

Writing in Ethnographic and Auto/biographical Approaches: Old and New Challenges

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Abstract

In this paper I consider the importance of writing in qualitative approaches, particularly in Ethnography, as well as the implications of the crisis of ethnographic representation in relation to auto/biographical approaches. My paper has above all an exploratory dimension. I intend to review some relevant and recent publications in social sciences (with a specific focus on ethnographic approaches, both in Sociology and Anthropology) in order (1) to reflect on discourse, rhetoric, voice, audience and writing; (2) to promote a more critical reading (and writing) of qualitative research, including ethnographies and life histories; and (3) to examine the complex intersection between writing and reading in qualitative research. It is evident that “ethnographers, like many contemporary scholars, have become increasingly preoccupied with the nature and consequences of their textual practices” (Atkinson, 1992, 51).

This paper has three sections. Firstly, I comment briefly the writing question in objectivist paradigms and I present some arguments on the crisis of representation and the linguistic and literary turn in social sciences, and more specifically in ethnography. Secondly, I discuss on self, voice, and audience within the context of academic and research writing. Finally, I discuss the implications of the paper for promoting a more dialogic, problematic, complex research (and teaching) based on auto/biographical approaches.

Key Words: Research Writing, Auto/biographical Approaches, Narrative Turn, Voice, Audience.

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Introduction

This paper is set within the hermeneutics, poststructuralist, feminist and postmodern trends, which have been contributing during the last 20 years to raise the self-consciousness of the function of representation and written text (the more seminal and pioneering anthropological works on this question were published by Clifford Geertz in 1988, and by James Clifford and George Marcus in 1986; see: Geertz, 1989; Clifford & Marcus, 1991). As Van Manen said, we need a deep exploration of writing epistemology and pedagogy (Van Manen, 1990, ch. 5). I want to make it clear that I refuse realist and neo-realist approaches in social sciences, but also the opposite trend, consisting in a radical and exclusive textualist perspective. Therefore, I think that the social world has a significance that transcends its textual inscription, transcription or description. "The social world is not confined to the texts that purport to describe it, and the two should not be confused... It was wrong to celebrate science and ignore rhetoric. It is equally wrong simply to reverse the emphasis" (Atkinson, 1992, 51-52). I seek to transcend the researcher's roles as a "cartographer of domination" (the arrogant and authoritarian discourse of conventional social sciences) as well as a "cosmographer of ennui" (the radical postmodernist discourse of hypertextualism) (Richardson, 1990, 64).

In my paper I resort to frequent citations and references to relevant literature. My contribution is both a review of the state of the art and a reflection for applying the discussion to auto/biographical methods. In other words, the aim of this paper is very modest: to arrange the library in this area. At the end of my paper, I surmise about the links between writing in ethnography and in autobiographically

oriented research and teaching. For me it is important do not forget the teaching dimension of life histories. In this sense, it may be useful the parallelism between researcher or educator, and (2) participants or social actors and learners. In research, it is present an educational feature and the other way around in education it is present a research facet.

From objectivism to the crisis of representation.

From an objectivist and positivist viewpoint, writing is merely a neutral, impersonal instrument used in order to present or display the research findings and conclusions. In this domain, writing is not a problem. Language 'represents' reality. Logical empiricism has showed a strong interest toward language and linguistic clarification. In this context, science has been understood as a rigorous language, a system of true empirical propositions. In this trend, physicalism (see Neurath, 1932) asserts that "the descriptive terms of scientific language are reducible to terms which refer to spatiotemporal things or events or to their properties" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). A similar perspective, although more open to critique, is present in postpositivist perspectives, based on a fallible representation of reality.

With the so-called crisis of representation -favored by poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist and deconstructionist approaches- academic and research writing (as well as the rest of research questions) became an important issue. G. Marcus and M. Fischer coined that expression "to refer specifically to the uncertainty within the human sciences about adequate means of describing social reality" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 41). In the last few years, some authors have stressed this crisis: in Sociology, relevant contributions come from Laurel Richardson, Susan Krieger, Norman Denzin, Paul Atkinson,

