Qualitative Health Research

http://qhr.sagepub.com/

Writing Up Qualitative Research... Better

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/12/1/91

Published by:
⑤SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Health Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://qhr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://qhr.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://qhr.sagepub.com/content/12/1/91.refs.html

Writing Up Qualitative Research . . . Better

Harry F. Wolcott

The author presents his views for breaking from the traditional order ("Chapter Two" in many studies) and segregation of topics—literature review, theory, and method—in favor of integrating these components into a report only as needed. He urges researchers to consider alternative ways of satisfying the intent of a literature review. He questions whether traditional requirements result in theories being forced or presented prematurely, and raises the possibility of presenting multiple or cumulative theories toward the study's end. He notes that qualitative research is based on participant observation and the resulting insights and wonders whether an emphasis on methodology detracts from our studies. Engaging writing can result when writers are free to break with tradition and present their findings in discovery-oriented ways.

Short-term memory lapse strikes again. After accepting Jan Morse's invitation to give this talk, I could not remember whether she said to give *the Sage* address or to give *a sage* address. I decided not to take any chances. I am going to talk about my monograph *Writing Up Qualitative Research*, first published by Sage in 1990. The monograph appeared as one of those little blue volumes in the Qualitative Research series. It has done remarkably well—more than 28,000 copies at last count. So Sage suggested a second edition, this time as a stand-alone book, updated and expanded.

The success of the earlier monograph has been intimidating. The impetus for writing it came from Mitch Allen, then an editor at Sage and now affiliated with AltaMira Press. Mitch suggested the idea when I stopped by the book exhibit at the 1988 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. By the time I returned to my hotel room I had in mind the book I would write. Yet, had he not proposed it, I would never have dreamed of writing on the topic of writing. And, having written the book, I never would have imagined its success. Three of what I might refer to as "former friends," all teachers of English in high school, thought the book quite unworthy, and I steeled myself for the worst. What I had not recognized is that high school English teachers are *teachers* of writing, not struggling researchers who must write. The book's audience was the latter, and that audience did not mind hearing

about my problems and solutions, rather than be told how they should write accounts or how Thomas Hardy or George Eliot had gone about writing theirs.

I still don't know exactly what worked, or why. In revising, I have tried to leave as much as possible of the earlier writing intact, to focus on updating, clarifying, and adding new ideas. I decided to leave the chapters in place, even with their terrible titles like *Getting Going*, *Keeping Going*, and *Tightening Up*, because I hoped readers would grimace at such labels and immediately think how they might improve them. That's the kind of thinking that gets good writing out of bad first drafts, and it doesn't matter to me if people see it in my writing before recognizing it in their own.

In the years since the monograph's publication in 1990, I have been attentive to other writing-related problems noted among colleagues and, especially, among doctoral students completing dissertations. Although I had never given a name to the most critical set of problems I identified, I now give them the collective title of "The Chapter Two Problem."

The problem first struck me in bold fashion in 1985 when I spent a year in Thailand as a guest lecturer and consultant. I was invited on one occasion to speak to graduate students in education at a university outside Bangkok. I decided to talk about my second major study, *The Man in the Principal's Office* (Wolcott, 1973). I wasn't sure how much of my talk a Thai audience would understand, but I knew there was keen interest in qualitative research. I presented the study as something of a model. I began by describing the scope of the first chapter in detail because it dealt with how I went about the research. I assumed that methods were of primary importance to these graduate students. I was watching my audience closely, trying to discern whether they were following my words. I decided to pose a question to them. "If chapter 1 gave an account of the fieldwork," I queried, "what do you think I presented in chapter 2?" An eager response and a flood of hands, and my listeners chanted with glee and confidence, "Review of the Literature."

Wrong! My second chapter was titled "A Day in the Life," and it recounted what the principal actually did on one particular day. But my audience of Thai students already had the contents of any and every academic chapter 2 fixed in their minds. I was struck by having traveled halfway around the world to visit a strange campus in a foreign place to describe a totally unfamiliar study, only to find students with a ready-made answer to my question. Dammit, I thought, is chapter 2 doomed always and only to be a review of the literature, regardless of institution or language or national origin?

