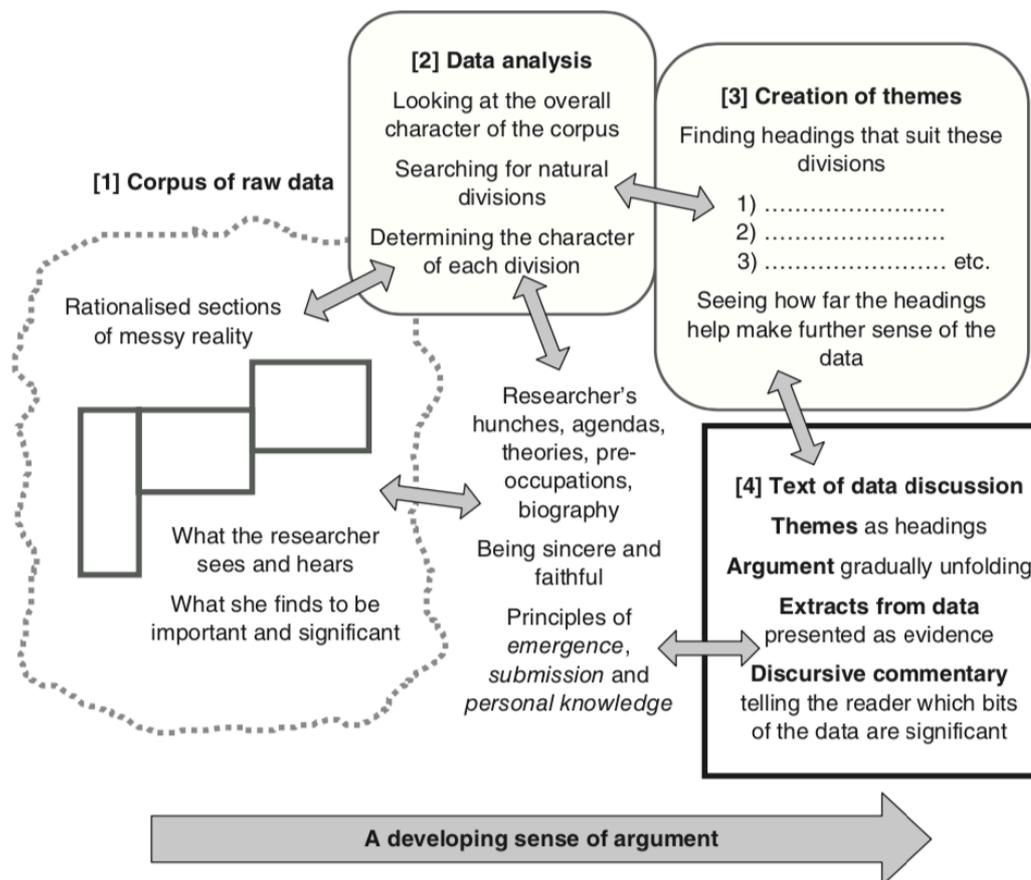# Writing, voice and claims in qualitative research

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The whole process of researching and writing

How it all fits together (Holliday 2016: 99)

[2] Data analysis
Looking at the overall character of the corpus
Searching for natural divisions
Determining the character of each division

[3] Creation of themes
Finding headings that suit these divisions
1) ....
2) ....
3) .... etc.
Seeing how far the headings help make further sense of the data

[1] Corpus of raw data
Rationalised sections of messy reality
What the researcher sees and hears
What she finds to be important and significant

Researcher's hunches, agendas, theories, pre-occupations, biography
Being sincere and faithful
Principles of *emergence*, *submission* and *personal knowledge*

[4] Text of data discussion
Themes as headings
Argument gradually unfolding
Extracts from data presented as evidence
Discursive commentary telling the reader which bits of the data are significant

A developing sense of argument

Thesis structure and functions

The following 'standard' order could be changed (Holliday 2016: 45)

Abstract: Summary of your basic argument - what you did and what you found

Introduction, 4000 words:

Topic and focus, subjects and setting, argument, vision, researcher motivation, location within broader research, research questions, thesis plan

Literature review (2-3 chapters) 20,000 words:

Conceptual/theoretical framework, how existing theory and research sets the scene, researcher positionality

Methodology (1 or 2 chapter), 7,000 words:

Theoretical context, approach, methods, how data was collected and analysed, how intersubjectivity is managed

Discussion of data (2-3 chapters, 30% of thesis), 27,000 words:

Structured around emerging themes, demonstrating thick description, 50% data extracts, interrogation of meaning, implications for prior theory and research