and Kenneth Plummer; in Anthropology, it is necessary to mention Clifford Geertz, George Marcus, James Clifford, Harry Wolcott, and François Laplantine (see: Richardson, 1990, 2000; Denzin, 1989a, 1989b; Atkinson, 1990, 1992; Plummer, 2001; Geertz, 1989; Clifford & Marcus, 1991; Wolcott, 1990; Laplantine, 1996). This new intellectual sensibility shares the main traits of postmodern perspective: "... a radical questioning of the certainty and authority of scholarly text; a rejection of the search for 'truth' and reason as absolutes; a denial of the intellectual and moral distance between the academic and his/her human 'subjects'; a suspicion of the 'big' narratives of totalizing theory (historical, Marxist, sociological)" (Atkinson, 1992, 38). Nevertheless, I propose not to forget the relevance of ideology and power as meaningful forces conditioning personal and social action. "... This active subject in control of the self is at the same time subjectified within a network of pastoral power" (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, 115).

Traditionally qualitative research has showed a strong interest toward writing, but mainly in relation to conventional, formal, procedural aspects of report writing, "... following a specified format: statement of the problem, conceptual framework, research questions, methodology, data analysis, conclusions and discussion. These formats are too schematic and constraining" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, 298). In reality, in both conventional and modernist qualitative approaches, "... the exercise is simply one of presenting not writing 'the findings'" (Plummer, 2001, 169).

Language is always related to a rhetoric of representation. In other words, language and writing are linked to power, ideology, history, society, culture, gender, and

identity. Language and writing are not unbiased tools in social research (for an overview, see: Coffey, 1999; Schwandt, 2001; Richardson, 2001). Following to Derrida, it is true that "a disclosure of narrative practices is always a disclosure of forms of power" (Richardson 1990, 12). Our work (for example: theory, basic and applied research, teaching, production of knowledge, and so on) is a site of moral and political activity, a site of exploration and struggle (Richardson, 1990, 63; 2000, 929). Even more, writing is reflective activity engaging our physical, mental, emotional and social being.

Research writing: self, voice, and audience. innovations and alternatives.

"Writing is the dark secret of social science" (Plummer, 2001, p. 168). Writing is more than an impersonal tool for communicating something. Writing is a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2001) and a way for revealing and privileging the self. From this perspective, ethnographic and biographical methods are closer than usually it is recognized. Almost 20 years ago, Norman Denzin already identified six questions raised about ethnography: "(1) how theory structures inquiry; (2) how conventions determine the narrative, written form of the ethnography; (3) how the experiences of the subject are written; (4) whether objectivity is possible; (5) how gender shapes the field experience; and (6) how we are to read ethnographies once they have been written" (Denzin, 1989, 177).

The literary turn, promoted by C. Geertz, J. Bruner, and other, has broadened the ways in which some authors have conceptualized the ethnographic text and has stressed the importance of characteristics of research writing, centered on three phases: the collection of information, the construction of the text, and the reading of the texts by differing audiences (Coffey, 1999, 119).

As pointed out Clifford and Marcus (cit. in Plummer, 2001, 171), the ethnographic writing is determined contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically, and historically. The traditional authorship is challenged as well as the vision of the author as having a superior gaze or comprehension. For this task, it was particularly relevant the publication, in 1986, of *Writing Culture*, edited by Clifford and Marcus (1991), incorporating poetic and political views on ethnographic theory and fieldwork.

Feminist research and epistemology have been very influential in connection with a new awareness about the political, gendered, emotional dimension of writing and representation (see: Reinharz, 1992; Burman, 1994; Olesen, 2000; on feminism and ethnography, see Coffey, 1999, 10-13; on gender and lifelong learning, see Dybbroe & Ollagnier, 2003). Feminism insists on subjectivity and personal experience. Reinharz remembers that “many feminists have written that ‘finding one’s voice’ is a crucial process of research and writing” (Reinharz, 1992, 16). Feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemologies and feminist postmodernism have contributed to a new view about knowledge and identity (Schwandt, 2001, 92-93).

The questions concerning the self and personal identity have been usually hidden in ethnography and even in auto/biographical research. In the fieldwork, the researcher constructs and reconstructs her or his self, his or her personal and professional identity. Nevertheless, “social science –writes sociologist Susan Krieger– is premised on minimizing the self, viewing as a contaminant, transcending it, denying it, protecting its vulnerability... we paint pictures in which we hope not to exist; or if we exist,... are subordinate or nearly invisible” (S. Krieger, cit. in Plummer,

2001, 181). There are some certain general stances in the qualitative report, passing on the purposes and identities of researcher. Miles and Huberman (1994) list the following perspectives: aesthetic, scientific, moral, activist. Writers seek new ways to engage the reader in a symbolic conversation. A way of “... establishing the self of the researcher is by speaking as a person to the person of the reader” (Holliday, 2002, 136).

