12

WRITING ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter reviews various choices available to researchers when writing up the qualitative report. Extended examples are provided to illustrate selected elements and styles of writing. Brief advice for thesis and dissertation students is also provided.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Reporting study results to others is a necessary component of virtually all qualitative research projects. But in what form? The conventional formats long familiar to quantitative researchers, something like this, are too schematic and constraining:

- Statement of the problem

- Research questions

- Methods

- Results

- Discussion

- Conclusions

A qualitative write-up could follow that format (and many do), but it's not the only one available to us. Normally, we'd have other expectations for a qualitative report.

For example, we might expect a close description of the setting and the major participants. We might look for a more circular linkage between research questions, methods, data collection, and analyses. Qualitative data have special strengths: local groundedness, holism, temporality, access to causation, emphasis on meanings, and so on. Reporting formats can capitalize on them. Even for data segments within a study, a set of field observations can be rendered differently—as a series of vignettes, in poetic form, or compiled in a meta-matrix. A blurring of the frontiers seems to occur between social scientific reporting and figurative or rhetorical renditions of aesthetic material.

The reporting of qualitative data may be one of the most fertile fields going; there are no standardized formats (save for a journal's manuscript submission requirements such as APA, MLA, etc.), and the ways data are being analyzed and interpreted are getting more and more varied. As qualitative data analysts, we have few shared canons of how our studies *should* be reported. Should we have normative agreement on this? Probably not now—and, some would say, not ever.

Yet it's important to consider the choices you have in designing and writing reports. The challenge is to combine elegance and credibility appropriately with the many ways social events can be described, and to find intersections between the academic thinking of most conventional studies and more creative thinking. Just as a good analysis nearly always involves a blend of variable-oriented, categorizing, paradigmatic moves, and case-oriented, contextualizing, narrative ones, so does good reporting.

We do not offer a fixed set of ideas about reports and reporting but rather identify a series of *choices* you have in writing your accounts. They include choices about the report's audiences and the hoped-for effects on them, the voice or genre of the report, its style, its structure, and what can be done to ensure better use of the report.

Our stance is that these choices should be made clearly and deliberately in preliminary form—for interim reports, quite early, and for final reports, somewhat before the midpoint of a study. Wolcott (2009) has an even stronger position: "You cannot begin writing early enough. . . . Would that mean someone might write a first draft before venturing into the field to begin observations or interviews? Absolutely" (p. 18). The point here is not advocacy of data-free writing but of early and continuous writing as a way to make your ideas—more and more informed by data—explicit.

Reporting is not separate from thinking or analysis. Rather, writing *is* analysis. And from our perspective, *a report is a display*. Reports display your organized accounts of what happened in the field, and they display your carefully considered analytic explanations of those events. Your report triggers within your readers the memories of their own personal experiences, plus their comparative and critical faculties. At its best, writing as a form of display presents new, intriguing ideas and stimulates the reader to perceive social life in different and more insightful ways (Saldaña, 2018).

AUDIENCES AND EFFECTS

The Reader and the Writer

Reports are supposed to be written for specific audiences in order to achieve specific effects. But the familiar label "audience" obscures an important issue: You cannot exactly manage who reads your

work or the effects you want to achieve with them. Rather, in Erickson's (1986) terms, the reader is a co-analyst, experiencing the original setting vicariously, looking at the evidence, weighing the writer's interpretations and perspective, and noting how they have changed along the way.

Generally speaking, you need to make choices of reader types from a list like this:

- *Local participants and respondents:* the people who provided data

- *Program administrators and operators:* in evaluation studies, people running and/or deciding about the program being looked at

- *Practitioners:* people engaged in the same sort of work as those studied but in different settings

- *Other researchers:*

    o Colleagues in your own setting

    o Colleagues in your academic field

    o Members of thesis/dissertation committees

- *Policymakers:* governing boards, legislators, and agency officials

- *General readers:* purchasers of trade and e-books

- *Mass readers:* purchasers of magazines and newspapers, readers of Internet news sources, websites, digital videos, and blogs.

