How did I get myself into this?

The Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde Experience of ED 151x
This paper describes my process as an introductory qualitative researcher. It is a journal, maybe a running analytical commentary about what happened, of the research process. It includes excerpts from articles and memos, in addition to conscious and subconscious conversations of a quantitative researcher who has jumped the fence of research domains. Witness this researcher’s subjectivity, internal conflict about interpretations and process, and her interaction with the divided self of qualitative research.
December 4 2003 – Post Peer Review Reflection

How did I get myself into this? I am in a group on a mission to find the ‘perceptions of opportunities of African-American middle school boys.’ I know I said in the beginning that I would suffocate my quantitative tendencies, but if I had used these just once, maybe this ‘story’ that we are trying to find would have been a question for another time with more time. First of all, the research time period is a course of one 12 week period. Secondly, our data is supposed to come from one observation and two interviews with a subject. If I analyzed the probability of actually answering this question by balancing comprehensive variables in a quantitative sense, I would never have attempted this question. These are some reasons:

1. If I want to look at boys, I need more than one boy and some girls so I can test the correlation to boys.
2. If I want to find perceptions of African-Americans, I probably want perceptions from non-African-Americans so I can eliminate perceptions of many ethnicities.
3. If I wanted perceptions of middle school students, I should get perceptions of high school and elementary youth so I could extract middle-school specific perceptions.
4. That is too many variables in one experiment! It is a very large question, yet, this is not an experiment. It must not be conducted in such a manner.

The benefit of this domain (Dr. Jekyll) is that initial hypotheses should be dynamic and emerge in situ, (Spindler and Spindler, 1987). This might have been to our advantage if the research team had disentangled its
expectations from the interviewing process. Individually, we have perceptions of opportunities and success, and it is highly probable that we superimposed ourselves in such a manner that we evaluated our subject’s responses instead of allowing him\(^1\) to create our answer. If the hypothesis can emerge, should not the answers and product have the same freedom? (Dr. Jekyll again.) This is where we may have committed a heinous act that probably sabotaged our own process. Team members have vested interests in identities of minority students and their perceptions. Maybe the pressure of finding right and wrong answers increased our academic-expert-I subjectivities (the spirit of Mr. Hyde enters the researcher’s bodies), and the only reason I think we changed our focus was because we felt the need to be able to answer a question. These qualities have the capacity to filter, skew, shape, block, transform, construe, and misconstrue what happens from the outset of a research project to its culmination in a written statement, (Peshkin, 1991, p. 286). We did not change our lens dramatically, and in our product draft, our peers detected an evaluative tone. People, and settings should be painted using descriptive and nonevaluative words in field notes and observations, (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 74, 76), and generalizations were running rampant throughout the product (much to Dr. Jekyll’s dismay and Mr. Hyde’s pleasure).

Every time I heard someone say that he has ‘a disconnect’\(^2\), my stomach twists in knots. I do not recall any of our questions having the word ‘connect’ in them, and I also do not know that perceptions require connections. I

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1 ‘Him’ and ‘he’ refer to an African-American seventh grader at a college preparatory middle/high school.
2 The research group defines the lack of ability of the subject to connect his class subjects to careers and life as a ‘disconnect.’ Disconnect was the theme of first draft of the product.
also do not think we should change our words to communicate with him and then change his words in communicating to others. This could be necessary for understanding between interviewer and subject, but boundaries for legitimization should be established. Erroneous contextual interpretation could be imposed for every non-quoted representation. Otherwise, we could claim that he believes many things, but we never asked him what he thought he could be, we asked him what he wanted to be\(^3\). Maybe this is a novice researcher stumbling block. Interviews. \textit{(Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde)}. We should have learned ‘to examine vocabularies as a function of the assumptions and purposes of the users rather than an objective characterization of the people or objects of reference, (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998, p. 65). Maybe we did not get the answer to the question because we never asked the question.

\(^3\) This is in retrospect and based on the writer’s memory. We do not have full transcripts, just reconstructed notes because the tape recorder ate the cassette that contained both interviews.
September 2003

The first day of class...and I am learning about qualitative research methods. I admit the natural bias toward quantitative methods as having more precision and robustness, and I also admit some concern about making up a question and then deciding what evidence answers it. This really makes me skeptical because I can tweak answers to fit questions that I make up or I could just change my question if my process for collecting data does not involve instruments whose mechanisms are independent of me. That is certainly an ethical vulnerability of all research, certainly for funding and audience purposes, but I admitted to having more faith in methods that involve inanimate objects. However, I am eager to investigate this strange beast (henceforth to be called Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde)\(^4\) of qualitative research with the understanding that I come from a field of strange beasts in other’s eyes. So, I will ignore my number-crunching compulsions and see what is so green about the grass on the other side.