In the last few years, discussions about genre, voice, signature, authorship, narrative authority and audience have spread considerably. Clifford Geertz draws a distinction between signature and voice. He applied this conceptual frame to four relevant anthropologists. Signature is related to the construction of textual identity; it is the way in which the function-author becomes evident in the text. On its part, discourse supposes the development of a specific way for formulating the events in terms of vocabulary, rhetoric and pattern of the plot (Geertz, 1989, 11-34).

The search of a subjective, engaged voice in academic writing is an intellectual and emotional struggle. A feminist scholar questions: “How to communicate in terms that engage with and intervene in academic genres without fragmenting, objectifying or disempowering women’s experiences?” (Burman, 1994, 131). Similar questions are made by colleagues Nod Miller and Linden West at the outset of a dialogical paper produced by electronic communication: “How can we write about personal experience in an academic context without getting bogged down in academic jargon?; how do we avoid pretentiousness and narcissism...?; how do we deal with what is difficult to capture in language...?” (Miller & West, 2003).

Reports and other sorts of academic and research writing intend to achieve specific

effects on selected and varied audiences. “For whom we do write? Audience matters, because it starts to shape the way we write” (Plummer, 2001, 174). The reader is a co-analyst, experiencing the original setting of research vicariously (F. Erickson, cit. in Miles & Huberman, 1994, 299). The potential audience or readership of research writing consists of: local respondents; colleagues in the same field; readers oriented to the action, such as policymakers, program operators, civil servants, practitioners, community leaders, and other professionals; students’ dissertation and thesis committee; funders of research; general and mass readers (Yin, 1984, 122-123; Miles & Huberman, 1994, 300; Marcus & Cushman, 1996, 197-199). In function of reader’s orientation, it is possible to distinguish five types of readers: point-driven, information-driven, story-driven, atmosphere-driven, meaning driven (Kenyon & Randall, 1997, 128-134). Reading is related to writing; both processes are not separable. We need more reflection on effects of writing on readers and on the way the reader is changed as a result of writing activity. It seems correct to think that “the narrative is therapeutic not only for the teller but also for the audience” (Atkinson & Silverman, cit. Coffey, 1999, 117).

Concerning the level of diffusion and research use, Miles and Huberman (1994, 305) indicate these possibilities: awareness, reception of basic message, understanding, acceptance, adoption decision, utilization/implementation, integration. Also it is relevant to comment the different attitudes of researcher concerning his / her role regarding the participants. According to R. Brown (cit. in Plummer, 2001, 181), there are “three positions that the author assumes in relation to the subject: as superior, as equal and as inferior”.

In the last few years have appeared new writing strategies and genres in ethnographic research, paying more attention to sensitive events and emotional experiences (Coffey, 1999, 152): autoethnography, ethnographic drama, ethnographic poetry, ethnographic fiction (for an overview, see: Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Brady, 2000). L. Richardson considers “... writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic” (Richardson, 2000, 923) and offers us some advices to develop experimental or alternative ethnography, under the name of creative analytic practice ethnography, such as: (a) join or start a writing group; (b) work through a creative writing guide-book; (c) enroll in a creative writing workshop or class; (d) keep a journal; (e) write a writing autobiography; (f) transform your field data or transcriptions of interviews in a drama or a poetic representation; (g) experiment with narratives of the self; (h) try writing a text using different type-faces, font sizes and textual placements; write your data in three different ways (narrative account, poetic representation, drama); (i) practice collaborative writing; (j) memory work (Richardson, 2000). Plummer (2001, 199-201) mentions, moreover, a more extensive use of photographs, video and visual form (digital photography, video diaries) and of new technologies (CD-Rom, virtual reality).

Some authors have reflected on difficulties with writing experienced by adults in educational settings. “Educators involved in working or teaching with adults have difficulty with writing..., they often refuse to write about their diverse and multiples experiences... [and]... tend to disqualify their ability to write and find excuses not to do it” (Dominicé, 2000, 137). We need therefore more teaching on writing, more activities to foster a positive attitude toward personal and professional writing in teacher

training, professional learning, workplace, learning of research (for example, in PhD and master programmes). Altrichter, from a research-action approach, suggests different activities for helping to write in adult education and teacher training, mixing individual, pair, and plenary work (Altrichter, 1993, 193-194). For students and novice writers, “the genre of academic writing behaves as a gateway through which they must pass to be allowed membership, and then to participate creatively within the [academic] community...” (Holliday, 2002, 132).