Types of Effects

What are you hoping will occur when a particular type of reader engages with your report? Although that cannot be predicted or controlled, getting your *intentions* clear can make a profound difference in what the report will look like and how you produce it. Any qualitative research report may be written from certain general positions:

Scientific

- To heighten insight, illuminate, and deepen understanding

- To expand or revise existing concepts, explanations, and theory

- To convince the reader of the report's worth, truth, and value

- To advance the methodological craft of research

- To add to existing information on a topic

Aesthetic

- To entertain, amuse, and arouse feeling

- To enable vicarious experiencing

Moral

- To clarify and sharpen moral, ethical, and legal issues

- To emancipate, raise consciousness, and free the reader from unrealized oppression

Activist

- To show connections between findings and local problems

- To enable improved decisions and to provide guidance for action

- To empower the reader and to increase a sense of control

- To mobilize specific action

- To support the reader in future use of the findings

One of the critical considerations is *which* effects you intend for *which* types of reader. If your report is a dissertation and your first audience is your committee (and only secondarily other researchers), then the effects of theoretical and methodological advancement—or perhaps, mostly, convincing the readers of the report's credibility—are likely to be central. On the other hand, if your audiences are policymakers and trade book readers, your intended effects may be different—for example, the illumination, moral clarification, and mobilization that Jonathan Kozol (1991) doubtless intended in his riveting depiction of urban schools in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*; and the insightful investigative journalism and social critique of America's minimum wage injustices in Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*.

VOICES AND STYLES

How do we speak to the reader? Many choices can be made, and no standard lexicon describes the overall tone, mode, and orientation of the report. Yet when we read a research report, we can almost immediately detect a pervasive voice, a *style* that defines the relationship between the writer and the reader.

Matters of style are connected with choice of voice. Using passive instead of active verbs, "objective" stances rather than honestly personal ones, and indirect locutions instead of straightforward talk have a long and dishonorable history in traditional research reporting. They serve only to wrap the writer in the mantle of "science" while mystifying and alienating the reader.

One common misconception some scholars have is that you need to "write smart" to be taken seriously or to prove that you know a lot, because it's a traditional discourse expected in scholarly/academic publications and presentations. Others "write smart" because they're arrogant elitists in love with their own intelligence, and they feel that lofty prose, obscure vocabulary, and abstract concepts are the only ways they can communicate their brilliance to others. We're not advocating that you "dumb down" your qualitative writing; we're advocating that you "smarten up" your voice. Things can still be complex without being complicated. Write simply, write clearly, and write believably. Keep it real.

van Maanen's (2011) eloquent and classic *Tales of the Field* distinguishes among several possible voices or research tale types, with many examples from his own and others' work. Several of these can be compatibly mixed and matched within a single report:

Formal (also known as *Analytic*): traditional and conventional scholarly writing. Details the methods, data collection, and data analysis procedures employed with a systematic overview of results and theories.

Realist (also known as *Descriptive*): a direct, highly detailed, matter-of-fact portrait, with methods left mostly undescribed.

Confessional: written from the fieldworker's viewpoint. This includes methodological dilemmas, admission of errors, ethical issues, and behind-the-scenes glitches.

Impressionist: personalized, atheoretical accounts, often story-like, aiming to link reality and the fieldworker and to enable the reader's vivid reliving of the experience.

Critical: focuses on sociopolitical implications of field work. Critically examines, usually through a Marxist lens, sociological and cultural underpinnings of human dynamics.

Literary: evocative narratives. Utilizes the power of literary tones, styles, and elements to develop characters in active storylines as in "creative nonfiction."

Jointly told: collaborative, coauthored accounts. The researcher and participants join together to create a polyvocal narrative of their collective experiences.

Structural (also known as *Interpretive*): a combination of theoretical reflection with first-person accounts. This writing links the local to the general.

Poststructural: "purposeful incompleteness and uncertainty." Inconclusive results to reinforce the flux of human nature.

Advocacy: takes a deliberate moral perspective. The work examines inequities and power struggles to achieve social justice and to empower the oppressed.

