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“Grab” and Good Science: Writing Up the Results of Qualitative Research

Jane F. Gilgun

Qualitative researchers have an array of choices in how to write up their research. Yet many write in distanced, third-person voices and give short shrift to the voices of informants, as if neither they nor their informants were part of the research. In doing so, they might believe that their writing style is scientific. Unfortunately, such styles of writing not only silence their informants and themselves, but many times they also contradict the philosophies of science on which many forms of qualitative research are based. If our philosophies of science are science, then how we write up our research, when it is consistent with our science, must logically be scientific. “Grab,” or writing that is both interesting and memorable, goes hand in hand with good science.

Keywords: *qualitative research; writing social science; Chicago School of Sociology; philosophy of science; definitions of science; constructivism*

While I was reviewing a manuscript on the quality of constructivist research recently, it struck me that the distanced voice in which the author wrote contradicted the spirit of constructivism. Instead of conveying a sense of the experiences of informants, the author presented vague, general statements written in an anonymous, third-person voice. If his or her philosophy of science had been positivistic, then the voice chosen might have been appropriate. In a private note to the journal editor, I said that the piece was also boring, mainly because I knew the voices of informants were swirling below the surface. In retrospect, *boring* is a strong term, but that was my immediate response.

Reflecting later, I realized that omitting the voices of authors and informants perpetuates a form of silencing, which could not be further from the emancipatory spirit of constructivism. By using a third-person voice, the author, who appeared to be a talented younger scholar, silenced her- or himself along with the informants. What is going on? It takes a lot of effort to make qualitative research boring. I wondered what professors in graduate school had taught this scholar about writing.

This younger researcher has lots of company. Over the years, I have noticed that many authors write about qualitative research in detached, third-person voices. This manuscript on constructivism, however, triggered my wanting to speak about

writing up the results of qualitative research, maybe because the author was a young scholar and so obviously talented. My purpose in this article is to stimulate some rethinking among researchers who write in distanced, third-persons styles, who mute the voices of informants and their own, and who encourage their students to do the same.

In this article, I provide an historical overview of how well-known qualitative researchers have talked about and written qualitative research. I also reflect on whether definitions of science influence the kinds of writing professors in graduate school encourage and reward their students for doing. Finally, I show how "grab" (Glaser, 1978), or writing that is interesting and memorable, is consistent with good science.

SOME HISTORY

The topic of how to write up the results of social science research is not new. In the first part of the 20th century, Small (1916) used the first person to write an engaging essay on the first 50 years of sociology in the United States. He advised scholars to go beyond "technical treatises" and to include "frank details" to give future generations a sense of the times in which they lived. He believed that personal testimony provides "clues to interpretation of the period producing them" (p. 722).

As the first chair of the sociology department at the University of Chicago, Small recruited faculty who shared his views and who not only produced compelling, memorable research but who also worked with graduate students who produced models of good research and good writing (Bulmer, 1984; Gilgun, 1999b). He hired such faculty as Thomas (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920/1927), Park, and Burgess (Park & Burgess, 1921), whose students included Young (1932), Johnson (1922), and Frazier (1932, 1939), among many others. These scholars helped to create what became known as the Chicago School of Sociology, whose legacy includes writing that is evocative and cogent, emphasis on researchers' immersion in the field, and the blending of ideas with first-hand descriptions (Bulmer, 1984).

Small's influence extended beyond the University of Chicago. He founded the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895 and was editor until 1924, and he helped found the American Sociological Society, which became the American Sociological Association; yet today, Small's views are not well known.

An example of the style of writing that Small encouraged is from Dollard's (1937) study of caste and class in a southern town. Dollard gave "frank details" on his fears that other white persons would see him with "Negroes" on his front porch. The mores of the time dictated that the proper place for black people was at the back door and that white people do not shake hands with black persons.

My Negro friend brought still another Negro up on the porch to meet me. Should we shake hands? Would he be insulted if I did not, or would he accept the situation? I kept my hands in pockets and did not do it, a device that was often useful in resolving such a situation. (p. 7)

This verbal portrait tells a great deal not only about the racist practices of a Southern town in the United States during the first part of the 20th century but also about how a White man from the North conformed. Dollard said he wrote in the first person

because “it will show the researcher as separate from his [*sic*] data . . . and it will give the reader a more vivid sense of the research experience” (p. 2).

Another example is Whyte’s (1943) first-person account of “street corner society,” a book that sounds as if it could have been written today, not only in terms of the information it provides but also in terms of its writing style, which is lively and in the first person.

