

end?”) or eagerly and early, perhaps introducing an analytical or theoretical framework as a means of introducing the reader to the problem at hand.

There is no one best way to accomplish any of this. Doctoral students worriedly anticipating when and how to introduce their analytical or interpretive frameworks sometimes find the advice helpful to “stay descriptive as long as possible.” This advice is biased in favor of the descriptive account while alerting students that there will come a point at which they will find it necessary to introduce something more than descriptive labels to keep the account moving forward in a purposeful way. Should even that advice prove too “writerly,” how about this: “Tell the story. Then tell how that happened to be the way you told it.”

In thinking about a point at which analysis enters the reporting process, beginning researchers who can maintain a critical stance toward their own descriptive data—data they initially may have regarded as objective—become aware that data are tainted with an analytical or interpretive cast in the *very process of becoming data*. To go a step further, as Mary Anne Pitman insists, “Data are already theory” (personal communication; see also Pitman & Maxwell, 1992, p. 761, with the more cautious claim—reflective of dual authorship—that data are already “theory laden”). The descriptive aspects of an account might better be regarded as implicit analysis or implicit interpretation. Instead of anticipating some tangible point at which description abruptly stops and analysis begins, we can be looking for the often subtle shift as implicit analyses or interpretations gradually give way to explicit ones in even the most descriptively oriented account.

One problem with descriptively oriented researchers striving too hard to be objective is a tendency to treat everything at the same level of detail. Observers get fixed (or perhaps transfixed) behind a wide-angle lens that attends unselectively, recording everything from the same distance rather than zooming in to particular details consonant with the purposes of the study. For example, in a study of computer use in the classroom that I was asked to review, the researcher had attended dutifully to an entire class, especially the teacher-pupil dialogue, during a lengthy period of group instruction. When pupils finally were released to their own keyboards and screens, however, my suggestion was that both researcher and reader might learn more through attention directed to any *one* of those screens rather than remaining fixed at

the same vantage point from which the entire class had been observed earlier. Further, whatever appeared on the screens offered rapid feedback into what pupils had understood of their instructions. Like fieldworker observations themselves, descriptive narratives can move in and out like zoom lenses. The world is not flat; we should discourage any tendency of descriptive researchers to make it seem so.

### Ways to Organize and Present Description

Qualitative researchers need to be storytellers. That, rather than any claim for number crunching, ought to be one of their distinguishing attributes. To be able to tell (which, in academia, essentially means to be able to write) a story well is crucial to the enterprise. When we cannot engage others to read our stories—our completed and complete accounts—then our efforts at descriptive research are for naught.

Regardless of the topic—presentation of a case study, discussion of method, examination of underlying philosophical issues—we ordinarily expect qualitative researchers to build their cases, or at least to draw their illustrative examples, from stories. Qualitative researchers of analytical or interpretive bent are nonetheless expected to ground their reflections in observed experience. So there must be something of the storyteller in each of us. Let me turn to this customary starting point of qualitative reporting—development of the narrative or presentational account—before proceeding to explore the analytical and interpretive dimensions that accompany it.

In the paragraphs that follow, I identify a number of ways to organize and present the descriptive portion of a qualitative study. I stop at 10; my purpose is to be suggestive rather than all inclusive. One can reduce such a list to the fewest basic plots (I would begin by looking for three all-consuming ones, as you must realize) or expand it ad infinitum. I have used variations and adaptations of these approaches in developing my own narratives, but always in combination, never in the pure forms described below.

(1) *Chronological order.* Events always can be related in the order that they occurred, with relevant context introduced as needed. Relating events in ordinal (first, second, . . .) or chronological sequence (if that

does not violate confidences) offers an efficient alternative to the sometimes lengthy bridges written to give an account the appearance of flow when significant events do not seem all that continuous. Events can also be related in *reverse* chronological order, introducing the account by looking at how things are—or were—before turning to how they got that way. (Note my preference for the past tense here rather than for the often awkward “ethnographic present.” See Sanjek, 1991, for a thoughtful examination of the phrase *ethnographic present*.)

(2) *Researcher or narrator order.* Chronological order is a fallback position for relating an account, as well as an obvious way to organize and code fieldnotes. Researchers should be attentive to other logics in addition to the logic of time so dominant in our own thinking. Thus an informant’s way of unveiling his or her life story ought to be examined for its own internal logic before a researcher unwittingly reorganizes it into an orderly chronological sequence. The way the story has been revealed to the researcher may offer another way to organize. (This fits well with the idea of presenting an account as a mystery, to be discussed below.) Researchers endowed with a gift for storytelling—or self-consciously developing their own “theory” of it—may see many alternative ways to relate events through narrative strategies. The underlying issue, as Josselson (1993) defines it, is the question of what material from the journalistic or literary to the academic and theoretically enriching” (p. xi; see also Spence, 1982).