These voices have consequences for what is included in a report and what can be learned from it. For example, van Maanen notes that a realist, descriptive voice tends to rule out alternative interpretations and/or to pretend that the interpretations come straight from the respondents. Confessional tales may overfocus on the fieldworker as doing "vanity ethnography," blurring what happened, and may be seen as self-indulgent writing. An impressionist account may focus too much on the exemplary and dramatic moments of field work to the neglect of a site's mundane and patterned reality. (These are only sketchy summaries. We recommend van Maanen's *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* to the reader seeking an articulate, experienced researcher's reflections on writing.)

WRITING EXAMPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are excellent books devoted exclusively to writing up qualitative research; see the appendix for recommended titles. In this section, we offer just a few examples of what we consider to be important components of qualitative reportage, and some examples from published studies that exhibit (read: display) the necessities of exemplary writing.

Writing the Abstract

A journal article abstract or thesis/dissertation abstract may be the first narrative block a reader accesses after scanning your work's title. Certainly, this front matter should describe the study's purpose and design, but we emphasize that writers should also *include the project's major findings or conclusions* in the abstract, rather than simply relaying the topics that will be discussed. Giving us the study's "headlines" first better frames the reader for the full-length report, and makes searches more efficient for readers who may be reviewing a large number of works for a literature review or a qualitative metasynthesis. We recommend that at least one-half of an abstract's length be devoted to summarizing the study's conclusions.

As an example, Anthony Silard (2018; also see Display 9.1), in his *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* journal article, "Emotions for a Cause: How the Emotion Expression of Nonprofit Leaders Produces Follower Engagement and Loyalty," suggests the results not only in his title, but also includes the major findings in his abstract. They are italicized below to highlight them:

Although emotion and leadership is a flourishing topic in organizational research, little is known about the actual emotion-related leader behaviors within the context of nonprofit organizations. Through an inductive, multiple-case study drawing from 34 semistructured interviews with individuals who have occupied leader and/or follower roles in nonprofit organizations, *a meso-level framework emerges that delineates the mutually strengthening interplay of emotion-related leader behaviors and organizational display norms in the nonprofit sector. These norms favor the expression of positive emotion and proscribe the display of negative emotion. Nonprofit leaders who enact emotion-related behaviors congruent with these display norms generate the follower outcomes of engagement and loyalty.* Implications for nonprofit leadership research and practice are discussed. (p. 304, emphasis added)

As a second example, Alessandro Stievano et al. (2016) explored "Nursing's Professional Respect as Experienced by Hospital and Community Nurses" in their *Nursing Ethics* journal article. An editorial requirement of this particular journal (and one we feel all journals, regardless of discipline, should adopt) is an extended yet succinct abstract that "front-loads" readers with a categorized summary of key components of the study. This textual display provides an at-a-glance overview for busy professionals who need essential information delivered concisely:

Background: There is growing awareness that patient care suffers when nurses are not respected. Therefore, to improve outcomes for patients, it is crucial that nurses operate in a moral work environment that involves both recognition respect, a form of respect that ought to be accorded to every single person, and appraisal respect, a recognition of the relative and contingent value of respect modulated by the relationships of the healthcare professionals in a determined context.

Research question/aim: The purpose of this study was to develop better understandings of perceptions of nursing's professional respect in community and hospital settings in England.

Research design: The research design was qualitative. Focus groups were chosen as the most appropriate method for eliciting discussion about nursing's professional respect.

Participants and research context: A total of 62 nurses who had been qualified for at least a year and were working in two localities in England participated in this study.

Methods: Data were collected using 11 focus group sessions. The data were analysed by means of an inductive content analysis, extracting meaning units from the information retrieved and classifying the arising phenomena into conceptually meaningful categories and themes.

Ethical considerations: To conduct the research, permission was obtained from the selected universities.

Results: Recognition respect of human beings was perceived as ingrained in the innermost part of nurses. Regarding appraisal respect, a great importance was placed on: the interactions among healthcare professionals, the time to build trust in these relationships, the influences of the workplace characteristics and nurses' professional autonomy and decision-making.

Conclusion: Recognition respect of persons was embedded in the inmost part of nurses as individuals. Concerning appraisal respect, it was thought to be deeply enshrined in the inter- and intra-healthcare professional interactions. The forging of trusting relationships over time was deemed to be strongly associated with good quality interactions with other healthcare professionals. (pp. 1–2)

Even if you're not submitting your manuscript to a journal that requires an extended abstract like the one above, we feel you should write one at the conclusion of your study as a way of condensing the primary elements of your study. This narrative display also functions as an executive summary for a private, commissioned report and can serve as a template for a thesis/dissertation abstract write-up.