Then and there I resolved that somehow, someday, I would try to liberate chapter 2. Of course, chapter 2 *can* be a review of the literature, if that's what you want, or a dissertation committee—or later, your publisher—insists on. Or it can deal with *method*. Or it can deal with *theory*. Or you can go for broke and get all three out of the way at once: theory, method, and review of the literature. But chapter 2 does not *have to* deal with any of these. There is no law governing the contents of chapter 2 any more than there is a law that dissertations must be boring. Furthermore, there is considerable risk that diverting attention to these topics will obscure or overshadow what you have to report. Chapter 2 ought to be whatever you as author want it to be—it's your story, your research, and you ought to feel free to develop it in the manner that best allows you to accomplish your purposes.

Now, how to get the message out, at least to raise awareness of how we have come to accept this seeming "tradition?" I saw my opportunity in preparing the revision of *Writing Up Qualitative Research*. I could take up my cause in a new chapter, one that would slip in nicely right in the middle of the book. My tentative title for the chapter was "Linking Up."

The editor at Sage with whom I worked on the revision, C. Deborah Laughton, was thrilled with the proposed chapter title and its presumed contents. She promptly informed me she couldn't wait to see what I had to say about computer links, networking, and the like. But I am not of that generation; no one reads Wolcott to learn the latest about computer capabilities. This is a chapter about making links with the work of others. In the chapter, I suggest that we encourage less rather than more of it and that we draw on these three facets of qualitative study—method, theory, and literature—on a when-and-as-needed basis. That is my sage advice. The content of this talk is on the new Chapter 4, "Linking Up," which appears in the second edition of *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (Wolcott, 2001).

If you listen closely to get the gist of my argument, you won't even have to buy a copy of the new edition because this is the only totally new material in the book. If you have come across the first edition in the past 11 years, you may not notice that much change in the rest of it. Of course, if your students or coworkers have never read it, I hope you will direct them to the new edition because I can say, and my editor wholeheartedly agrees with me, the revision is a better book. It's *Writing Up Qualitative Research* . . . better.

I turn immediately to the contents of the new chapter, which is Chapter 4 in the revised edition. Sage advice, I hope; a Sage publication, for sure. You may find my arguments unconvincing and feel more convinced than ever that things should remain as they have been. Indeed, you may feel that I am promoting a lessening of standards, a diminishing of rigor. But hear me out, and consider whether things need to be quite as hide-bound as they sometimes appear. When the dissertation becomes the *last* document a person writes, the dissertation research the *only* research in which a person ever engages, then our efforts at rigor seem counterproductive.

The remarks that follow are taken from the text, with changes and abridgment as necessary to stay within suggested time limits and to soften the effect of your having to listen to words intended to be read *by* you rather than *to* you. Keep in mind that this is Chapter 4 of seven chapters in all. It sits right in the middle, with chapters about "getting going" and "keeping going" preceding it and chapters about "tightening up," "finishing up," and "getting published" following it.

I begin the chapter with a reminder that to this point in the book I have focused single-mindedly on the stated purpose of your research. I have urged you to do the same. I have gone so far as to suggest that you draw attention to a sentence that begins, "The purpose of this research is . . . " You won't go wrong if those very words appear in your final draft and you make them sentence 1, of paragraph 1, of chapter 1. Although that is a rather unimaginative way to announce your purpose and begin an account, it should convey to readers what you have been up to.

But research is embedded in social contexts and, like all human behavior, is *overdetermined*, the consequence of a multiplicity of factors. Researchers themselves also have contexts and purposes far beyond the immediate scope of their studies.

Time now to expand the gaze, to look at research as a social act and to the *multiple* purposes (note the plural) we seek in pursuing research as a professional calling. How do we link up our research—and ourselves—with others?

I draw attention to three topics that offer opportunities for such "linking up." The first is the traditional review of the literature. The second is the expected paean to theory. Third is the customary discourse on method.