Implications, 10,000 words

Pulling together what's learnt from the data, referring back to key elements, implications for theory, research and practice

Conclusions, final comment on all the basic points in your argument

The absolute importance of voice

Swan's researcher voice in her introduction explains what we need to know about the research questions and the literature review:

> The second and third questions supplement the first, which is important if we take 'ownership' to imply the control and successful management of their professional role. …
>
> These research questions prompted a cascade of further questions necessary to clarify current knowledge and illuminate the directions planned in this thesis such as asking what is already known about the topic: who are multilingual teachers, what do they do and why is it necessary to know? Searching for answers prompted more detailed study of major topics in the literature, such as the 'Centre/periphery' and 'native/non-native' distinctions, with further questions to be asked about their continuing relevance.
>
> **The 'real world'**
> In shaping this project, I found a great deal of support in the literature and discovered, firstly, a way of clarifying the field with these words of Widdowson: …
>
> Widdowson has here formulated what I found to be a valuable guide for shaping PhD research. The 'two kinds of reality' described enable the recognition of 'local conditions' which are an essential part of my research, in that my aim is to show how knowledge of 'the real worlds' of multilingual teachers is essential for explaining their professional practices. There is further clarification in his subsequent definition of applied linguistics:
>
> (Swan 2012: 8-13)

And here

> Specific and detailed conversations and tape-recorded interviews were transcribed in Canterbury. These too had to be selected primarily according to the line of my enquiry and argument. Subsequently they were, patiently and with exactitude, translated into English. After a faithful translation was achieved, I highlighted, condensed, summarised, and presented these in short forms as texts in Chapter Four. Though 'fragments', these have each been read, and re-read again and again to make sure the specific terminology used by the participants, and the tone and direction of the 'whole' were preserved. This is as much to do with my integrity, as is to do with theirs. The nature and extent of the data collected have simply been too great to present fully. Repetitions, and forms of direct questioning by myself have not been included in these texts. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 38)

The use of the first person?

What the researcher voice has to explain

Presenting to the reader multiple forms of material and devices. The researcher voice explains everything, but cannot be there without the evidence that supports it

- Theory, the literature, 'data' (other people or places, researcher experience), and what it means - or a different arrangement
- The structure of the written study - stages, steps, sequence, demarcation, division of role
- Arrangement of the material - juxtaposition, 'conversation', thick description, framing, event

… and how it all fits together - like travel directions, documentary voice-over, imagining the material and devices are on the screen and what you will say while pointing at it

- Introductions - where something is, what it will be like, why it is there, how it connects, what it means, what its purpose is
- Transitions - how what is coming next relates to what has just been read

Examples

Which parts of the thesis do these extracts come from? What makes them work?

> The structure of my data chapters is generated directly by the themes that emerge from the analysis of the data.

> The following quite long extract from my research diary, which is in effect a piece of auto-ethnography, helps me to make sense of the interview extracts presented in the section so far. It needs to be quite long because I need to show a development of thinking; but I will break into it with comment on how it relates as I go.

> The theoretical perspective that I developed in the previous chapters now enables me to make sense of both my methodology and my data in a way

that I had not thought about before. Just to summarise here, the perspective is that …. This means that I can now …

The personal account in the previous pages is clearly highly subjective. However, when juxtaposed with what … said in …, and with the theory coming out of …, it does now make it possible to see that …

What is important to note in the following … is that …. This will then serve to frame … by showing that …

The … is organised in the way that it is because I want to show that …. Therefore, first there is … which will provide an introduction to … This is then followed by … because I want to show immediately the connection between … and …

Demarcation

Data: what can be seen and heard. Used as an extract to provide evidence.

Comment: what this means, why it is significant.

Contributes to the **argument** - what you are generally saying

> 'No one assigns you. It's just if you walk in and one is there and it looks like ... someone needs to feed them so you just do it. You use your common sense and get behind the feeding table.'

> 'It makes sense. I have to feed all these people so I get behind the feeding table.'

> I interpreted these comments to mean that NAs were constantly assessing the situation and reacting accordingly. When a resident was not actively engaged in feeding or was known as a 'feeder', any competent NA would recognise what was needed to be done and do it. Feeding a helpless resident does not happen until the NA makes that assessment and begins the feeding. Feeding, like all other interactions is 'indexical' and 'reflexive'. Its practices are 'embodied', 'circumstantially contingent', and 'unwittingly' performed (Garfinkel 1967; Lynch, Livingston, and Garfinkel 1983). (Pierson 1999: 128)

Note that reference to literature follows discussion of the data

The use of wider margins and inverted commas

Demarcating elements of thick description

How does Barnes separate viewpoints to make this auto-ethnography work?