Writing About Methodology and Methods

We must provide readers a necessary account of what and how we went about doing what we did in the field and in front of a computer monitor. The methodology section of a report details the overall framework of the investigation, while the methods section describes the procedures we followed to collect information of various types and from whom. It is an evidentiary warrant, of sorts—not of data, but of the researcher's systematic ways of working—that authenticates the qualifications of the investigator and the quality of the study's design and execution.

Dana L. Miller, John W. Creswell, and Lisa S. Olander (1998) explored the writing of a field work project in three different ways for their compelling *Qualitative Inquiry* journal article, "Writing and Retelling Multiple Ethnographic Tales of a Soup Kitchen for the Homeless." This first excerpt demonstrates an exemplar of qualitative research writing's front matter; their modified conceptual framework, purpose of the study, field work setting, and major research questions—in other words, the *methodology*:

> The soup kitchen becomes a microcosm for studying the homeless population . . . and we can learn much from an ethnographic study that explores alternative narratives about the culture of a soup kitchen.
>
> The purpose of this ethnographic study was to describe and interpret the cultural setting of the St. Tabor Soup Kitchen, located in a small Midwestern city called Midtown. St. Tabor is housed in a multipurpose complex with Daily Refuge (a daytime shelter for the homeless and near-homeless) and Community Thrift Shop. Three research questions emerged during the study: How might the soup kitchen, as a cultural setting, be described? What are the cultural themes of the soup kitchen? How can we become advocates for the soup kitchen, day-shelter and the homeless population? (p. 472)

Other necessary elements for this ethnographic report are documentation of the data collection methods, the selection of key informants, and how the coresearchers' findings were verified. Notice how the amounts and forms of data and the explanation of triangulation procedures establish a sense of trustworthiness for the forthcoming account—these are the *methods*:

> We observed homeless guests for 4 months during the noon lunch hour at St. Tabor Soup Kitchen. Our methodology was qualitative, involving ethnographic procedures . . . and an evolving design to best understand the culture of the soup kitchen and the needs of the low-income and homeless population in Midtown.
>
> The noon lunch at St. Tabor was provided by Daily Refuge. Gaining access through the director of Daily Refuge, we volunteered for 4 months, serving meals in the soup kitchen

and helping with clean-up. Data collection consisted of 35 observations, and formal and informal interviews. In addition, we collected documents describing the low-income population in the city, sign-in sheets that provided census data about guests, written materials about Daily Refuge, daily food menus, and we took photographs of the facility, town and guests. Our personal fieldnotes included conversations with guests, volunteers, and staff; notes from our research team meetings; and our interpretations and personal reflections.

Information-rich key informants were purposefully selected to participate in the study, including the director of Daily Refuge, the facility manager, and a homeless man who volunteered as a cook for many days during our visit. With these individuals, we periodically shared our emerging cultural description of St. Tabor. Throughout the study, we verified the accuracy of our account by taking our report back to key informants and by triangulating among multiple participants, investigators, and data collection methods. We use pseudonyms throughout this report to protect the anonymity of the site and participants. (p. 472)

The coresearchers do not label the above sections as ways of rendering van Maanen's *formal* style of writing and tale-telling, but that is what they have done. The formal (or *analytic*) tale presents the researcher's systematic procedures and thinking of how the data come together to explain how things work.

"Being There"

Careful description of the settings, people, and events we witnessed is one of the main contributions of qualitative research. But such descriptions also have an analytic and interpretive purpose: to illuminate the constant, influential, and determining factors shaping the course of events and what it all means in the grander scheme of things.

A classic ethnographic mandate is to give readers a vivid sense of "being there" at the social setting we observed. Descriptive and realistic accounts remain firmly rooted in the data themselves, and this style of writing may help the reader imagine the site in his or her mind and lend a sense of credibility to the author's experiences—in other words, "I was there, and this is what I saw and heard" (Saldaña, 2011b, p. 147).