The three topics have become so much a part of the reporting ritual that, in many qualitative (and most quantitative) dissertations, each may be assigned a separate chapter. Too often, the topics are addressed in elaborate detail before the reader catches more than a glimpse of what the researcher is up to.

Rather than underscore the important role played by each of these in the research process *writ large*, I want to explore some alternative ways for linking up with "the literature," with theory, and with method that complement and augment the research that *you* are reporting. That seems preferable to regarding the three as hurdles to overcome or rituals to be performed before you are free to strike out on your own. But you must gauge your own situation and the prevailing norms in your academic specialization and, if you are preparing a thesis or dissertation, in your department as well. If institutional constraints are strong, or your committee members include faculty yet to be convinced about your qualitative approach, you may decide that a far, far better thing to do is to comply with the expectations set before you. Before you begin to rock the boat, be sure you are in it.

Do, however, make sure that the traditions you are honoring really exist and are not just part of the mythology surrounding dissertation writing or getting an article accepted. I recall a discussion with a senior faculty member who insisted that her dissertation advisees prepare a lengthy chapter 2 reviewing the literature. She defended her staunchly held position on the grounds that a review was *required* by our Graduate School. I did not for a minute deny that she could insist that her students prepare such a chapter. But I insisted that the "rule" was hers. I offered then and there to accompany her to the Graduate School to prove my point. She allowed (privately) that the rule might not *actually* exist, but she demanded such a review as evidence of her students' "mastery" in their field. I had, and have, no argument with finding ways to have students demonstrate their newly won command of some special body of literature. But it has always seemed counterproductive to burden a dissertation with a secondary function diametrically opposed to demonstrating one's ability to focus on a particular phenomenon studied in depth. A command of the literature can be assessed through other assignments, for example, a separate synthesis paper included as part of the requirements in a graduate program.

What I propose is that instead of treating these linking activities as independent exercises—in a dissertation and in all subsequent scholarly writing—you remain resolutely selective about the links you make, and you make relevant links on a when-and-as-needed basis. Most likely, that will mean holding off, except for the most general of comments, until the research you are reporting needs to be situated in broader contexts.

For purposes here, I am assuming that the researcher does have plenty, and probably even too much, to report, which is usually the case in descriptively oriented fieldwork-based studies. In such circumstances, one should not be expected to present a major review of everything that everyone else has done before reporting some original observations of one's own.

FIRST, THE "LIT REVIEW"

Perhaps you paid close attention, even breathed a sigh of relief, when I suggested (as I do in an earlier chapter) that you dispense with devoting chapter 2 to a traditional literature review. Especially if, as Howard Becker (1986) put it in his neat little book *Writing for Social Scientists*, you are feeling "terrorized by the literature" (chap. 8). Now hear the full message, not just the words you may have rejoiced to hear.

First, what I tell you has absolutely no authority behind it. I am not one of the people who must be satisfied with your study. Citing me as an authoritative source for deviating from tradition is more likely to get both of us in trouble than to get you out of an obligation. If you are directed to write a traditional chapter 2 or its equivalent by someone who *does* have authority, then do it you must. Perhaps you can negotiate the alternative that I propose. If not, accept the fact and rise to the challenge. Whether the experience will be "good for you" is difficult to ascertain, but I can assure that it could be bad for you if you do not. Note also that if you are asked to prepare such a chapter, it will be left to you to figure out just which *literatures* (note the plural again) you are expected to include—method, theory, prior research, social significance of the problem, philosophical underpinnings of inquiry, implications for policy, applications to practice, and so forth.

My sense is that readers want to be engaged immediately with the problem you are addressing rather than be subjected to a testimonial to how learned you have become. They will assume you have a solid rationale for undertaking your research and will reveal it in time. They are not likely to insist that you plow through the entire history of your topic before you dare take a step of your own. They come to their task ready to join you in a presentation—a "re-presentation"—of what you have to contribute. One of the things that makes *all* academic teaching and writing so boring is the practice of approaching every topic with a backward look at where and how it all began. Origins are important, but things don't necessarily need to be presented in the order in which they happened. A brief explanation as to the significance of the topic should be enough for starters.