> My first task was to read the autobiographies thoroughly. Using a simple grounded approach, I noted themes like values and beliefs dominated even the diaries written when I was sixteen. I highlighted what appeared to be values and then isolated references to beliefs, attitudes, and lifelong interests. When the category of key stories emerged from the data, I found that properties like people, places and objects occurred in each of them. Remembered

autobiographical detail was cross-referenced with people who shared events with me, matched against and contrasted with the evidence of diaries, letters and art works contemporary with events. Each autobiography was re-read several times in the light of the biographical conversations I held during the research. (Barnes 2012: 51)

After meticulously describing the nature, origins, and how he makes use of letters and diaries, Barnes goes on to tell us how he uses 'biographical conversations':

Interactions with friends can be more informal than a semi-structured interview, we had conversations. These were special conversations however, in which I tried to say as little as possible, so I coined the term, *semi-structured conversations* to express their directional nature and referred to Denzin (1989) for a suitable framework to guide them. Our conversations took place on car journeys, in the sitting room of my house in front of the fire, in friend's chosen rooms or in one case the deserted lounge of a quiet hotel. These conversations were recorded with permission, later transcribed and shared with the friend concerned. The same happened with first drafts of chapters 6 and 7. (52)

Multiple voices

[1] Researcher account, [2] data, [3] comment at the time of data collection, [4] comment on 1-3 at the time of writing, [5] overarching argument

How are these voices used in this extracts? What do they achieve?

My main aims in this section, however, are to further relate the sense of agency the participants demonstrate, and how they autonomously set out to invent, create, or construct a world for themselves through art. … to demonstrate to themselves how they can create worlds where they might participate in the ways they choose.

Saara and I set off at 4.30 pm to Toktam' house, where Toktam has initiated a life class. This is an experiment and will run for a few weeks to develop formal and spatial skills, a painter acquaintance of their own age is to 'sit' for them. …

I am sitting behind the group and really wish that I had a video camera. I notice a book near the model's chair, Toktam placed it there a few moments ago. I leave my post and take a few steps and pick it up. Everyone is drawing. I look at the book, it is 'Fra Angelico, Phaidon 1992' with a stamp from Honar University Library. … Toktam and I speak about Fra Angelico. I ask her what she might say to people who believe Western art must be understood in a certain way. She laughs and says 'People can say what they wish. But look at it' she shows me 'The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels' and says 'I look at the similarities of the organisation, the content, it is not dissimilar to some Persian paintings' …

It is inevitable, in my view, that this private and collective partnership in the life class, however short lived, would serve as a tool to overcome the harsh realities of Toktam's experiences. (Honarbin-Holliday 2005: 125-129)

The analysis is what is said *about* the extract

What is this describing? What came just before?

S's statement suggests a conflict between personal and grand narratives. On the one hand is what seems to be her host mother's grand narrative that foreigners should be 'assimilated' into the 'host' national culture. This can be associated with a dominant, essentialist, West as steward discourse of culture in which so-labelled 'non-Western' people are Othered as needing help to adjust to the individualism and personal responsibility imagined to characterise 'Western culture' (Holliday, 2013, p. 110). This discourse is evident in the host mother's reported assertion that S will 'never be part of this culture' because she wants to leave her accommodation 'simply because' she does not like it. The discourse therefore implies that the host mother thinks that S has not learnt the 'this culture' lesson of being able to engage with and take responsibility for the rules of the accommodation contract because of 'her culture'. (Amadasi & Holliday 2018: 247)

What more could or needs to be discussed?

- What happened before the interview?
- What the researchers said in the interview?
- Research diary entries?
- Researcher personal narrative?
- Other data extracts?

Juxtaposing data in thick description

How does Duan make it clear how his thick description was working?

The reasons for Teacher Liang passing the letter to us were, I thought, to teach us something from the letter, to offer us encouragement, and hard-working spirit. I felt that Teacher Liang was a good teacher. The reasons for her to hit us or scold us were to nurture and educate us - to enable us to become useful, successful people. She did everything for our own good! (Diary 3.2, Bao Ling, 7/3/02)

This Teacher Liang is the same one that scolded Wang Yang in the first extract. It seemed that he had already changed his view regarding this teacher. In the incident above, Bao Ling seemed to dislike the teacher. But in this extract, it seems that he tries to find some justification for his teacher's ill treatment of him, even defending his teacher for what she had done to him, showing his understanding for her scolding him. This does not necessarily mean that he has changed his view. It may indicate consistently ambivalent feelings towards her. On the one hand, he hated his teacher for scolding him in public. On the other hand, he showed consent in witnessing his teacher's

recital of the discourse. This may suggest that there is evidence of the dominant discourse within the students' discourse. The following extract shows just such a feeling: (Duan 2007: 156-157)

Preparing the reader for long stories

Wu's thesis contains narrative accounts that are sometimes over a page long. How does he succeed in not leaving the reader alone with them?

