.

As a result, there are many critical methodological questions in relationship to the interpretive processes of qualitative research teams that have not yet been addressed. For instance, what are the special ethical issues that teams face in terms of access, confidentiality, and reciprocity? How should issues of voice be approached—from both a theoretical and practical standpoint? What are the costs and benefits of teamwork? What are the credibility issues involved in group interpretive processes; that is, how do we know that a reasoned process has been followed in developing an interpretive stance? Is consensus a necessity? What would define “interpretive consensus”? At what point and in what manner is interpretation “fixed”? How does the “fixing” of an interpretation present the multiple voices that led to its final form? All of these unknowns are related to what we have termed “the interpretive zone.”

We should note here that we, like most other researchers working on teams, began this process blindly, assuming that what we had learned about the conduct of individual research would transfer to the work of the group. Our image, therefore, of what such interpretations would be like and how they would emerge was probably along the lines of “a better truth,” that is, that the findings would be emergent, but that consensus would lead us to a shared view. Indeed, we might even have assumed that we would “find more” and that our findings would be “more valid” because more of us had close access to the data and agreed on what we “saw” in it. It was only midway through the process of the study that we began to grapple with the issue of how we, as a group, were actually conducting the interpretive process and the ways in which that process defined and shaped what we thought we were learning. The discussion that follows is meant to provide a hands-on sense of the team process, as a means to raise questions about the issues of collective interpretation and meaning and to prompt discussion about the ways that group form and process contribute to interpretation in qualitative research.

Case Study: The Arts in Education Project

In 1992, Liora Bresler established the Arts in Education Project, a multi-site arts curriculum project employing a case-study methodology. The purpose was to investigate the ways that art, as a discipline and human experience, is translated into a broad range of school settings. The project was unique in that it examined several arts disciplines found in schools (visual arts, music, dance, and drama) rather than one specific area. This was a three-year study.

Seeking to understand the contexts that shape the arts—their contents and pedagogies—she selected three district arts programs differing widely in their structures, student populations, communities, and the kinds of environments these districts provided for the arts. The first district program studied included dance/drama, music, and visual arts specialists serving five elementary schools. The second arts program consisted of one visual arts specialist in a private, Christian school. The third program studied was a music program taught by two music specialists in the same school in a small blue-collar town with limited economic resources.

To carry out the study, Bresler assembled a qualitative research team representing diverse areas of expertise, with the hope that exchanges among team members would enrich interpretive possibilities for thinking within and across the arts. During the second year of the project (1993–94), the focus of this discussion, graduate student fieldworkers included Mary Lemons, a music educator, Carolyn Fertig, a visual arts educator and studio-trained painter, and Nancy Hertzog, a specialist in gifted education and a former dancer. Each fieldworker gathered data from elementary arts specialists working in their area of expertise. A fourth assistant, Judith Davidson Wasser, a doctoral student with experience in qualitative research and a background in literacy issues, served as research assistant at-large. All had been students in Bresler’s qualitative methods class at one time or another. Three members of the team—Lemons, Hertzog, and Wasser—were doctoral candidates, and they brought the unique interests and methodological concerns from their dissertation work to this project.

Lemons, Hertzog, and Fertig had primary responsibility for fieldwork, including weekly classroom observations, some teacher interviews, and some videotaping. Their data, in the form of field notes, videotapes, and memos, served as the basis for the group analytic discussions of which there were about 30 over the 1993–1994 year, totaling over 100 hours of conversation focused on the interpretation of this material. These group interpretive meetings and the analytic work that flowed in or out of them are the primary focus of our discussion. In examining what we learned, we begin with an exploration of the ways the character, tone, and purposes of the group were shaped, as well as the ways that multiple disciplinary and experiential viewpoints mingled in the process of interpretation. Next we consider specific issues that emerged from this experience that distinguish group work from previous methodological concerns with the individual researcher. These include ethical issues as well as issues of costs, benefits, and the fixing of the interpretation.