Rather than dedicating an entire chapter to an examination of the underpinnings of your inquiry, I suggest that you draw on the relevant work of others on a when-and-as-needed basis. (As you surely are beginning to realize, "when-and-as-needed" serves as a mantra for the whole chapter.) I object to the practice of simply backing up with a truckload of stuff and dumping it on unsuspecting readers, which seems to be what most traditional reviews accomplish. That is more likely to create an obstacle that gets in the way of, rather than paves the way to, reporting what you have to contribute.

Given the number of years you undoubtedly have been subjected to such an approach, you may feel duty bound to follow it. Well and good if you can weave your review into an engaging account without losing your readers along the way. But if the urge and urgency to provide a traditional review reflects the wishes of a dissertation committee, perhaps you can negotiate that the review be incorporated into your research *proposal* rather than into the final account. In that way, you can demonstrate your command of the literature without having to force it into a predetermined place in the dissertation.

In subsequent writing, should you feel a need to document in exhaustive detail how things came to be, draft such a statement and then set it aside. You can decide

later whether your readers are likely to feel the same need that you did for such thorough grounding. Look for alternative ways to satisfy the *intent* of the literature review. By all means, flag important citations to the work of others. But do so sparingly, only as the references are critical in helping you to analyze and to situate *your* problem and *your* research within some broader context. In the normal course of things, the need for locating your work within a widening circle of concern is most likely to be toward the end of your study, where you begin to draw the strands together and ponder some broader implications.

NEXT, MAKING THE LINK TO THEORY

You may be expected—or directed—to say something explicit about the issue of theory. No one will let you (or me) get away with the idea that there are no theoretical implications in our work, but issues of theory can be addressed in myriad ways. Let me turn to the roles theory can play so that it offers a way to extend the significance of your work. Theory should not be regarded as just another ritual to attend to, another obstacle along the route to obtaining an advanced degree or getting something published.

Although my point here is to consider ways to link up with the work and ideas of others, linking activities themselves have a time and a place. Don't begin linking too soon. I have suggested that you hold off on the lit review until the material you are introducing is well in place. Even more emphatically, I urge you to hold off introducing theory until it is quite clear what you are interested in theorizing about, and how that relates directly to what you have to report. Focus on the descriptive task until you have provided a solid basis for analysis and for determining how, and how much, to draw on the work of others.

When you are ready to address matters of analysis and interpretation, consider proposing multiple plausible explanations rather than pressing single-mindedly for a particularly inviting one. Guard against the temptation to offer satisfying, simple, single-cause explanations that too facilely appear to solve the problems we address. Human behavior is complexly motivated. Our interpretations should mirror that complexity rather than suggest that we have the omniscience to infer "real" meanings. Qualitative researchers should reveal and revel in complexity. As anthropologist Charles Frake (1977) has observed, we should strive to make things appropriately complex without rendering them more opaque. Leave for more quantitatively oriented colleagues efforts to tie things up in neat bundles. They are better situated to do that and appropriately compulsive about it.

Interpretive remarks belong in the summation, where you situate your study in broader context. That is the place to draw on the work and thinking of others. And be selective. Don't succumb to the temptation of making a "parade" of social theory. Theory ought to be useful, not simply for show. Roger Sanjek (1999) offered a practical lesson for drawing on theory quite different from simply making a parade of it. In describing how theory served as a resource in writing up an extended community study, he reported "I searched for no more theory than I needed to organize and tell my story" (p. 3). If you are writing up research, theory should serve your purpose, not the other way around. In other words, when you can *make theory work* for you, use it. When theory is only *making work* for you, look for alternative ways to pull your account together and to explain what you have been up to.

Of course, *if* theory has guided your inquiry from the start, the reader should be informed from the start. But in observing students and colleagues at work over the years, I have more often seen theory imposed, in a too-obvious effort to rationalize data already collected, than I have seen data collection guided by a theory already well in hand. Field-oriented researchers tend to be greatly influenced (awed?) by theory. By the very nature of the way we approach things—flatfooted observers with feet of clay—we tend at most to be theory borrowers (or theory "poachers," as others sometimes see us), rather than theory builders. Taking a model of theory-driven research derived from the so-called hard sciences doesn't serve anything but our already heightened sense of physics envy. Unless you think one must wear a white lab coat to be a careful observer, forget that model and keep your "theorizing" modest and relevant.

