6-2003

The Relevance of Authorial Presence in Creating and Understanding Qualitative Writing

Karen W. Scott

Mark L. McCaslin

Gary C. Alexander

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

The Relevance of Authorial Presence in Creating and Understanding Qualitative Writing

Karen Wilson Scott, Mark L. McCaslin, and Gary C. Alexander

Researchers are a part of and not apart from their studies. How much authorial presence or "voice" to disclose is central to that issue. Qualitative research lends itself particularly well to inclusion of the author's first-person perspective, the personal voice. By employing a narrative style, the researcher can include the reader as well as bring forward the author's position. The challenge is to represent the research process in the research product. Was the authorial presence balanced? Did it increase the reader's understanding of the research? How relevant is the author's perspective to the reader's understanding of the data? Researcher and reader are enlightened and enriched by the inclusion of the researcher's voice, the researcher through self-awareness, and the reader through positioning of the author. Balance can be gained through determining how much or how little authorial presence is relevant to the effective portrayal of the informants' reality.

Introduction

As researchers we become a part of, and not apart from, our research within naturalistic approaches to inquiry. This remains true whether or not we acknowledge such in our writing or in how we position ourselves on the page. We are always present in our writing no matter how hard we try to hide this fact (Richardson, 1997). To greater or lesser degrees the description, the analysis, and, perhaps especially, the interpretation are colored by our research perspectives, beliefs, values, experiences, and biases relative to the subject. Acknowledging our perspective as authors provides the reader with a more informed view of the manner in which we employed our research paradigm and, more importantly in qualitative research, how we employed our principle investigative tool: ourselves. Richardson writes: "Surely as we write 'social worlds' into being, we write ourselves into being" (p. 137). Our research studies are often studies about the self—the self of the researcher. Bettis and Gregson (2001) suggest that "thoughtful researchers" (p. 3) regardless of tradition "should be able to articulate how their philosophical stance

or paradigm informs their use of theory, their methodology, and their selection of methods" (p. 3). Such reflective disclosure is one means of informing the reader of the author's perspective of his or her role as the researcher and who he or she is in relation to that research.

The question becomes, as Geertz (1988) so succinctly phrased it: "How is the author made manifest in the text?" Geertz suggests that "the question of signature, the establishment of an authorial presence within a text, has long been a problem for ethnography" (pp. 8-9), and we suggest that the same is true for many of the other qualitative traditions as well. It is not merely the establishment of a presence that is in question, but how great a presence there should be. In 1995, Tierney suggested that reflectivity, reflexivity, and the role of the researcher had already generated more than a decade of debate. Nearly another decade has passed since. Reflexivity, as defined in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, is "directed or turned back on itself; marked by or capable of reflection" (2002, p. 980). It is this turning back on self in reflection that

gives rise to the question of the researcher's voice.

It is worth remembering "once upon a time, as the story goes, the 'I' could not be found in our qualitative texts" (Tierney, 1995, p. 3). Today, we freely include ourselves in our research. The challenge we now face is to address our critics concerning the use of the personal voice. Have we seen an improvement in naturalistic pursuits where that voice is employed? Have we gained a balance between the researcher, the informant, and the ecology from which it springs? And, if not, how can we gain a sense of balance?

Perhaps the most critical choice in choosing the personal voice is the choice of representation. Our voice "stands in for all the others" we have discovered during the course of our research (Bochner, 2001, p. 134). Without representation those voices may remain suppressed or go unnoticed. As Palmer (1998) pleaded through the essays of Rainer Maria Rilke, "Ah, to not be cut off, not through the slightest partition shut out from the law of the stars" (p. 1). We all, our informants and ourselves, have a deep and reasonable want and need to be heard, to have our voice matter. To detach us for reasons of objectivity and protocol would betray the essence of what is true, real, and beautiful. And, in this regard, our voice, our representation, lends itself to the development of a philosopher's stone capable of addressing and interpreting the epistemological, axiological, and ontological questions and concerns generated by the human ecology.