The Group As an Interpretive Tool

Forming the group: color, tone, value, and style. How is the notion of group valued, and what are the values that are embedded in the group, making it a specific group in a specific location? Although we probably all had different experiences of and different expectations for groups, collectively we honored the notion of group and our participation in this form, and we demonstrated our commitment through symbolic gestures and ritual action. For instance, while we kept a strong professional focus, at every meeting we made personal inquiries, congratulated members on passing milestones (qualifying exams, dissertation presentations, and the like), and provided each other with sympathy when the going was rough. We demonstrated our caring in many ways—through the sharing of food (an
important part of each meeting) to the creation of a group name (the Artsy 5). While demonstrating personal concern was an important part of each meeting, it was never allowed to become the focal emphasis of our meetings.

Food and nicknames might seem insignificant in themselves, but each were ways by which we ritualized the group process. These symbols, rituals, and sayings were also the means by which we distinguished our group and articulated the positive value that we placed on the notion of group. It is important to note that the ways we symbolized and ritualized group are stereotypically seen as the ways that women, more than men, identify a group. It is true that we strongly identified ourselves as a group of women. How this might have been different had there been men in the group, we can only speculate.

Bresler, as leader of the group, played a pivotal role in establishing the value tones and colors by which we came to live as a collective. For instance, we were not only a research group, but one devoted to the study of arts in educational settings, and Bresler’s values about research and the arts figured strongly in the stance that members took as participants in the group. An Israeli, a pianist and musicologist, and more recently a qualitative researcher, she thought of the arts as embodying strong affect. Embedded in her perspectives about research and the arts was a belief in the importance and artistry of qualitative research and strong feelings about excellence in performance.

She viewed the group and its discussions as a critical interpretive tool, and she demonstrated this belief in multiple ways. Meeting times were sacred, and all members were to be present, on time, and focusing intently during the discussions. Meetings would only be interrupted for emergencies. None of this was stated but must have been understood as no one ever broke the unspoken code. Her emphasis on meetings as interpretive tool was conveyed through the emphasis on analysis that dominated each meeting. Procedural discussions were kept to a minimum.

On our team of five, there were three members with clearly defined roles as fieldworkers and two members with other primary role definitions. For team members, all whom had experienced Bresler as a teacher, it was clear that she was defining a different sort of role for herself as a team leader. As she admits, in meeting her pedagogical goals as a teacher, she was more directly authoritarian in a way that highlighted or foregrounded the self. As a team leader, however, she functioned almost as an interviewer—probing, monitoring, supporting, and soliciting from different team members. Her goals were not stated as directly or in the more authoritarian manner she adopted in the classroom, and her “self” appeared in a more backgrounded position. As team leader then, she exercised control in a more subtle manner, setting the values that identified the group—internally and externally—directing group focus to interpretive issues, and orchestrating the interplay of conversation that was the substance of interpretation.

Positioning herself in this way as team leader positioned those who had been her former students in different roles as team members. As students, their responsibility was to complete individual assignments, but as team members, their contribution was to think intensely and creatively for the good of the project. As students, assignments were crisp, clear, and transmitted on the syllabus, but as team members, many of the “assignments” emerged through joint work in the course of conversation. This was one of the areas of discrepancy between the role of graduate student and that of research assistant, which at times caused team members some anguish.

Like Bresler, Wasser also held a non-fieldwork role. As research assistant at-large, Wasser entered the team in a deliberately nebulous position that evolved over time in relationship to project needs and her skills. One way to describe the role that emerged is as “ethnographer to the team.” Among other things, this role included taking notes of meetings—that is, creating the communal text, serving as intelligent talk-back machine, and acting as memoist. Creating a communal text from the group discussions provided the group with more than a record of the interpretive process; it became a window into the nature of this process and, in particular, the intricate and reflexive interplay of individual and group. The roles of intelligent talk-back machine and memoist built upon the communal text. As keeper of the text, she was able to play back ideas and concerns that emerged from the discussions. Some of this was mundane—simply laying out future schedules as the group devised them. At other times, it meant reviewing issues raised earlier and checking for new interpretations. As a memoist, Wasser took it on to develop specific ideas in greater depth than had been possible in group conversation. These memos became a secondary or intermediate form of data for the project. Finally, as the team member with a particular interest in anthropology and constructivist theory, Wasser also played a special role in making ties for the group between discussions of fieldwork and larger concepts that might have value in the development of grounded theory. All members were, of course, active developers of theory, but Wasser, lacking specific in-the-field responsibilities, became the fieldworker in the field of theory, drawing these ideas into the conversation of the group to mingle with discussions of teachers, students, and school performances. The role, as it evolved, made her responsible in a number of ways for the functions of bridging and linking across areas and ideas. In a different but complementary manner to Bresler, she served as a facilitator, monitoring the need for summaries, reviews, and integrative or hypothetical statements.