Among the features of “craftmanship”, Lincoln and Guba (cit. by Miles & Huberman, 1994, 306) mentions power and elegance, creativity, a quality of openness, independence, courage, emotional and intellectual commitment, and egalitarianism. The styles of writing up the research reports are now more open and complex. Different genres define diverse ways of writing and reading in research and academic contexts. So, Van Maanen (cit. in: Denzin, 1989, 177-178; Miles & Huberman, 1994, 300) has identified different textual structures, functioning as tales of the field: romantic, realistic, poetic, factual, analytic, satiric, journalistic, existential. “Realist tales... provide a rather direct, matter-of-fact portrait of a studied culture, unclouded by much concern for how the field produced a such portrait... Confessional tales focus far more on the fieldworker than on the cultures studied... Impressionist tales are personalized accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork cast in dramatic form; they therefore carry elements of both realist and confessional writing” (J. Van Maanen, cit. in Ely, 1991, 171). Working from a case study perspective, Yin (1984, 126-135) combines three different purposes of case studies (exploratory, descriptive, explanatory) with six different structures

of writing report: linear-analytic, comparative, chronological, theory-building, “suspense”, and unsequenced. This frame makes possible a more complex understanding of pragmatic functions of research reports.

On the other hand, it is necessary to enlarge the audience of qualitative research by creating more open and democratic texts. In many academic settings, obscurity is prized over clarity. Popularization and democratization of social science would be a good thing, even if it is interpreted as a product of “mindless” and “journalists” without enough “theoretical sophistication”. In England, and also everywhere, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) -or similar mechanisms of assessing research quality- disregards academic productions such as textbook, scientific spreading, and so on (Plummer, 2001, 174-176). Academic papers are important, but not exclusive. We need, says sociologist Laurel Richardson, to pay more attention to strategies and ways of writing for mass circulation and writing of trade books (Richardson, 1990).

Writing and reading in auto/biographical approaches: from prudence to engagement.

In 1992, Paul Atkinson wrote: “The mapping of genres and traditions in this field [Cultural Anthropology] is underdeveloped. There have been some advances within the anthropological discourse; the sociological domain remains all but uncharted” (Atkinson, 1992, 30). I think that nowadays we need in auto/biographical approaches more interest toward different genres, voices and audiences. As Norman Denzin pointed in 1989, biography and auto/biography are always a complex construction. Biography and autobiography are not natural, transparent, obvious processes (Denzin,

1989). In my opinion, ethnographic discourse can help to formulate new ideas, new challenges, new perspectives in auto/biographical research and teaching.

As Coffey (1999, 133) writes, "... there are meaningful connections that can be drawn between ethnography and (auto) biographical practice". At the outset of my paper I have written that I seek to transcend the two extremes discourses of social sciences: the cartography of domination and the cosmography of ennui, in words of L. Richardon. In this sense, biographical ethnography, or bio/ethno/graphy, can aid the steering of a course "between the over-determinism of some varieties of socialization theory, and the opposite extreme of seeing selves as extremely unique individuals which are the product of inner psychological processes" (L. Stanley, cit. in Coffey, 1999, 132).

Previously I have written that ethnographic and auto/biographical approaches are closer than usually it is recognized. In both cases we are confronted with rhetoric, discourse, social life, cultural translation, identity, interpersonal relationships, gender, voice, authorship, and so on. When ethnography is developed with an auto/biographical viewpoint, questions on self-revelation, confession, subjectivity, and lived experience come to the foreground (Coffey, 1999, 157-161). "Autobiography is the highest and more instructive form in which the understanding of life is confronting us" (Dilthey, cit. in Richardson, 1990, 23). For revealing and restorying the self (Coffey, 1999; Kenyon & Randall, 1997), we need more subjectivity and engagement by researchers and educators. Life history approaches are not only an alternative methodology to experimentalism, empiricism and functionalism. Life history approaches are an epistemology and even an ontology, challenging the supposed

privileged position of researchers and educators. Auto/biography perspective is a physical, emotional, intellectual, relational work engaged with otherness, ethics, politics and personal growth.

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José González Monteagudo

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