How Much Authorial Presence to Disclose

Qualitative research lends itself particularly well to inclusion of the author's first-person perspective, the personal voice. By employing a narrative style, the researcher can include the reader with literary devices such as storytelling to bring the writing to life, as well as bring forward the presence of the "researcher's voice" to candidly disclose the author's position (Richardson, 1994, 2000; Wolcott, 1994). Some authors refer to first-person writing as narrative "I-witnessing" (Geertz, 1988); others call the style "reflective reporting" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) or "authorial representation" (Creswell, 1998). Derrida (1981) calls the author's voice the "metaphysics of presence." Some researchers move beyond reflective narrative to explore and interweave their thoughts and feelings about what they know and how they know it in a narrative style called reflexive voice (Hertz, 1997).

In Geertz' view, the kernel of the issue is not narrative in nature, but epistemological—an issue of how to avoid coloring objective facts with subjective perspectives. Geertz refers to the situation as a "clash between author-saturated texts and author-evacuated ones" (1988, p. 9). Creswell (1998) asks how much of the self the researcher should disclose. "Finding somewhere to stand in a text that is supposed to be at one and the same time an intimate view and a cool assessment is almost as much of a challenge as gaining the view and making the assessment in the first place" (Geertz, 1988, p. 10). Our view is that in order to maintain a balance the researcher must approach the research with a predetermined discipline, an understanding of the ecology, and a knowing responsibility to the informant, the setting, and the story to be told.

The personal connection is of value in capturing the lived experience, the phenomenon of human interaction, and the development of meaningful theories emerging from the human ecology. There are many different ways in which the world can be experienced and represented (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Each person who chooses to engage and make meaning of the data breathes new life into the lived experience of the researcher as self (Jipson & Paley, 1997). From our perspective, we do not want to simply read qualitative research; we want to

live it. As readers, we want it to come alive on the page, to be touched by the story generated by the research. We need to feel the story as well as hear it. This can only be accomplished by the use of voice that is very personal. A voice that allows the research to come through the researcher, through his or her interpretations of what was discovered from the informants and the ecology.

Now here we are confronted by the protocols of empiricism, the need to stand apart from our research to keep it upright with rigor. This rigor requires control, distance, objectivity, and surrender, if we may, to the lenses of a quantifiably defined world. As Bochner (2001) stated, there have been those (Atkinson, 1994; Pithouse & Atkinson, 1988) who have defined the use of the personal voice as a mechanism for creating narratives that are misleading, sentimental, exaggerated, and as a romantic construction of the self. While their arguments are not new, they are correct in that a construction of the self is a part of and not apart from the virtues of narratives. For with the use of the personal voice comes a delicate and grand responsibility. A responsibility that we, as researchers, are not accustomed to holding. It demands from us a sensitivity to first hear and interpret fairly and accurately; a willingness to invest ourselves in building connections—a relationship with our informants; the courage to move beyond current levels of understanding—to move beyond our own biases and the biases of the educational community; and it requires a level of discipline and integrity that is central to naturalistic pursuits.

Perhaps it is time to consider the empirical world without defending against its protocols. If we consider the naturalistic and the empirical as complements, then it would be more productive to create naturalistic protocols based upon what is required to discover what is true, real, and beautiful rather than waste efforts in comparing and contrasting the two methods of inquiry. Maslow (1971) stated:

> I am convinced that the value-free, value-neutral, value-avoiding model of science that we inherited from physics, chemistry, and astronomy, where it was necessary and desirable to keep the church out of scientific affairs, is quite unsuitable for the scientific study of life. Even more dramatically is this value-free philosophy of science unsuitable for human questions, where personal values, purposes and goals, intentions and plans are absolutely crucial for the understanding of any person, and even for the classical goals of science, prediction, and control. ... it is time we stopped taking any such notion seriously. For my part, I have turned away from such debates over mechanical determinism without even bothering to get into the argument. (p. 5)

More productive would be pursuits that clarify how researchers remain disciplined, sensitive, responsive, and responsible to the research, the informants, and to themselves. All of these elements are crystallized on the page in naturalistic inquiry. Our choice of voice will determine what is heard and how the reader will feel and interpret the stories of our research.