Multiple voices: multiple lens. Bresler placed particularly strong emphasis on the importance of the heterogeneity of the group, frequently mentioning this as a factor in the way she had composed the group and using it as a means of describing what she sought from the interpretive process. “You are the expert in this field,” she would insist to a team member during meetings. “You understand what is happening here in a way that is not available to the rest of us. Let us learn from what you know.” Thus, the special knowledge that a music-teaching veteran would bring to the analysis of a music lesson, a painter to a visual arts lesson, or a dancer to a dance/drama class was critical to her. She sought the insiders’ perspective, contrasting it against outsider eyes in order to build a rich picture of school arts programs. The group’s construction held, in her eyes, the potential for such interpretation.

The heterogeneity of the group, in terms of disciplinary backgrounds, sites of work, and roles in the group, brought to the fore team members’ multiple allegiances and passions. Trained in different disciplinary, although often
overlapping fields, we came to the group speaking in different discourses. As a result, we judged different issues to be critical, "saw" in different ways, and passionately believed in the righteousness of our causes and the lens by which we viewed the world. In some cases, our stated positions sounded similar, but our underlying assumptions were very different or vise versa, as the case might be. The year-long process of continuous probing and clarification demonstrated to us how important, but how complex, the issue of beliefs and assumptions are within the interpretive process.

An excellent example of the multiple voices/multiple lens dilemma we faced can be seen in the various ways members approached the issue of the purpose or focus of arts education. For instance, Hertzog had a strong background in gifted education, a world in which careful attention is paid to individual children and their talents. When observing a class or reading the observations of others, she sought information on the ways teachers developed children's special and unique talents, and she worried when she found evidence of schools' failure to address children with unusual artistic talent. Lemons, with many years as an elementary music teacher, believed in public education, and arts education, as an opportunity for all children. She sought evidence that all children had equal access to participation and worried when she found schools lacking in their commitment to provide equal amounts and kinds of arts experiences to all children. In this sense, her concern with the potential of public education in the arts contradicted Hertzog's concern with the dilemma public schools face for providing special assistance to children with special talents. Similar to Hertzog's position, but nuanced in another way, was Bresler's position and, in some respect, that of Fertig. As a trained concert pianist, Bresler valued professional training, including the development of technique, the emphasis on excellence and hard work, and a concern with the traditions of an art form. Bresler's position, however, foregrounded the art discipline, whereas Hertzog's position, like Lemons', emphasized the needs and development of the child. In another vein, Wasser, a former reading specialist with experience in compensatory programming for adults and adolescents, was particularly concerned with the learning opportunities provided to those students who are most disadvantaged. While this position was similar to Lemons' concern with public education, Wasser, to a greater extent than Lemons, emphasized the cultural, political, and economic arguments, whereas Lemons' stand was more developmental and child-focused. From this brief synopsis, the reader can gain a sense of the diversity of views present within the group and the ways they intermingled.

Various issues uncovered in the fieldwork raised, and re-raised, these differences, and through discussion, these differences helped us to understand the complexity of what we thought we believed and what we thought we were seeing at the sites. For instance, what were we to make of a public school elementary choir that required auditions for participation? When a dance instructor teaches dance as a cognitive rather than an aesthetic or expressive form, what are children gaining or missing? What should the role of technique instruction be in the elementary arts program? How do the discourses in which arts teachers are themselves embedded contribute to what we see unfolding in the classroom? Should arts instruction be integrated across the curriculum? Why or why not? What responsibilities should arts instructors have to the general curriculum and larger school community? What responsibility does the school have to the arts?

Our roles and positions changed as we absorbed the concerns and issues of others, allowing ourselves to view site data through their concerns and developing our own positions in new ways. One small but powerful example occurred through the intervention of Fertig. Fertig, a studio painter, was deeply attentive to the artistic design of classrooms, particularly the ways in which the colors of classrooms affected the tone and feeling of the room. This interest was apparent in her very first set of field notes and continued throughout. As a group, we noted and discussed this, and as time passed members of the group realized that they had unconsciously become more attentive to this issue themselves. In this way, Fertig's concerns became absorbed into our individual and collective consciousness, changing the ways we "saw" and "felt" classrooms. Thus, each one of us came to "own" a corner of the sensibility of a studio painter encountering a school classroom.