I approached the group and opened with something like this: “Pardon me. Would you mind if I joined you?” There was a moment of silence while the man stared at me. He then offered to throw me downstairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance. (p. 289)

A final early example is from the work of Bott (1957), a British anthropologist who made seminal contributions to the study of families and social networks. Here, she described her theorizing about some of the many concepts she originated.

By degree of segregation of conjugal roles I mean the relative balance between complementary and independent activities on the one hand, and joint activities on the other. (p. 55)

Bott un-self-consciously used the first person even while sharing her attempts at theorizing.

RECENT THOUGHT

More recently, many others have addressed the writing of qualitative research. Haraway (1988) warned researchers not to pull the “the God trick” by speaking in anonymous third-person voices. Instead, she urged them to make their presence explicit in their writings. For hooks (1990), speaking for others is a form of colonization, where authority figures appropriate the voices of persons they are studying. Foley (2002) explicated four types of reflexivity in writing: confessional, theoretical, textual, and deconstructive. He believed that these kinds of writing “transform the idea of scientific ethnography” (p. 469). His review of thinking on reflexivity can stimulate creative ideas about writing.

Another aspect of contemporary thought on reflexivity that has a long history is the idea that researchers shape any piece of writing, irrespective of the voice in which they choose to speak and the degree to which they include the voices of the persons whom they research. Mowrer (1932) made such an observation more than 70 years ago when he said,

But facts are not born full bloom to be plucked by anyone. In every perceptive experience there is an infinite number of observations which might be made but which are not. What the individual sees is determined in part, at least, by what he [*sic*] is trained to observe. (p. 281)

Furthermore, many contemporary researchers believe that the materials researchers generate are co-constructions, representations of interactive processes between researchers and researched. Fine (1994) examined the reciprocities

between researchers and those whom they research. She challenged notions of "scientific neutrality, universal truths, and researcher dispassion" (p. 70). The use of the first person and of direct quotes is a way of acknowledging that the voices of researchers and those whom we research are not the same yet are interconnected.

Although the authors of *The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2001) give a scanty rationale, they stated that clarity requires the use of the first person; authors who do not "may give the impression that you did not take part in your own study" (p. 38).

For many qualitative researchers, Clifford and Marcus's (1986) edited volume *Writing Culture* is a landmark. By focusing on the relevance of literary theory, terms such as *metaphors*, *poetic*, and *literary* more frequently became attached to ethnographic writing following the publication of this work. (In this essay, I view what is said about ethnographies to be applicable to the writing of other forms of qualitative research.) The essayists portray ethnographic writings as political inventions that have the potential to resist and transform dominant modes of thought and social structures.

These essays have inspired many qualitative researchers to rethink how they represent what they find. Denzin and Lincoln, editors of *Qualitative Inquiry*, have put the journal in the forefront of showing the many ways that literary theory and genres can enrich the writing up of qualitative research. An example is a special issue on arts-based approaches to qualitative inquiry that Mullen and Finley (2003) guest edited.

Countless researchers now experiment with how they represent the products of their research. In a recent review of the literature on popular theater as a performative research method, Conrad (2003) noted, "In the past few years I have attended presentations and read about research using forms including reader's theatre, poetry, photography, music, collage, drawing, sculpture, quilting, stained glass, performance and dance" (p. 15). Lather and Smithies (1997) used a split-page method, where the top of the page contained transcripts of taped interviews with women with HIV/AIDS and the bottom of the page was author commentary.

These views give researchers fresh ideas about how to represent themselves and the persons we research. For example, in an article on gendering violence that I wrote with Laura McLeod, a doctoral student in anthropology (Gilgun & McLeod, 1999), we represented several voices. We supplied ample direct quotes from the accounts of our two informants. We wanted them to speak for themselves in their own words. As coauthors, we spoke in the authorial "we." When we had divergent interpretations of the accounts of the informants, we spoke as individuals, put our first names to the sections that were our interpretations, and italicized our responses. Our analyses were often laced with anger.

An excerpt from this article illustrates these points. The speaker is Tim (not his real name), a social service professional with a graduate degree and who abused sexually boys for whom he had responsibility. His story deeply affected me, because I am a professor of social work. My responsibilities include teaching students in graduate programs. This is what Tim said about the boys he victimized:

I'd train them to the point where they knew when certain things were a certain way, that it was time to be sexual. With a couple of my victims, I had them trained so well that they would initiate it. . . .