Choices of Authorial Position

The authorial stance of the writer (Richardson, 1994, 2000) or what Derrida (1981) names the "metaphysics of presence" is complex. The choices may be to place the author in the realm of dispassionate observer chronicling what occurred for the reader; or perhaps, place the author in an entirely different, more passionate realm of vividly detailed verisimilitude (Richardson, 1994); or to place author, informants, and reader together in an atmosphere of "being there" (Geertz, 1988); or finally, somewhere else.

The challenge is to represent the research process in the research product. In other words "how to get an I-witnessing author into a they-picturing story" (Geertz, 1988, p. 84) and do so while maintaining the rigor and discipline of the study.

Van Maanen (1988) identifies as possible options three distinct, general styles of reporting human science research. First, in a *Realist* approach the writer draws a direct, matter-of-fact portrait, with little description of method. The researcher is invisible, but through interpretation all-powerful. A second option offered is a *Confessional* approach whereby the report is written from a personalized, researcher point of view. The methodology is revealed through passages of forthright self-questioning. A third option offered is an *Impressionist* approach, which portrays a story-like chronicle designed to weave the researcher's experience with reality in a way that allows readers to live or re-live the experience.

Van Maanen (1988) notes there are potential problems with each style or genre. The Realist approach may conceal alternative interpretations or suggest that the researcher's interpretations came from participants. The Confessional genre tends to be so strongly personalized that the inclusion of the researcher's experience could be viewed as narcissism. Finally, the Impressionist reporting style may trade a more accurate portrayal of untidy reality for a perhaps less accurate, but congruous, pleasantly ordered view. Nonetheless, selecting any of the three options, the researcher may open the window to the reader a bit wider. Was the authorial presence balanced? Did it increase the reader's understanding of the research? Tierney suggests that we can "become actors in our own dramas rather than a disengaged director of a play" (1995, p. 3). We have all seen the odd person who seems to wander on camera to wave at his or her fellows at home. Are there moments when we become too much in view? Coles (1993) provides the following message for

those who would study and research from this vantage point:

> Sometimes the difference can be a matter of attitude or tone: how do we describe what we have seen and heard, how do we look, in my father's word, "within" others and ourselves—what kind of light do we choose to shine? I think my elderly father was making a gentle but urgent plea for care and caution as we try to look at the world and ourselves—to use a filtered light, a lonely, small flashlight, with restraint, rather than searchlights burning relentlessly in every direction. (p. xvi)

These are questions and concerns central to achieving a credible authorial position.

Wolcott (1994) confesses that in his own writing he uses subjectivity as a preference of qualitative approaches, rather than attempting to establish a detached objectivity. He elects to place himself "squarely into the setting or situation being described to whatever extent seemed warranted for the purpose at hand" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 351). How do we decide what is warranted for our purpose? The key perhaps is relevance. How relevant is the author's perspective to the reader's understanding of the description, analysis, or interpretation of the reported data? Each author must use his or her own judgment to decide that question.

Writing as Relevant Research

Glaser (1978) suggests that writing the report is not tidying up after the research is concluded, but rather that theoretical writing is an important element of the research in and of itself. Theoretical writing "freezes the ongoing for the moment" (Glaser, 1978, p. 129). Theoretical writing, like theoretical analysis, should be dynamic. Glaser and Strauss recommend that during writing, researcher-authors should actively capture their thoughts, insights, and learnings in a

disciplined memo system that informs both the researcher and the topic and is included in the analysis and interpretation of the work (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Richardson (1994) suggested that Glaser and Strauss' memo system could be divided into four categories: (a) Observation Notes comprised of concrete details; (b) Methodological Notes comprised of self messages concerning the methodology; (c) Theoretical Notes comprised of hunches, hypotheses, and insights; and (d) Personal Notes comprised of uncensored doubts, pleasures, and feelings about the research. In this way the writing itself is a method of discovery and analysis (Glaser, 1978; Richardson, 1994, 2000), and the reader can recognize that by glimpsing the theory freeze frame through the author's eyes as it evolves (Glaser, 1978). Further, such a system of what might be termed rigorous reflexivity allows us to step back and evaluate the relevance of those data to our message. When we have rigorously analyzed our introspective data, we can disclose our authorial view to the reader via relevant authorial reflexivity (Hertz, 1997) gained in part through an active memo system.