October 2003

When I went to the classroom to conduct the observation, I spent lots of time recording the macroscopic environment of the classroom. I drew diagrams, and identified objects in the class that would provide me with the first layer of information about who was in the classroom. In this process, I did not get lots of details about tones in conversations, faces made or gestures in interaction between students and the teacher. I felt

\(^4\) Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are characters that coexist in a man who is the main character in a Robert Louis Stevenson novel. Dr. Jekyll is a good doctor and Mr. Hyde is his alterego.
intrusive and tried to imagine myself as an inanimate object that had eyes and ears which could record observations. (Dr. Jekyll invades the file cabinet.) I think video recordings might help me triangulate the layers of data involved in an observation.

I was not very confident after our observation that ‘perceptions’ can be observed. More experienced researchers encouraged us to give the interview a chance. Using interviews you can delve into the student’s thinking and reasoning, whereas you cannot do this using observational data, (Johnson, 1997, p. 289), and so I went into the interview stage with less anxiety.

November 6th and 13th, 2003

Ironically, the most effective strategy is no strategy (Fetterman, 1998, p. 46)....”It is probably is efficient not to have a strategy and then you avoid disappointment when your strategies are unsuccessful at accomplishing the desired results.“

-excerpt from Interview Memo

Contrary to the literature, the team devised strategies to help the subject feel comfortable. We brought lunch, and we got him a present to thank him. We asked him questions about school, family, and future career goals in a sequence logical to us. Most of his answers were short, but sometimes he just talked freely. Usually, they were on things that excited him, but were not in the direction we wanted him to go. We would bring him right back to the topics we wanted to explore. In that respect, having no strategy may have gotten us a completely different picture of him from his talking about basketball, his friends, the digestion assignment, and sports cars. I felt disappointed because we did not get exactly what we
were looking for (as if you can see Mr. Hyde in Dr. Jekyll
during the day???)}, and more disappointed that we did not
allow him to just talk to us. This is one reason why I
felt like the interview was constrained much more than a
conversation would be. It might gain the researcher what
they want to see, but it might not show what the subject
would show us just through talking. Especially since we
only had one observation, the data from interviews gives us
a description of what he thinks, whereas observing him in
various contexts might demonstrate what he thinks. I
really wonder what people will tell you without asking
questions if they felt comfortable.
When (if) Dr. Jekyll realizes there is a Mr. Hyde, then what?

“It was I who had embellished, dressed up her statement to fit my own imagery, slipping myself into her text so quietly that I had not even realized, until now, that I was hiding in there.”

—Kate Altork, You Never Know When You Might Want to Be a Redhead in Belize

I have reservations about quoting him because we lost our tape and all interview data except a few minutes of transcript (*Mr. Hyde invades the ‘ghetto blaster’*)⁵. In class, we talk about when we think the subject is dishonest or giving us what he thinks we want, but how much of that is built into our interpretation and description and where do we account for it? I shudder to think that I might indulge in a Kate Altork experience and to have been rewriting as he was speaking as I conducted a real-time transcription, (Altork, 1998, p. 118). I was taking notes during the second interview, but I cannot verify them. What if I have misrepresented him and this data is the foundation of our coding and one of the citation sources in the product? I have strong concerns about validity and the ethical balance because there was limited data by design. After I make this plain, is that enough?

**December 7 2003 - The Product**

At this time, I do not know what the final product will look like. I have spent some time reviewing the transcripts and field notes, and I enjoy the story that I see in my mind (*Dr. Jekyll*). I do not need to have a

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⁵ ‘ghetto blaster’ refers to a boombox that we used to record the interviews because of its size and humorous picture created when carrying it around on campus and at the site. This is a research team moniker sparked from the allusion based upon a movie character from an early 1990s Spike Lee film.
profound discovery about him because he is in the seventh grade, and whatever he thinks is probably going to change. I still am not comfortable saying that we found a ‘disconnect,’ and I also do not think that we without reservation have found ‘perceptions.’ I spent lots of time looking at themes and not trying to be so theoretical, and the product story that I outlined only highlights themes. I built the framework so that we do not have to come to a group consensus on the ‘story’ in order to talk about what we found, but I am not certain that is what will happen. The likelihood that the product will demonstrate a consensus is high because the product writing process will go through many hands before it is complete and the last person’s voice might be the one with the loudest volume. This is another vulnerability of a research team. Everybody looks like Dr. Jekyll, but Mr. Hyde is also at the group meeting. I suppose purpose of the assignment is to write together and learn collaboration, so we did, but even that is left up to interpretation. If anybody’s voice is to be maintained, it is my hope that the subject’s voice takes priority over ours.
In conclusion, the nature of the beast on both sides of the research domain fence is in analysis and interpretation. Some observant eye is going to describe the patches of dry, brown grass on either side of the fence even though lush greenery grows far and wide. Some beasts are considered more domestic, while others are considered wild. One can gain lots of strength and wisdom from wrestling. The story told could be one of victory, defeat, or triumph after injury. However, there are two sides to every story, and I am grateful for the team approach to qualitative research. I exchange a number compulsion for a transcription and coding compulsion. The beast never dies.
References