Clifford Geertz (2000) observed in a brief new preface to a reissue of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "This backward order of things—first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about—may seem odd, or even perverse, but it is, I think . . . standard procedure in cultural anthropology" (p. vi). I'll hazard that it's standard procedure in most qualitative inquiry. Discovery is our forte.

Drawing theoretical implications is a critical aspect of the research process writ large, and the advancement of theoretical knowledge is a reasonable expectation for our cumulative efforts. But making a relevant link to theory is not a step that every researcher is prepared, or has been prepared, to take. Take your work as far as you are able. Let your students do the same. Point the way if you are not prepared to take the theoretical leap yourself—especially if and when it begins to feel like a leap—rather than making a pretense at "doing the theory thing." If you have presented your descriptive account well and offered what you can by way of analysis, you have fulfilled the crucial obligation to make your research accessible. Undertheorized research abounds, but there is no such thing as *unreported* research! Recognize as well that some scholars prefer to have us doing the basic descriptive task, freeing those more theoretically inclined to do what they do best. The way we continue beating up on the work of our predecessors should remind you that no one ever pulls off the whole thing or quite gets it right. My hunch is that if you are drawn to qualitative approaches, you are not among the theory-compulsive.

If you have the choice—that is, if you are not directed otherwise—consider integrating theory, or introducing your concerns about theory, into your account at the place where such concerns actually entered your thinking, rather than feeling obligated to slip theory in at the beginning as though it prompted or guided your research all along. In rare cases, at least among novice researchers, the pursuit of theory might provide a narrative thread for weaving the account together. Seasoned hands such as yourselves might be able to weave a spellbinding tale of theory-driven research, especially if the account reveals the risks of conducting research when you know in advance what you are looking for.

The search for theory, like a cogent review of the literature, offers a way to link up with the prior work of others and a shorthand way to convey the gist of our interests and our inquiries. This "searching" stage is where one's dissertation committee, one's student or faculty colleagues, even anonymous reviewers, can—but seldom do—render invaluable service. Rather than belittle the efforts of novice researchers who thrash about trying desperately to hook up with theory, those more experienced can—and should—suggest possible leads and links. Is there any reason why making the theory link could not become a more interactive (and more

collegial) element in dissertations, with faculty input publicly acknowledged by identifying not only the theoretical insights proposed but also identifying, by name, the faculty member who suggests them?

Doctoral students often reach this "Where's your theory?" stage in writing their dissertations, pressed for time and feeling they have gone about as far as they can—or dare—go in theorizing their studies. Potentially, that presents a great teaching moment, provided help is proffered in a truly helpful way. But when well-intended suggestions fail to take root, it seems preferable to leave fledgling researchers' accounts where they are rather than stepping in to wrest control from them. Wresting control may "save the day for science" but at the possible cost of ambushing beginning researchers and leaving them dead in their tracks. Better, I think, for a student to submit an undertheorized study that is entirely his or her own than to feel that in the final moments a work has literally been yanked away to be placed on a supposedly higher theoretical plane that the student is not yet able to attain.

Personal reflection: The satisfactory closure that my own dissertation committee was probably expecting, or hoping for, in my dissertation completed in 1964 did eventually get written—but a quarter of a century passed before I was able to write it—in the 1989 reissue of *A Kwakiutl Village and School* (see Wolcott, 1967). I appreciate that committee members were satisfied, if perhaps not wildly elated, with the essentially descriptive account that I wrote. If they wondered among themselves whether I might be pushed to take things a bit further, they were kind enough not to insist. In contrast to my experience, I am haunted by the words of a student who told me, years after the fact, that she never bothered to make a personal copy of her dissertation. "Why should I?" she queried. "Those weren't my words, they were my advisor's!" Such intrusiveness is most likely to be exhibited in theoretical heavy-handedness when a novice researcher is shoved aside by a probably well-intentioned advisor who insists, "Here, let me take over. You don't seem to know what you are doing at this point." More recently, a former colleague serving with me on a dissertation committee confided privately that he simply did not have time to bring the student's study up to his own high theoretical standard. Sound familiar? An academic put-down, when a patient reach-down would have been so much more instructive.