A purely methods laden account makes our reports sterile and less "human." One of qualitative research's strengths is its ability to convey the social dimensions of life through evocative prosaic renderings. Giving readers a virtual experience of "being there" in the field with us can be accomplished through what Saldaña calls "significant trivia"—rich visual imagery. In this excerpt from the soup kitchen for the homeless study, Miller et al. (1998) provide a description of the setting using small but inference-laden details:

The Soup Kitchen, run by a Catholic church, provides dinner 7 days a week and lunch on weekends. Daily Refuge rents the kitchen on weekdays to serve free lunches. St. Tabor's dining area is one modest sized room, about 45 by 30 feet. Guests sit around three rows of tables (2 by 24 feet each) covered with green, plastic, flannel-backed tablecloths with tiny paw prints. When not in use, chairs line one of the walls of the room. The dining area is modern and clean, with sparse accessories—a couple of trash cans, a small cross hanging on the wall, a bulletin board advertising services available to the homeless, and a few community service awards. A long serving counter divides the dining area from the

kitchen—a modern, clean cooking area with a stove; commercial size oven; microwave; stainless steel, locked refrigerator; dishwasher; and mops and buckets for clean-up. (p. 474)

"Being there" accounts for what the researcher both saw *and heard*. Occasional quotes from participants throughout the report both document the data and honor the voices of those we studied. We have read a few reports in which the researcher's point of view dominated the text and neglected to report what others said in the field, opting instead to summarize their responses rather than quoting them directly. Selected monologic and dialogic excerpts from field notes and interview transcripts give not just a voice but a "face" to the people in our investigation.

Chapter 7's Vignettes profile offers an evocative way to render a substantive moment of social action in narrative form that includes both action and dialogue. As another example, we provide excerpts from a 2006 *Management Communication Quarterly* article by Sarah J. Tracy, Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, and Jess K. Alberts: "Nightmares, Demons, and Slaves: Exploring the Painful Metaphors of Workplace Bullying."

Ten in-depth interviews and two focus groups with nine and eight participants respectively were conducted with adult participants who self-identified as bullied workers. The coresearchers also employed creative drawing with them, a restorative approach for people experiencing trauma or pain, and which provides an outlet for expressing complex and subtle information that is difficult to verbalize (p. 156). The drawings served as stimuli for individual and focus group discussions, and they later became provocative displays in the final published report.

The coresearchers observed that participants related their workplace bullying experiences through selected metaphors, and thus the analysis focused on how these metaphors were used to describe their painful experiences. In this excerpt, notice how the participants are quoted throughout:

> More than any other metaphor, narratives and drawings characterized bullying as a contest or battle. This metaphor continuum ranged from playing a game to outright war, including killing and death. On the less destructive end of the spectrum, those targeted described feeling as though bullying was a matching of wits with an opponent who played unfairly. Participants spoke in terms of bullying as strategic attack, defense, and a set of shifting rules saying, for instance, that bullying was "playing a game," "playing their game," and "I had no rights . . . and they played on that." Dale, who worked in a security business, said the bully was "up to his old tricks." These metaphors of play and game suggest a less-than-serious issue and something that all members ostensibly should also be able to negotiate. However, as illustrated below, targets viewed the rules of the game as unfair and playing the game as dangerous and threatening.
>
>   Targeted workers characterized the contest as fixed or unfairly weighted in the bully's favor. They said bullies created the rules, changed them without notice or input and, as an aircraft mechanic named Ben explained, did so "behind closed doors." Dolly, a dental office administrative assistant, noted that bullies "make their own rules." Stephanie, a call center employee, said that the only way the bully would win was "to play dirty," whereas Jack, the director of an online university program, said that bullying "really has to do with making up the rules as you go along." Sadly, this metaphor of a game that is difficult to win extended to targets' seeking external help through the courts. Going to court was a gamble and "a crap shoot." Furthermore, in this "game," abused workers could see themselves as the prey of the hunt; Dale explained, "everybody's fair game" for bullying. Hunting, of course, can result in significant and even lethal injury. (pp. 159–160)

Again, we emphasize that text, too, is a display; and a participant quote is a "verbal display" that represents and presents data vividly about the study's phenomenon of interest.