> The stories were told from different points of view with different theme focuses for the purpose of making these experiences more accessible to the readers. A short comment (guide notes), added to the text of the stories, is provided as an overview or introduction to the stories. The sources of data will be indicated, which are traceable through tape/file number in Appendix 1.
>
> As both a researcher and a member of the participants, I was engaged in living and telling two types of stories. As a participant my ways of living and telling stories of curriculum change are similar to the ones our teacher participants lived and told. … But as a researcher I had a task to retell these stories, which were not necessarily shared by all the participants. …
>
> Before telling the stories, I need to profile the participants who will appear in my stories. I used pseudonyms to represent the real participants, except for myself. (Wu 2002: 60)

Making claims

Duan wasn't asked to make any changes to his thesis because he explained everything very clearly. How did he do this?

> In the process of writing the data discussion chapters (Chapter 5 to Chapter 8), my understanding of the social phenomenon under study evolved and developed, enabling me to observe an increasingly complex picture of the students. Such complexity is accumulated in each chapter of the data discussion, as well as among the chapters and sub-chapters. It means that at the beginning of each chapter, the relationships between the student discourse and the dominant discourse look simplistic - consisting only of conflict and fighting. But, as the narration and argumentation in the chapter developed, the relationships between the two discourses became more complicated. In this process, the degree of complexity in the relationships between the two discourses is built up. This is also the case with the accumulation of the chapters, meaning that the complexity between the two discourses also builds up during the process of the development of the chapters, such that Chapter 5 is more simplistic than Chapter 6, Chapter 7 is more complicated than Chapter 6, and so on. (Duan 2007: 293)

And here

> In terms of the students' thoughts, such as I can interpret them, there seems to be a distinct lack of perceived conflict most of the time. As their diaries and conversations attest, these students are not unused to self-contemplation. And though moments of emotional distress have been recorded here,

the terms of the dominant discourse are never knowingly presented by students in opposition to actual acts or thoughts divergent to it. No student described a lapse in the recent past as indicative of likely future lapses. All professed - and, I suggest, believed - that they would continue trying their utmost to succeed in the exam. Ongoing acts of opposition (such as persisting in 'premature love', for example) appeared to be suspended in a separate sphere of thinking from the desire to please one's parents, however strenuous my attempts, as an adult interviewer, to reconcile them. One might call this denial or self-deception on the students' part. (Duan 2007: 300)

Inserting reference to theory when talking about data

Where exactly is the reference to theory here? Why isn't there explicit reference to literature?

> She did though take the opportunity to write about this experience of ambivalence about her teacher and what happened in the debate in an assignment that they were set over the Christmas break. She was cautious to ask her teacher if this was appropriate. She interpreted *his* apparent ambivalence as permission. Despite her embarrassment at feeling silenced in the debate, she took the courage to write about it in detail along with her ambivalence about him.

> As with a number of accounts in this book, this one can be read in different ways. The Orientalist perspective would see it simply as evidence of oppression of individualism and move on. It might be argued that Parvaneh herself supports this view when she refers to the pressures of Iranian society.
>
> The other reading is that Parvaneh is in common with women *even* in the West who feel intimidated by male voices in classrooms, meetings and other scenarios. This reading is supported by her clear hybrid modernity, none of which is surprising once the Orientalist grand narrative is put aside. Being well-read resonates with Russian novels in Simin's book case in Chapter 6 and her … (Holliday 2022: 104-105, his emphasis)

Implications

This is the opportunity to draw everything together.

> This argument implies that people, regardless of provenance, possess a hybrid identity because their constructed skills enable them to work out communication everywhere: locally or globally. Therefore, no matter how foreign people are, their hybrid identity can enable communication negotiation in a 'third space' where the threads are connected. As discussed in the literature (see 2.3.), 'third space' is a creative space wherein all people, all time can work out cross-cultural communication.
>
> For instance, in Dany's encounter with the English boys (see 7.1.2.5.), he had a choice of looking for the block of not getting their childhood songs and feel different and deficient (which is often easier), or to loo k for the thread that would facilitate their conversation. Dany could have immediately started with prejudiced 'discourses of culture' which invoke the false large culture

images of how he is different from 'them', however, he chose to look for threads by looking beyond the imagined, yet powerful 'Us vs Them' construct. (Sadoudi forthcoming)

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