Most "theoretical agonizing" can better be located toward the end of a descriptive study rather than at its beginning. But, must there be any agonizing at all? Would anything be lost by *playing* with theories, the way we sometimes claim to play with ideas? Similarly, it has been suggested that we need not, indeed, should not, limit ourselves to a consideration of only one theory at a time. Economist Johan Galtung makes this plea on behalf of what he calls *theoretical pluralism* (Galtung, 1990, p. 101). Should you regard theory as too lofty even to make an appearance in your work, can you be coaxed into an examination of the concepts you have employed, or your ideas, your hunches, your notions, your speculations, even your best guesses? More modestly, you might make an initial foray simply by ferreting out critical assumptions that have guided your inquiry.

Another role that theory plays, and could play to a greater extent, addresses a nagging shortcoming of qualitative study: our individual and collective failure to make our efforts cumulative. Every study tends to be one-of-a-kind, due largely to the fierce independence of most qualitative researchers and the limited scope of what one individual can ever hope to accomplish. A small step might be to make better use of our own earlier studies in interpreting our later ones, to make our

individual efforts cumulative over time, such as pursuing different aspects of a central problem, or studying a common phenomenon from different perspectives. The challenge of making a greater effort to explore theoretical underpinnings need not, and should not, be placed so squarely on the shoulders of neophyte researchers.

We might also become more forgiving about our lack of theoretical sophistication in general. I am not apologetic about such a lack in my own work. I doubt that those with strong theoretical leanings find much of interest in my studies. I call my interpretations just that, "interpretations." I do not deny their implications for theory, nor do I deny that my data, like all data, are theory laden; I subscribe to William James's notion (attributed in Mike Agar's wonderful introduction to ethnography, *The Professional Stranger*, 1996, p. 75) that *you can't even pick up rocks in a field without a theory.* It is the term theory itself, and the mystical power attributed to it, that seem to get out of hand.

LINKING UP THROUGH METHOD

If the role of theory tends to be underplayed in writing up qualitative research, the role and importance of method are more often overplayed, especially when method is equated with, and thus restricted to, discussing techniques of data gathering.

Fully explicated, method encompasses more than technique, far more importantly including procedures for data analysis, topics I have addressed elsewhere (Wolcott, 1994, 1995, 1999). But when qualitative researchers address method as a topic to be "covered" in reporting their research, they tend to dwell too narrowly, too exhaustively, and sometimes too defensively on how they conducted their fieldwork and collected their data.

It is that narrow sense of the term, *method as technique*, that I examine in the chapter. The defensiveness grows out of apologies that essentially all we do is observe, whereas our quantitatively oriented colleagues pursue their work through something called "the scientific method." I remember a brief conversation with a seatmate on a transcontinental flight who told me he was a physicist whose specialty was the study of the ozone layer. I asked him how one would ever begin to research such a topic. I found his answer remarkably comforting: "First off, you need some observational data."

All research is based on observational data—an observation that is itself overlooked by those who insist on emphasizing differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Placing the approaches in opposition does a great disservice by detracting from the contribution to be made by each, including what each can contribute to the other. Most qualitative researchers would benefit by paying closer attention to counting and measuring whatever warrants being counted and measured; most quantifiers could "lighten up" to reveal highly personal aspects about themselves that strongly influence their professional practice. We all number our pages. We all make hopelessly subjective decisions in selecting the topics we research, regardless of how systematically some researchers proceed beyond that.

But, a word of caution to qualitative researchers tempted to lean on the sanctity of method, and especially to fieldwork techniques, to validate their research or to confer status. A critical "insider's appraisal" of our techniques is in order. That is the third kind of linking I examine in the chapter. As with the previous two, I suggest

you make less rather than more of this link. In this case, however, the rationale is different.