Ambiguity and trust. As noted, Bresler attached positive value to the contradictions that arose in the presence of diverse kinds of knowledge of education and the arts, deliberately assembling a group that she hoped would provide the kind of diversity that would lead to provocative discussions. Explaining that it was her cultural heritage as an Israeli, she frequently urged the group to struggle toward ideas, to wrestle with the data.

Her approach, which looked to intellectual tension as a means of bringing forth new ideas, owed much to Dewey's notion of the "problematic" (Dewey, 1934). Uncertainty, as found in problematic situations, was, according to Dewey, essential to inquiry. Perplexity, difficulty, obstruction all of these conditions were necessary to our interpretive processes. While the term "problematic" raises notions of conflict and struggle, it was more often the case that we experienced the tension as play, puzzles, or the interest of exploring a colleague's ways of doing and understanding—equally valid ways of considering the tension that seemed to be a part of the creative aspect of our collaboration.

The issue of trust as a moral and political stance is critical to mention here because dialogical inquiry that values the problematic must, by definition, engender a certain amount of ambiguity, and ambiguity can be played out in many ways depending upon the circumstances in which it arises. Trust is therefore a necessity in collaborative projects. Trust, however, like many of the other concepts we have unpacked in the process of our work, is a complex, multifaceted notion. There is the trust that members have in their colleagues as moral people who will not betray confidences and before whom they can speak openly and critically. This form of trust goes beyond mere listening and tolerance, however, but also includes the sense that the speaker will be taken seriously, that is, that their ideas will be listened to with interest. There is the trust between members and leaders that they will not be politically betrayed through the confidences or positions revealed in conversation. There is also the special kind of trust that nourishes dialogic inquiry, and that is the trust that members must have for the group and its members to tolerate
ambiguity, sustained moments of misunderstanding, not sharing the same views, continuing the discussion even when it makes one uncomfortable, and not being forced into one position or another.

Emerging Methodological Issues

The process of becoming a group with the specific purpose of forging interpretive meaning in our collective meetings occurred on both conscious and unconscious levels. Developing a meta-awareness of group as an interpretive tool was not an isolated occurrence; it unfolded in tandem with deepening awareness of our reflexive processes on a number of fronts. This meta-awareness provoked us to think about the ethical issues implied in the multiple roles we occupied, not only in relationship to each other, but also to those in the field to whom we were connected both directly and indirectly through the interpretive meetings. In hindsight, it has also raised questions for us about issues of costs and benefits, as well as about the ways we “fix” our interpretations.

Reflexive processes: reconceptualizing group and process. Initially, we didn’t really think about the group as a group; perhaps we saw it simply as an activity, a meeting. In that sense, it existed as a fixed structure of the project. This picture changed as we began to construct an identity for the group—making commitments to it, creating rituals to define it, and investing it with value. Eventually, we came to understand that the group itself was a dynamic entity always under creation. Within this crucible, we were forging interpretive meaning—raising ideas, contesting, reshaping, and absorbing them at meetings.

We developed a more processual notion of the group in tandem with constructing a more processual notion of interpretation. Initially, the research assistants approached analysis as a linear process. From this perspective, the chronology of an ethnographic study included conducting fieldwork, discussing fieldwork, coding fieldwork data, creating interpretations, and writing papers describing them. As we learned from our work, entering the field or entering a research team are, in many respects, parallel processes. In both settings, one has to learn to be appropriately present. One must gain understanding of group norms in order to understand when one transgresses its rules. One must teach others how one will be present, that is, what one’s role is and what they can expect from one in that role. One monitors one’s subjectivity carefully in field or group, both to promote peaceful coexistence, as well as to use one’s subjectivity as a tool for deepening understanding. In this sense, methodological insights into the individual researcher’s role in the field can be an invaluable tool for understanding the parallel processes that occur in the field and in the team.