Analytic Storytelling With Displays

Chapter 11 includes an extended example about the detailed write-up of coding and data analysis procedures, and we refer you to its "Analytic Documentation" section for review. Here, we discuss how narrative and displays work together in a report.

Throughout this book, we've stressed two basic modes of presentation: text (with varying degrees of detail and organization), associated with organized displays in matrix, network, or graphic form. We think these modes are an enormous help in drawing coherent meaning from data and in confirming and deepening conclusions. By extension, they communicate clearly and well to readers.

We return to Stievano et al.'s (2016) study on nursing's professional respect as an example. Recall that 62 participants distributed among 11 focus group interview sessions offered their perspectives on the topic. A few discussion questions posed to the nurse participants included the following: "Could you describe some indicators of nursing's professional respect in degrees of importance?" "Have you witnessed an episode where nursing's professional respect was violated?" "Have you ever witnessed a situation where the behaviour of a health professional (physiotherapist, speech therapist, radiographer, etc.), support staff or clerical staff, damaged or reinforced nursing's professional respect? Could you give some examples?" (p. 5).
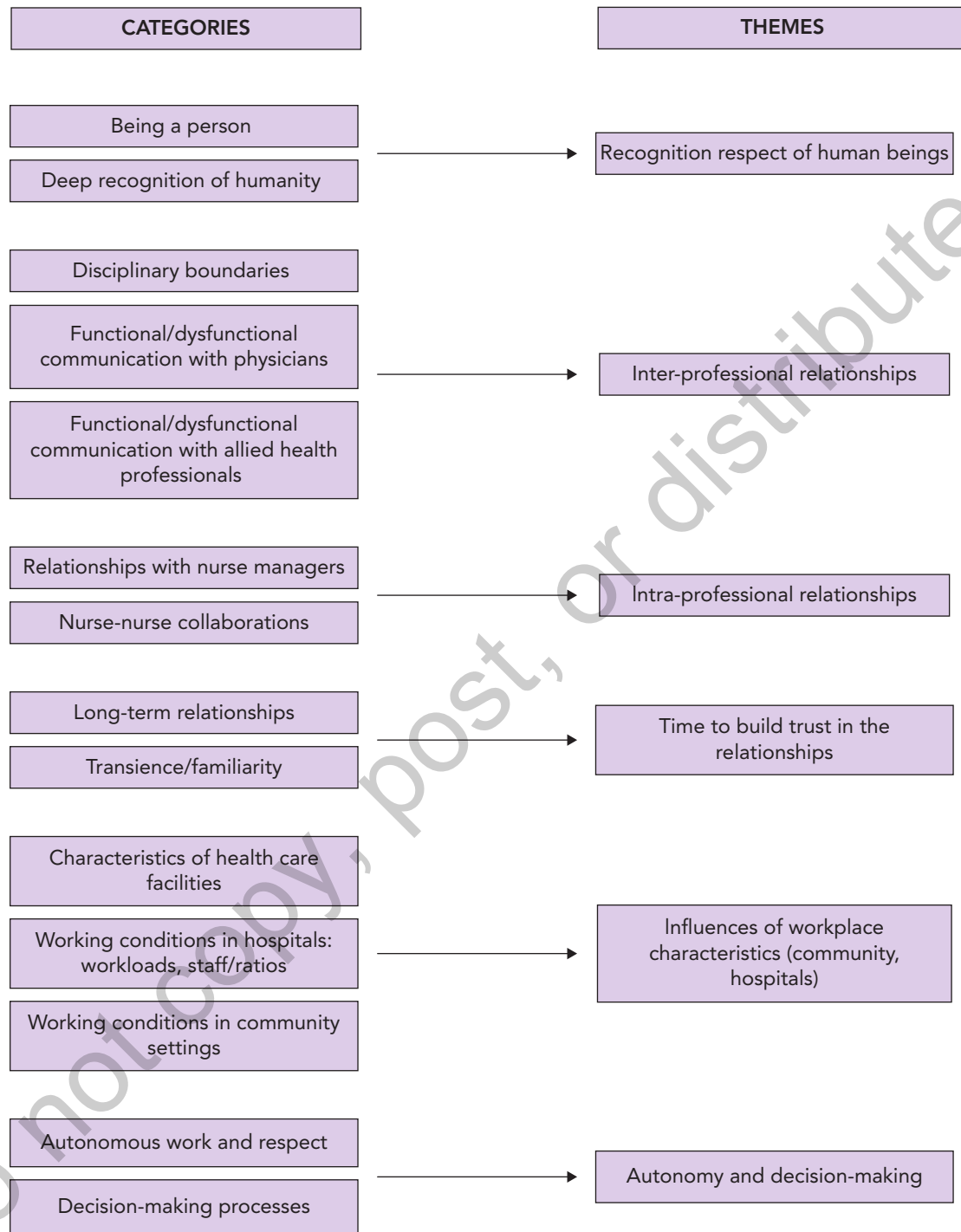
From a content analysis of the transcripts, "Codes were reduced, connected together based on their similarities and differences, and abstracted into 14 main categories. Six connecting themes were identified" (p. 7). Display 12.1 shows how the 14 categories clustered into those 6 themes.