When it comes to method, the links we can make to the work of others are neither powerful nor persuasive. Method is not the forte of qualitative research. Let me provide a brief overview to emphasize the rather ordinary, everyday approaches we employ. My intent is to dissuade you from the temptation to build or to strengthen your case by virtue of method alone. You are not obliged to review and defend the whole qualitative movement before proceeding with the particulars of your case.

RESEARCH "TECHNIQUES" IN QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Prior to the last three or four decades, not much had been written about field methods. As best I recall, the phrase "qualitative research" was rarely (never?) heard even in the 1960s. Of what had been written earlier, the same few references and the same few illustrative studies were cited almost to the exclusion of all others. Outside the fields of anthropology and qualitative sociology, however, they were generally regarded as exceptions to the rule of what constituted "real" or "rigorous" (i.e., experimentally controlled and thus verifiable) research.

Today, a different circumstance prevails. Fieldwork "approaches" have been wrested from the disciplines that introduced and nurtured them. The techniques that characterize field studies are widely known and practiced.

What I have done in the final part of the chapter is to underscore how broad the scope of qualitative study has become, how interrelated but complex its facets are. To suggest that interrelatedness, I originally arranged the major approaches within a circle, like pieces of pie: a slice for phenomenology, a slice for case study, a slice for ethnomethodology, and so forth (see Wolcott, 1990, p. 65). Pie charts ordinarily are used to illustrate proportion, but I wanted to show how the various approaches taken together can be subsumed under one broad label: qualitative inquiry.

In the years since, I have been looking for a better analogy than a pie or wheel. Eventually, I came up with the idea of representing qualitative approaches as a tree, not coincidentally unlike the giant oaks and maples I see from the windows of my study. Major branches extend out for archival research, observation strategies, and interview strategies, and a main trunk retains the feature common to them all—participant observation.

I describe the "tree" in detail in the chapter to suggest that there is little point in trying to provide a grand overview of qualitative research when any particular study can draw only selectively from such a wide variety of techniques and approaches. Broad overviews are properly the subject of entire books devoted to the topic. The term *participant observation* itself adds to the confusion because it is the cover term that refers to *all* qualitative approaches and also singles out one particular variant among them (in contrast to an observer study, an interview strategy, etc.). Thus, it is essential to provide detail as to exactly how participant observation in its all-inclusive sense is played out in any particular piece of research. The label itself is too encompassing.

Some unanticipated things happened when I refigured the original circle graph as a tree. For one, a different visual image helped me realize how participant observation is the core activity in *all* qualitative work rather than merely one alternative

form of it as I had represented it originally. Sticking with the analogy, participant observation is the sturdy trunk from which all the major and minor variations derive. That is why participant observation doubles as a synonym for fieldwork, for ethnography, for virtually any approach that is "qualitative." Participant observation is the heart, and heartwood, of all qualitative inquiry.

I was also surprised to discover that I had trouble placing *case study* on the tree. My problem was not that case study didn't belong anywhere but that it seemed to belong everywhere. I came to realize that case study is better regarded as a form of reporting than as a strategy for conducting research. I recognize that some scholars consider the case study to be an eclectic but nonetheless identifiable method. I prefer to regard it in a narrower sense: *a format for reporting*. As a format for reporting, it is not only a convenient one but a preferred one. If you present your studies in the form of cases, be sure to provide adequate detail about the specific research techniques you employ rather than hope that by itself the label "case study" provides adequate detail about how you proceeded. Like any of the generic methods, you could write an article or a book about it. But for any given study, the label is woefully inadequate as an explanation of how you proceeded.