In our group, the three team members who were assigned fieldwork roles had to enter the field and the team simultaneously, operating in both arenas throughout the project. In addition, through the process of analysis, their fieldwork sites entered into the “presence” of all team members. Thus, for all team members, but particularly for those team members who were also active researchers in the field, team participation exponentially increased the complexity of such issues as access, confidentiality, and trust. As an example, each fieldworker had to gain access to the site and negotiate standards of confidentiality with the principal, arts specialists, and teachers with whom they worked. The observations and interviews they made at their sites they processed into texts—field notes and transcripts—that were then shared among all research team members. Each team member was aware of the identity of the schools and faculty. Also, because we were conducting research in our own backyard, a small midwestern college town, many of us had multiple ties outside of the team to various participants in the study. The vows of confidentiality and the establishment of trust that occurred at each site between individual researchers and participants in the study were, by process of the group, also a property of the entire team. The collective self was bound as the individual self was. The support and consideration of the group for each others’ concerns and our collective support for our responsibility to the sites involved in the project made this situation bearable. Indeed, the group came to serve as a powerful resource for identifying, supporting, and problem-solving in regard to the important ethical issues.

Multiple roles and overlapping histories with different participants and team members also meant the addition of complex wrinkles to issues of ownership, boundaries, and territoriality that individual researchers might not have experienced when working on their own. For instance, in the first year of the study, Lemons had been responsible for fieldwork at a site that, in the second year of the study, became the “property” of Hertzog. As the shift in ownership occurred, Lemons admits to experiencing pangs of loss as she saw “her” teacher viewed and interpreted through other eyes, not her own. She was acutely aware of the self-
monitoring she did in regard to the appropriate boundaries that should be maintained in regard to her initial and subsequent roles on the project.

Collaboration: costs and benefits. In today's educational world, the term "collaboration" has become a buzzword of sorts. If something is collaborative, we believe it to be good, often without asking ourselves if the work and its outcomes were valuable or significant or without considering the cost at which that outcome was achieved or whether the collaboration actually contributed to the "goodness" or "badness" of the work. Collaboration is unexamined.

In our case, however, we have made the case that our collaboration was highly significant to our work and, indeed, at the heart of the interpretive process. Collaboration, then, did not simply contribute to the size or quantity of study—that is, because we had more people on the project we could cover more sites and gather more data and thus make a case for being more comprehensive, thorough, or rigorous in our findings. In this study, collaboration served that function as it also served a critical interpretive function. Bresler's need to look at diverse arts disciplines through the eyes of experts laid the conditions for the heterogeneous team, and she made that heterogeneity a basis for our interpretive work.

As we learned, for collaboration to have methodological value, there must be time allotted to the collaborative work, and this may mean that in other circumstances would go to fieldwork or writing activities. The 100-plus hours we devoted to talk were critical for this purpose. As the group developed as an interpretive entity, preparation for those meetings became more and more demanding, as we spent more time reviewing field notes and considering our ideas on the issues. Although the role Wasser took as ethnographer to the group—a kind of coordinator of emerging interpretations—was not planned, it became valuable in helping us to realize the group's role in this process.

Collaboration, as we are sure many readers will agree, is an arduous process. There are many emotional kinks that can occur. Some of these we've mentioned earlier, such as a members' sense of territoriality about a particular research setting. In other instances, our different interpretations of a teacher's action and the values we set by those interpretations raised hackles. Another point of ambiguity occurred as we struggled to make the shift from a focus on data collection to the analysis and the development of written products.

Although we were all collaborators, our roles were not the same, and this difference meant that allegiances and approaches to fieldwork were also asymmetrical. Of her role as team leader, Bresler recalls

I found it interesting that my loyalty was to the group here. Normally as a fieldworker I get attached to the setting, but here my setting was the group. I made a total of 15 field visits to the different sites, which was very, very marginal, not enough to develop attachment. It also meant that I was more attuned to issues rather than to the site. I realized that the social is for me a very important aspect of qualitative work. Because I was not there, I had to ask many more questions of the fieldworkers to get the vivid pictures I needed.

How cost effective a collaboration is depends upon the ways in which the collaboration enriches the interpretation—not all collaborations do. It is also true that some collaborations require so much effort to maintain that it overwhelms the purpose of the project. In putting a cost on collaboration, we take a highly instrumental position: Does it serve to deepen and enrich the interpretation? What evidence do we have that it does so?