Display 12.1 in and of itself is an effective graphic that illustrates the transformation of condensed data from one form to another. But the research team took it a step further and *integrated* the themes in a second graphic. They progressed from an *analysis* in Display 12.1 to a *synthesis* in Display 12.2. "Appraisal respect," a meta-theme based on the literature review and conceptual framework, is a relational engagement "embedded in time and place and is identified and expressed at various levels. . . . Appraisal respect will value morally virtuous personal attributes such as honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, reciprocal trust and responsibility" (p. 3).

The complete article describes the interwoven nature of the six themes and how they work in concert with each other for professional appraisal respect. The narrative alone might have sufficed for astute readers to grasp the analytic work, but the two graphics greatly enhance the audience's cognitive grasp of the resulting themes. Display 12.1 is elegant and straightforward enough to speak for itself. But Display 12.2's ideas are more richly complex, and the analytic narrative, *in combination with and reference to the display*, explains the study's findings better than words or images alone. One excerpt from the report, to be read in concert with Display 12.2, reads as follows:

> Concerning appraisal respect, an extrinsic respect for the qualities of other individuals— generated asymmetrically in the relationships among persons—was thought to be deeply enshrined in the relationships among healthcare professionals. These interactions qualified the respect for nurses. In fact, it was during these interactions between nurses and other healthcare professionals, primarily physicians, that the respect was defined, could be lost or violated, or possibly never recognized. This was decisive because the realization of the appraisal respect for nurses was clearly figured out so as not to dismiss others or to ignore others or to keep distance in virtue of a superior rank, or to objectify others who were regarded just for their usefulness and not as ends in themselves. (p. 14)

DISPLAY 12.1 ⬡ Elements That Influence Nursing's Professional Respect: Summary of the Analysis

CATEGORIES	THEMES

CATEGORIES	THEMES
Being a person	
Deep recognition of humanity	→ Recognition respect of human beings
Disciplinary boundaries	
Functional/dysfunctional communication with physicians	→ Inter-professional relationships
Functional/dysfunctional communication with allied health professionals	
Relationships with nurse managers	
Nurse-nurse collaborations	→ Intra-professional relationships
Long-term relationships	
Transience/familiarity	→ Time to build trust in the relationships
Characteristics of health care facilities	
Working conditions in hospitals: workloads, staff/ratios	→ Influences of workplace characteristics (community, hospitals)
Working conditions in community settings	
Autonomous work and respect	
Decision-making processes	→ Autonomy and decision-making

Source: Stievano et al. (2016), p. 8.

Some stories without pictures are ultimately abstract and unconvincing. But a story with vivid pictures enhances the narrative and leaves a more memorable impression. Think of all the illustrated picture books you read as a child. Most likely some of those images are embedded strongly in your mind and remembered fondly. The same principle applies with matrices, networks, and graphics in our research reports. We may not be able to recite verbatim what we read long ago in an academic journal article, but there may be traces of any accompanying visual images from that study still lingering in our long-term memories.