(3) *Progressive focusing.* If a study is built around a carefully specified problem, the descriptive account may be revealed through a progressive focusing that goes in either direction, slowly zooming from broad context to the particulars of the case, or starting with a close-in view and gradually backing away to include more context. Most likely the zooming will move in both directions. Whether one zooms from outside in (ground to figure) or vice versa probably reflects disciplinary orientations, the psychologist or biographer predictably opening and closing with a focus on the individual, the anthropologist or sociologist more likely to open and close with a focus on the social setting. Relating an account through progressive focusing is not unlike the “funnel approach” Agar (1980, p. 136) suggests as a model to guide fieldwork.

(4) *Day-in-the-life.* This approach can take a reader immediately to the scene of the action. The day-in-the-life need not be interpreted too literally. Readers might be privy to a real or a fictionalized account, an entire day, or some customary sequence of events. A variation is to take readers along on a reconstruction of the first day of fieldwork, so that others are introduced to the setting in much the same way the researcher first met and reacted to it. This approach can accommodate an impressionistic introduction that allows the researcher to communicate a “feel” for the setting as well as to make use of first impressions that may be part of a stereotype the researcher intends to examine or to correct.

I advise fieldworkers to make extensive notes during the first days of research as well as to ensure that their data are sufficient for the reconstruction of an entire “day” or a complete sequence of events. I have heard arguments pro and con about note-taking during the early stages of fieldwork, critics insisting that early impressions are poorly informed and note-taking is not well focused. Personally, I attach great importance to “first impressions.” Although I find such data invaluable in their own right, I think extensive early note-taking can be defended solely on the basis of keeping open the option to use this narrative technique.

To my surprise, when I decided to use a day-in-the-life approach for the opening descriptive chapter of my study of the principalship (Walcott, 1973), I found that, in spite of conducting fieldwork for 2 years, I had sufficient data to portray a “real” day in the principal’s life for only 2 days. Had I thought about it earlier, I would have made a conscious effort to record several full days’ events to broaden my options for the write-up.

(5) *Critical or key event.* Just as no researcher as fieldworker can ever hope to get the whole story down to every last little detail, no researcher an author can ever expect to tell the whole story either. One way to circumvent the problem of never being able to tell the whole story is to focus on only one or two aspects, creating a story-within-a-story in which the essence (but not the detail) of the whole is revealed or reflected in microcosm. Anthropologists often report phase-denoting life cycle events this way. In numerous accounts, the activities surrounding birth, marriage, or death are presented and examined, not only for the events themselves but for the way an entire cultural ethos is reflected

in them. Focusing on a key event is one example of "doing less more thoroughly" in qualitative inquiry, a guideline I have discussed elsewhere (Wolcott, 1990, p. 62).

(6) *Plot and characters.* Where individuals or sociological roles are central to a study, the researcher may proceed as though staging a play. First, the main characters are introduced. Then the story is put into motion. At that point, the researcher may either fade into the wings or assume the role of narrator, taking responsibility to ensure that the audience understands what is happening by guiding or "talking over" as the plot develops.

(7) *Groups in interaction.* In the same way it is necessary in some tellings to keep individual characters clearly identified (and in others to assure anonymity), it often proves helpful to researcher and reader alike to create distinct group identities to emphasize differences important to a case.

Addressing himself specifically to efforts at planned change, for example, anthropologist George Foster advises researchers to attend first and separately to the target group and to the donor group, and only then to put the two groups in motion together in their interaction setting (Foster, 1969). I have found Foster's suggested sequence well suited to *my* study of interacting groups. The advice may prove as useful for organizing and presenting material as for orienting fieldwork. The format draws attention to change agents themselves, so that the target group is not perceived as the only "beneficiary" of change efforts. Nor should attention be directed too narrowly to identifying only two groups in the transaction; efforts at social engineering need to be examined in broad contexts.

(8) *Follow an analytical framework.* The previous point suggests developing a narrative around one framework that has proved particularly helpful. Adopting *any* framework imposes structure on the descriptive account, if structure is what the research—or the researcher—needs. By having the framework in mind during fieldwork, the researcher, like a well-prepared chef, is assured that, when the various descriptive ingredients of the case are called for in an ensuing analysis, they will be at hand.

Making sure that the descriptive portion of an account will include the detail necessary for subsequent analysis or interpretation raises an important issue: how to ensure that one does not gather only data that support a preconceived framework. I think the antidote is to maintain a healthy skepticism toward everything one hears, sees, remembers, records, and writes in the course of developing a study. A guiding question: Am I attending as carefully to what is going on as I am attending to what I *think* is going on?

On the other hand, perhaps in anticipation of being overly selective or subjective, neophyte researchers sometimes seem to assume that, once drafted, their own descriptive accounts must be treated as gospel. They take that to mean that materials formed into sentences cannot later be changed, even by the author who constructed them, lest the truth-value of the account become suspect. This is not the case. Development of the descriptive material is every bit as much an interactive process as is any subsequent analysis or interpretation. Not until we try to make sense of data do we necessarily begin to understand what is central, what is peripheral.