Fixing an interpretation. Having declared that an idea warrants being identified as an interpretation, how does one go about "fixing" the interpretation? Who will participate in that process, and how will the voices that participated in the interpretive process be brought forth?

The question of fixing interpretations and questions of representation and authorship have been hotly debated over the last several years (see, e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Most of the debate, however, centers around the issue, again, of the lone researcher in relationship to the plural community. Exceptions to this trend are the authors mentioned earlier—Gudeman, Rivera, Kennedy, Gottlieb, and Graham—who have specifically addressed the issue of collaboration particularly in relationship to the writing process.

It's important to note that, while our case study description focuses on one intense year in which we were simultaneously engaged in data collection and data analysis, the process of writing up the results extends over a much longer period of time that does not include the same group members having the same relationship to each other. In the writing process, Bresler, as principal investigator, has, of course, primary responsibility to oversee the appropriate use of the data and, naturally, a strong interest in continuing to mine the corpus, but others have also participated in the writing process in various ways. The papers that have evolved from the study have followed different developmental paths.

This paper you are reading grew from an insight Wasser had upon reviewing the year's pile of meeting minutes and realizing that she couldn't remember reading about this phenomenon (group interpretive processes) in the methodological literature. This led to discussions with Bresler, a joint literature search, discussions with faculty and graduate students, and soon to the beginnings of this paper. The development of the paper has been the occasion for multiple memos back and forth and many meetings between the two of us. The development process then became a second collaborative grouping with overlapping membership to the larger group. In this smaller grouping, we turned all of our attention to a particular set of the issues raised in the larger group, mining them with more intensity than had been possible in that setting. Having participated in the group meetings, we can hear the other members' voices at various points in this text, but we are well aware that, ultimately, we must take the largest responsibility for the interpretations we have "fixed" here.

Ironically, the process of revising this paper for submission to this journal added a third circle of "collaborators," if that term might be used. These were the blind reviewers who read our work and made suggestions for improvement. Although we do not know who they are nor probably do they know who their fellow reviewers are, we can point to numerous places in the revised paper that contain their voices and concerns.
The Interpretive Zone

As we became more aware of the function of the group in the interpretive process, we began to feel the need for images, pictures, terms, or concepts by which to discuss or understand our experience. This need led us to the construction of a concept that we feel has been particularly helpful in allowing us to see the mental space in which we were working as a group—the interpretive zone.

We would like to propose the notion of "interpretive zone" to refer to the intellectual realm in which researchers work when they engage in collaborative work with each other. We use this term to indicate the mental location where interpretation takes place in this process. In the interpretive zone, researchers bring together their different kinds of knowledge, experience, and beliefs to forge new meanings through the process of the joint inquiry in which they are engaged. While it would be possible to think of the interpretive zone as a process occurring within an individual making meaning, as a methodological term, we use interpretive zone to refer to collective interpretive processes.

In making reference to "interpretive," we are drawing on a number of constructivist or interpretivist philosophical traditions.

The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118).

"Zone" arises frequently in many settings, and in choosing to employ it, we piggyback on many of these meanings attributed to it in research and other worlds. There are Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," Bakhtin's "character zones," Pratt's linguistic "contact zones," and the border areas or zones of critical theorists (Bakhtin, 1981; Giroux, 1992; Pratt, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986). "Zone" is familiar to us also from more worldly examples such as "demilitarized zone" or, a personal favorite, "intertidal zone." What is similar about these notions of zones is that they refer to unsettled locations, areas of overlap, joint custody, or contestation. It is in a zone that unexpected forces meet, new challenges arise, and solutions have to be devised with the materials at hand. The notion of zone implies dynamic processes exchange, transaction, transformation, and intensity. The ways authors characterize these processes differ from the neutral (scaffolding) to the conflictual (borders, struggles, wars) to the amicable (negotiation, alliances, gossip, overlap), and these characterizations emphasize different collaborative possibilities. Like Bakhtin (1986), we recognize the interpretive zone to be socially and historically situated—that is, an imaginary location in which multiple voices converge and diverge through the tensions imposed by centrifugal and centripetal forces in action. "Zone" more than "interpretation" forces us away from the image of the lone cognition working on a problem because the nature of zone infers more than one party—at least two if not more—competing, negotiating, interacting from different perspectives.