Reflexive Relevance to Authorial Presence

Reflexivity speaks to the role of the researcher and provides a crucial window through which the research can be viewed in its fullest, richest form, facilitating clear understanding of the analysis and conclusions. Reflexivity is "accomplished through detachment, internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of 'what I know' and 'how I know it'" (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). In other words, being reflexive is engaging in an ongoing internal conversation about experience in the moment in which you are living it. Many of us have ongoing internal dialogue much of the time.

Engaging in reflexivity, especially as a researcher, includes reporting the "facts" and "truths" of that dialogue. Besides memoing

(Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), such reporting can take the form of journaling, diary (Maurice, 1989), or other personal notation (Richardson, 1994, 2000). However, researchers employing reflexivity go a step further by actively interpreting that experience and then questioning how those interpretations came about and how that knowledge came into existence. The central philosophical questions of what is true, what is real, and what has value, once again emerge as critical foundations. "Self-reflexivity unmasks complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing" (Richardson, 1994, p. 523).

Weaving the researcher's reflexive voice into the research process increases the clarity of the reader's window on the research in several areas. The researcher's formation of the given problem rather than myriad other possible problem formations becomes more evident. How the researcher came to the questions asked, leaving others unasked, is also clarified. The criteria for selecting certain participants and ignoring others can be revealed in such introspective reporting. Finally, reflexivity benefits the reader and, in many ways, the researcher through a constant introspective commenting on direction of analysis and interpretations (including other possible paths), and in the conclusions drawn. Researcher and reader are enlightened and enriched by the inclusion of reflexive voice, the researcher through self-awareness and the reader through positioning of the author.

Reflexivity can be a powerful tool for a researcher to apply to open a reader's understanding of a murky, complex topic. One such study addresses the complicated topic of body image, food, and eating disorders. Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997) blur the lines between researcher and informant, as two of the authors suffer from an eating disorder, and the third struggles with trying to understand it. The three women employ a compelling narrative of taped conversation interlaced

with journaled description of ongoing reflexive internal dialogue both during the actual conversation and later during the analysis and interpretation of the conversation. The two authors who suffer the disorder describe their conflict with the nakedness of raw disclosure and their desire to be compassionately understood. The reflexivity in each researcher's voice brings an awareness of the silences and unknowable depths of challenge and struggle within each person's life. For the reader, many silences are given voice, and others pull away to remain mute. The author absent the disorder provides a balancing, yet also struggling, voice of compassion for her associates while trying to understand her own feelings of body image tangled with her strong reaction to their behavior and desire. For many readers, this third author may reflect aspects of their own voices, nudging them to re-examine their own feelings and desires to understand this and other highly complex issues. Tierney (1995) adds that by including self-reflexive authorial voice in scholarly work, we can contribute to broadening the academic landscape by including silent, invisible groups of people allowing them to see themselves as a part of the picture and allowing others to see them as they view themselves.

Balance in Authorial Voice

As we discussed, voice is "the struggle to figure out how to present the author's self while simultaneously writing the respondent's accounts and representing their selves" (Geertz, 1988; Hertz, 1997, p. xi). Tierney asserts what may seem obvious and yet can be overlooked, "an author needs to deal with who will read the text" (Tierney, 1995, p. 4). For example, an author wanting to intimately describe the voices of the informants, may want to simultaneously describe his or her own voice in a different way to address a possible perception that the author and the informants are of the same cloth. An author may want to disarm an

audience expected to oppose the position of informants. This author may even want to cause our hypothetical audience to question their biases, by presenting the voices of the informants in a way more palatable, more aligned with aspects of the audience, playing on similarities rather than differences. Ginsburg (1997) provides an illustration of such a complex motive on the part of the researcher-author.

Ginsburg faced a dilemma in writing and presenting her ethnographic research on the meaning of the Right-to-Life issue in the lives of politically conservative women activists. Knowing that her academic audience was highly galvanized against that view and recognizing that her work might be dismissed because her audience failed to hear it, Ginsburg struggled with how to give her informants a voice that could not be ignored. Further, she wanted to present her own voice as that of a researcher holding a view divergent from her informants'. To accomplish both purposes, Ginsburg used life stories, presenting long sections of informants' narrative to engage readers and allow them to hear how the informants interpret their own lives and political decisions. In so doing, the researcher and her opinions can be disclosed and bracketed without detracting from the compelling authenticity of the informants' voices and actions.