Jane: He had the power and the sense of entitlement to train them, and he also had access to their case files, and this was a power as well, a diabolical power, where he knew what was lacking in their lives . . .

Laura: "Train" them—he sounds like he's talking about a dog. Dogs and women and children—all become sexual objects who ought to do what Tim wants them to do for him.

WHY NOT?

I have only cracked open the door of the storehouse of ideas that qualitative researchers can draw on to justify evocative, compelling writing styles. The materials I have cited and others are widely available. Many have been around for a long time. What is holding so many scholars back?

I believe that qualitative researchers who write in distanced, third-person voices and who give short shrift to informants believe that this kind of writing is scientific and that lively, first-person writing is not. At issue in the writing of qualitative research, then, might be definitions of *science*. Discourse, or language and its implications, defines, exemplifies, and enforces particular understandings of science and excludes others (Gilgun, 2002).

Because most qualitative researchers recognize multiple perspectives, logically, we can consider the idea that definitions of science are pluralistic and that dominant understandings are subject to revision. I think that most qualitative researchers agree with Popper (1969), who said that science proceeds from conjectures and refutations. I doubt that he, and most qualitative researchers, would say that definitions of science are not subject to conjectures and refutations.

Any form of science requires that researchers do careful observations and represent observations as well as they can. Social scientists observe, interact with, transform, and are transformed by other human beings. Thus, we social scientists have the task of figuring out how to represent ourselves and other human beings in the most full and accurate way possible. So, if other human beings—and we as researchers—have thoughts, emotions, silences, histories, and multiple motivations, then our job is to represent them well, as these fit with our philosophies of science and the focus of our research.

So much of what it means to do qualitative research includes challenging and transforming dominant understandings and practices. Academics who teach students to do qualitative research and those who review for journals and conferences are positioned to foster the writing of lively, first-person, multiple-voiced texts. When researchers write for publication, we can rethink how we present ourselves and informants. We can ask ourselves if our modes of presentation are consistent with the philosophies of science underlying our research. Doing so will also open up dialogue about the nature of science. In short, if our philosophies of science are science, then how we write up our research, when it is consistent with our science, must logically be scientific.

VARIETIES OF DOING AND WRITING SCIENCE

My understanding of science includes the ideal of coming to some conclusion, no matter how tentative, about my observations and to provide evidence for my obser-

vations. Thus, my style of doing science includes not only representing my informants well, and me when doing so is relevant, but also drawing some conclusions about my observations. Sometimes, therefore, my conclusions are explicit theoretical statements and subjective reactions (e.g., Gilgun, 1999a; Gilgun & McLeod, 1999).

On the other hand, there are times when my findings are more powerful if I let my analysis and subjective reactions be implicit. In such cases, I do not provide an analysis, nor do I reveal my inner processes (e.g., Gilgun, in press). The genre in which I am writing and my operative philosophies of science guide me to making decisions about how to represent myself and my informants. If my philosophy of science is positivistic, then a distanced, third-person voice and the objectification of the voices of informants could be appropriate.

GRAB

Qualitative researchers have a marvelous range of choices in how they convey their findings. Yet, so many continue to write as if they are unaware of this amazingly creative work that engages their colleagues. For the sake of consistency, why not write up qualitative research in ways that show that the medium is the message, that is, to ensure that the forms we choose are consistent with researchers' philosophies of science? I do not think all researchers should blur genres and use literary forms to convey their research, but I do think many researchers could loosen up. After all, we as researchers want others to read and remember what we write.

Years ago, Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that the credibility of qualitative research rests on several strategies. Some of them are specific to particular types of qualitative research, such as using "abstract social science terminology" (p. 228) when researchers' goals are theory development. By using terms that are familiar, other researchers will readily understand the ideas.

Another strategy, however, is relevant to many forms of qualitative research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that researchers present findings so that readers are "sufficiently caught up in the description so that he [*sic*] feels vicariously that he [*sic*] was also in the field" (p. 230). Glaser (1978) later called for "grab" in writing up research, a term he did not define, but he noted that readers should find the material interesting and memorable.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative researchers, therefore, have choices in how to present and represent what they come up with. These choices extend historically to some of the early sociologists. Researchers can include themselves and their informants in their writing to varying degrees. They have many formats and genres from which to pick. A guideline I suggest for making choices is whether the presentation is consistent with the philosophy of science on which the research is based. I would like to push all researchers to write qualitative research that also has grab. Most of all, I would like researchers to write as if grab and good science go hand in hand.

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