Rorty refers to the dynamic possibilities of the interpretive zone in his discussion of hermeneutics and the distinctions between normal and abnormal conversations in the process of interpretation (Rorty, 1979), a normal conversation being one in which the discussants work within similar paradigmatic structures and an abnormal one in which they work across conflicting structures. Richness and thickness of interpretation being the goal (particularly of qualitative research), incommensurability (the place on the continuum between normal and abnormal conversation in which qualitative researchers most often find themselves) is not an impossible hurdle, but may deepen the interpretive possibilities and the meanings that can be made from field and team experiences.

The interpretive zone as we have constructed it is a metaphorical space where ambiguity reigns, dialogical tension is honored, and incommensurability is seen to have special value. Not everyone wants to make this their working space, nor would anyone want to be permanently located here. Certainly, any single researcher must navigate this space in any thoughtful inquiry, but it was through our collaborative group processes and our efforts to understand the contradictions that arose among multiple perspectives that made us particularly aware of the potential of such a notion as a way of thinking about group interpretive processes and the importance of directing energy in this direction.

Legitimizing the interpretive zone leads to a number of implications for the conduct, presentation, and analysis of qualitative research. For instance, as projects that make use of this notion are formulated, researchers will need to carefully develop their notions of the group and the ways in which it will function. As the work proceeds, they will need to chart the group process as well as the fieldwork itself. In describing the research, we will now require a more explicit positioning of the research group—its character, tone, and assumptions—and information on the ways the group coalesced. Who were the members? What were their roles? How was the group composed? In particular, readers of qualitative research would have concern with the manner in which group process contributed to interpretation: What was added, enriched, or subtracted as a result of the group interaction? How did the group offer different methodological possibilities than would have been possible from a single researcher? How were these developed and employed?

As we have mentioned earlier, an unfortunate by-product of the myth of the Lone Ranger researcher has been the lack of attention to the complex ethical issues that arise in the conduct of teamwork. Just as the work of a single researcher generally unfolds with attention to ethical issues such as confidentiality, access, and trust, so too there is a need for attention to these issues when the interpretations are collected through collective processes. In particular, the formulation, conduct, and description of qualitative teamwork needs to take account of the special nuances in relationship to group membership that arise in ethical domains.

There are those who will assume that collectivity solves the problem of warrantability, but such an assumption is foolish. Groups, like individuals, can follow faulty lines of reasoning, make evaluations without adequate evidence, or be swayed by particular passions or allegiances. Thus,
we still face the issue of: How should this be judged? What makes it reliable? What are the warrants offered for the knowledge produced? Frank acknowledgment of the collective process and a discussion of its contribution to the process are essential if we are to evaluate products in which teams of researchers serve as methodological tools for interpretation. This should not substitute, however, for discussion of the reasoned process the researchers followed, the theoretical assumptions from which they work, and the evidence they use to justify their assertions.

A major stumbling block to evaluating such work is that we know so little about the inner workings of collective interpretive processes. As mentioned earlier, we need rich descriptions and documentation of group work so that we can more thoughtfully understand the process of group interpretation. For instance, what kinds of intermediary products or processes help to build the work? In a particular situated work, what turning points were faced, how were these negotiated, and what “findings” resulted?

The acknowledgment of a notion like the interpretive zone should also have important implications for the training of up-and-coming researchers. To date, classes in qualitative research methods tend to train students in the Lone Ranger model. Students working alone at self-selected sites conduct interviews and observations that are shared with the teacher but seldom with fellow students. A focus on qualitative research as a collective process, rather than as an individual process, means that students might be assembled in teams, share fieldwork data with each other, and work together to develop interpretations from their data. This would require that students grapple with the notion of the interpretive zone through their joint strivings. Mentorship would include helping students understand the ways group-constructed knowledge is more than the sum of its parts. In this sense, “interpretive zone” could play an important role as a placeholder for ideas that will gradually come to be enriched through experience in the field and with group processes.

Coda

If one takes the perspective that all research is collaborative, then all qualitative researchers are always so employed. But even if one takes a narrower perspective as we did, focusing on the group effort of a selected team of researchers, the majority of qualitative researchers will participate in one if not many such collaborative efforts during their careers. Although team efforts are common in our field and with group processes.

References


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