I am drawn to analogies for providing perspective. I employed the tree analogy as a way to explain, and the tree diagram that accompanies the chapter as a way to illustrate, how participant observation constitutes the core of qualitative research. The visual also helps to emphasize connectedness among the approaches: what they share in common and how they are differentiated. But your readers do not need the whole history of who may have planted the tree—it always seems to get back to Herodotus—or how the tree has evolved and grown. Readers need only to be assured that you are secure in the position from which you do your viewing and that your choice of perspective is a reasonable and reasoned one, well suited to your purposes and your particular talents. If a dissertation committee wants assurance of your general command of the "method" literature, or you as a committee member feel that such a demonstration is in a student's best interests, here is another aspect that might be developed in the research proposal, subsequently to be employed *selectively* on a when-and-as-needed basis in writing up your study.

By identifying participant observation as the core research activity in qualitative inquiry, I meant to underscore not only the everyday nature of our data but the everyday nature of the way we go about collecting data. It is impossible to shroud in mystery or esoteric explanation an approach that can be encapsulated by the term participant observation. Method alone is not sufficient to allow us to make strong claims about what we have done. Employing ordinary fieldwork techniques in the course of an inquiry does not require one to dwell excessively on who has pioneered them or who has employed them elsewhere. Neither "being there" in some natural setting nor "intimate, long-term acquaintance" is sufficient to guarantee the accuracy or completeness of what we have to report. There is little point in trying to make a big deal of them.

Qualitative inquiry is more than method, and method is more than fieldwork techniques. The more you dwell on the latter, the more you draw attention away from your substantive report. Don't try to convince your audience of the validity of your observations based on the power of a fieldwork approach. Satisfy readers with sufficient detail about how you obtained the data you actually used. Your data consist essentially of rather everyday stuff, collected in rather everyday ways, so any insight you have gained about *organizing* and analyzing such data will be especially

welcome. As you all know, the real work of qualitative research lies in mindwork, not fieldwork.

CODA

The chapter, and this talk based on it, have been intended to do some consciousness raising about how we conduct our work and how we present it. No question that qualitative researchers have been able to introduce quite a few "degrees of freedom" into the arena of social inquiry in the past 30 years. I think we need to do the same thing with the reporting of our studies, forgoing some rituals that have crept into our work that are at odds with discovery itself. It makes no sense to have to state your theory or hypothesis in advance if the purpose of your inquiry has been to try to discover what needs hypothesizing and how best to go about it, no sense to have to defend the whole qualitative movement because you did not run an experiment.

There is an old maxim, "When in doubt, tell the truth." My message here is to strive for more candor, to be straightforward in what we report and how we link up with the work of others, not to observe rituals of reporting that interfere with and interrupt—rather than enhance—our modest efforts.

When Jan Morse extended the invitation to speak, exactly 1 year ago, the new chapter had not been written. I anticipated that preparing this talk would offer further incentive for getting the chapter drafted, and your reactions would help me improve it. A year is a long time. In the interim, the writing was completed. Instead of a working draft of the chapter, you got a sneak preview of the finished one. But the ideas expressed are thoughts, not commandments, and hardly new thoughts at that. There have always been colleagues working on behalf of making academic writing—yes, even dissertation writing—less pompous and less dependent on ritual, more searching and discovery oriented. Stories well told, their links and contexts relevant. Can we do even more?

REFERENCES

Agar, M. (1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography* (2nd ed.). New York: Academic Press.
Becker, H. S. (1986). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Frake, C. (1977). Plying frames can be dangerous. *Quarterly Newsletter of the Institute for Comparative Human Development*, *1*(3), 1-7.
Galtung, J. (1990). Theory formation in social research: A plea for pluralism. In E. Øyen (Ed.), *Comparative methodology* (pp. 96-112). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Geertz, C. (2000). Preface to the reissue of *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
Sanjek, R. (1999, November). *Into the future: Is anyone listening?* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago.
Wolcott, H. F. (1967). *A Kwakiutl village and school.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. [Republished in 1989 by Waveland Press with a new Afterword]
Wolcott, H. F. (1973). *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. [Republished in 1984 by Waveland Press with a new Introduction]
Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research* (Sage Qualitative Research Methods Series, Vol. 20). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Wolcott, H. F. (1995). *The art of fieldwork*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
Wolcott, H. F. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
Wolcott, H. F. (2001). *Writing up qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Harry F. Wolcott, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Anthropology, University of Oregon, Eugene.