Whether one is following a chronology, doing progressive focusing, or imposing an analytical model, what proves important in later stages for developing a manuscript should help guide subsequent revision of earlier sections, not only the descriptive account but sometimes the problem statement itself. That is why fieldwork and initial deskwork need to go hand in hand, preferably with writing begun while one still has access to the field. Howard Becker (1986, p. 12) has reminded budding social science authors that the only version that matters is the last—that is, the final—one. His advice prompted from me a writer's (and researcher's) guideline that I incorporated in *Writing Up Qualitative Research* but borrowed from the instruction sheet for assembling a wheelbarrow: "Make sure all parts are properly in place before tightening" (Wolcott, 1990, p. 47).

(9) *The "Rashōnan Effect."* Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film classic *Rashōnan* has lent its name to social science (e.g., Lewis, 1959, p. 17; see also Heider, 1988). The film depicts a violent encounter as seen through the eyes of four witnesses, lending dramatic emphasis to the lesson that there is not one version of any event but as many versions as there are viewers. As a storytelling technique, any descriptive account

can be related through the eyes of different participants, seemingly freeing the researcher from having to disclose his or her own view—except for the presence of the authorial hand that has guided each viewer's recounting.

This Rashomon Effect can be adapted as a teaching device as well as a narrative strategy. An instructor might suggest that students conclude their fieldwork inquiries by examining data in terms of the way scholars in different disciplines (e.g., anthropologist, historian, sociologist) or qualitative researchers of different persuasions (e.g., micro-ethnographer, biographer, ethnomethodologist, phenomenologist) typically present data and offer their interpretations. This is somewhat akin to the scientist's search for and systematic examination of rival hypotheses, except that in the science game a single hypothesis usually emerges as victor, while adherence to the Rashomon Effect may make alternative interpretations equally compelling. In *A Thrice-Told Tale*, for example, Margery Wolf provides a superb example of multiple interpretations of the same set of events as reported by the same fieldworker reporting in three distinct styles: fiction, fieldnotes, and reflexive account (Wolf, 1992).

(10) *Write a mystery.* My final suggestion, one that may appeal to compulsive problem-solvers as well as to fans of the genre, is to organize and present qualitative studies as though writing a mystery novel. (Marion Dobbert reminded me of this refreshing idea.) The problem focus becomes the mystery to be solved. With the researcher in the key role of detective, data are introduced in the manner of accumulating evidence, to be sifted, sorted, and evaluated according to their contribution to solving the mystery. The challenge (and reminder) is to write with a sense of excitement and discovery. How satisfying to have a reader say of a qualitative study, "I just couldn't put it down."

Whether or not they are particularly keen on portraying themselves as "solvers of mysteries," all researchers are advised to think about their problem and what it is they are trying to discover or solve. A researcher who cannot complete the following sentence (in the proverbial 25-words-or-less) is not likely to be effective as a fieldworker or ever be able to bring a study to fruition: "The purpose of this study is . . ."

I do not mean to suggest that everything must be specified in advance, for that would deny qualitative researchers the capacity to refine their studies as they proceed. Yet even the most fervent advocates of emergent approaches need to have, and to be able to communicate, a sense of what they seek. Comforted as we may be by the freedom of our inductive style, we must recognize that nothing emerges from qualitative inquiry without considerable assistance on the part of the researcher:

### Analysis

To underscore the distinction between analysis and interpretation, it may be helpful to distinguish between key terms and word pairs often heard as descriptors in qualitative inquiry. I have in mind a rather liberal sorting, the same approach I use at a rudimentary level to sort data bits into broad categories. Into the pile or bin labeled "analysis" I would place such terms as *cautious, controlled, structured, formal, bounded, scientific, systematic, logico-deductive, grounded, methodical, objective, particularistic, carefully documented, reductionist, impassive*. Into the pile or bin labeled "interpretation" go a set of terms largely complementary to the first: *freewheeling, casual, unbounded, aesthetically satisfying, inductive, subjective, holistic, generative, systemic, impassioned*.

There are additional terms whose counterparts do not necessarily belong with "analysis." If interpretive results can sometimes be creative, speculative, conjectural, fresh, surprising, unpredictable, imaginative, inspirational, and insightful, that does not mean that analytical findings invariably are uncreative, unimaginative, uninspiring, unsurprising, or lacking in insight. Nevertheless, an inherent conservatism and caution is associated with the work of analysis, a mantle of restraint worn proudly, somewhat akin to the laboratory coats worn by technicians to proclaim, "Scientist at work." Even in the social sciences, where virtually nothing is known with certainty, an analytically based report may all but shout, "Based on careful analysis, this much we can say for sure . . ." or, in short, "We found . . ."

Because qualitative data gathering is conducted through such everyday techniques as participant observation and interviewing, it is comforting to employ a term like *analysis* to suggest that in what we