It is incumbent upon us as educated scholars to convey "reality" in a way that those we write about recognize it as their reality. Infusing their reality with our own might be approached in the same manner as suggested by Tierney's (1995) metaphor of researcher as the detached director of a play where we are also actor/narrators able to make asides to the audience. Many movies in a digital videodisc (DVD) format include a second viewing of the movie overlaid with the director narrating what he or she intended and how that was (or was not) accomplished. It may be interesting and relevant for the audience to understand the director's

reality during the development, but that inner perspective should augment, rather than overshadow or replace, the intended topic.

Conclusion

Our writing depicts, through our purposeful construction, how we as qualitative researchers developed our research study and how the direction we investigated led us to conduct certain analyses and finally draw the interpretations we bring forward. We discussed the importance of weaving an authorial presence in academic literature as a means of providing a clear window through which the reader can recognize the author's position and effectively view the research. Noting the wide swing of the pendulum from avoidance of authorial presence in qualitative research two or more decades ago (Tierney, 1995) to perhaps a narcissistic over-inclusion of authorial presence in the interim (Van Maanen, 1988), we discussed a need for establishing balance. We suggested that balance could be gained through determining how much or how little authorial presence is relevant to the effective portrayal of the informants' reality. To whatever extent weaving our voice with that of our informants enlightens our readers, causes them to question their own biases, brings an alternate reality into clearer focus, balance is achieved.

References

Atkinson, P. (1994). Rhetoric as skill. In M. Bloor & P. Taraborrelli (Eds.), *Qualitative research in health and medicine* (pp. 110-130). Aldershot, UK: Avebury.

Barone, T., & Eisner, E. (1997). *Arts-based educational research in complementary methods for research in education*. Washington, DC: American Education Research Association.

Bettis, P. J., & Gregson, J. A. (2001). The why of quantitative and qualitative research: paradigmatic and pragmatic considerations. In E. I. Farmer & J. W. Rojewski (Eds.), *Research pathways: Writing professional papers, theses, and dissertations in workforce education* (pp. 1-21). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7,* 131-157.

Coles, R. (1993). *The call of service: A witness to idealism*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. E., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experience. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction* (6th ed., pp. 580-581). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Geertz, C. (1988). *Works and lives: The anthropologist as author*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociological Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Ginsburg, F. (1997). The case of mistaken identity: Problems in representing women on the right. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hertz, R. (1997). *Reflexivity and voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jipson, J., & Paley, N. (Eds.). (1997). *Daredevil research: Re-creating analytic practice*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Maslow, A. H. (1971). The farther reaches of human nature. New York: Viking Press.

Maurice, A. (1989). Diary studies as a teacher awareness tool. *Guidelines: A Periodical for Classroom Language Teachers, 11*(2), 88-98.

Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary (10th ed.). (2002). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Pithouse A., & Atkinson, P. (1988). Telling the case. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *English discourse styles* (pp. 183-200). London: Picador.

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tierney, W. G. (1995). (Re)presentation and voice. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1,* 379-390. Retrieved October, 23, 2001, from http://ehostvgw6.epnet.com/fulltext.asp?r...2& hit Num=3&booleanTerm=tierney&fuzzyTerm=.

Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Karen Wilson Scott, is an Assistant Professor of Adult, Counselor, and Technology Education at the University of Idaho in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Her interests include congruous autonomy in older adults, com-mitment and perseverance, adult learning, and advanced qualitative research.

Mark L. McCaslin is an Assistant Professor of Adult, Counselor, and Technology Education at the University of Idaho, Idaho Falls, Idaho. His interests include community leadership, interpersonal communication, community action, and advanced qualitative research.

Gary C. Alexander, is an Associate Professor of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at the University of Idaho, Boise, Idaho. His interests include leadership, organizations and organizational change, multicultural education, qualitative methodology, online learning, and action research.