DISPLAY 12.2   ◉   Professional Respect for Nurses in Hospital and Community Settings

Professional respect for nurses

Recognition respect of human beings

Appraisal respect

Inter-professional interactions

Professional autonomy and decision-making

Influences of workplace characteristics (community, hospitals)

Intra-professional interactions

Time to build trust in the relationships
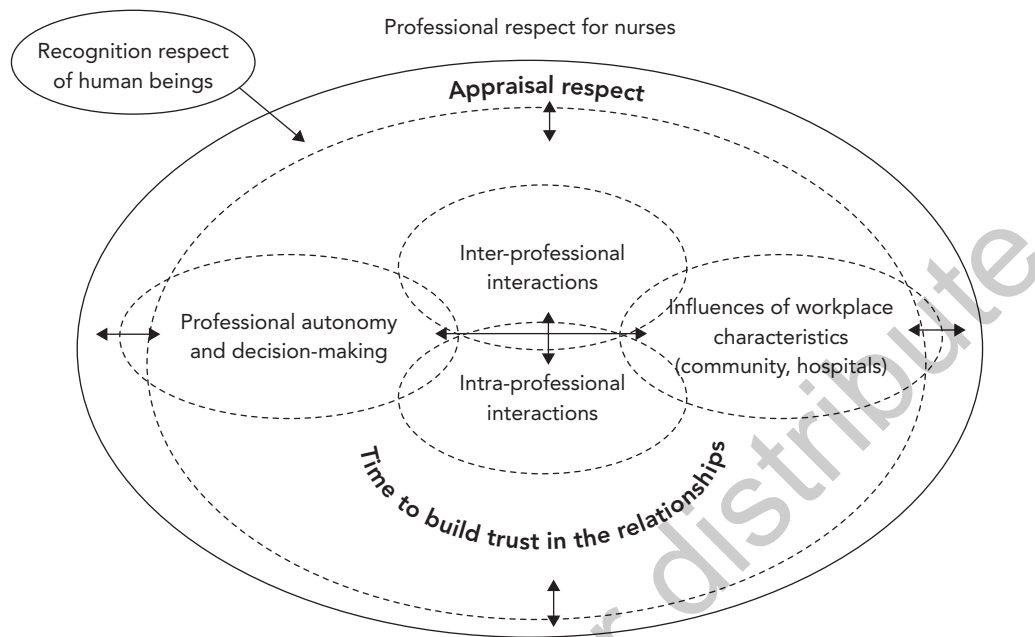
Source: Stievano et al. (2016), p. 10.

TRADITIONAL PRESENTATION MODES

As we emphasize throughout the book, data analysis includes selecting, condensing, and transforming data; displaying these data in an organized way; and drawing and verifying conclusions from the condensed, displayed data. Any interim or final report will deal, more or less explicitly, with this flow of analytical processes and their resulting products.

But scholarly text does not have to be sterile. Qualitative researchers characteristically employ a range of literary devices. The description of the study's context is often rendered in quasi-pictorial form ("Yellow Falls lies at the end of a fertile valley, with small farms in its hollow and a creek meandering through the flood plain"). Important events or interactions may be reported in the form of vignettes ("This happened near the entrance to the outpatient clinic, when the cardiologist, two residents, and several patients were within earshot.").

Many codes—especially pattern codes—are captured in the form of metaphors ("dwindling efforts" and "interactive glue"), where they can synthesize large blocks of data in a single trope. Metaphor, irony, and metonymy—even comedy, satire, tragedy, and farce—are seen as workable tools. But qualitative research reports are both something more and something less than traditional fictional literature. Our tropes are about something that we have realistic reasons for believing in. Evidentiary warrants are behind our assertions and claims.

How are qualitative reports organized? Not surprisingly, there are no standard setups, except at a very general level. Each researcher must craft a report structure that fits the intellectual and local context of the particular study, combined with the in-house requirements of a journal editor, book publisher, or university graduate program. A study's research questions, context, and audiences drive

the design of reports more than any general canon could. Nevertheless, we humbly offer what we feel are minimum guidelines for a traditional qualitative report:

1. The report should tell us what the study was about or came to be about.

2. It should communicate a clear sense of the social and historical context of the setting(s) where data were collected.

3. It should provide us with what Erickson (1986) calls the "natural history of the inquiry," so we see clearly what was done, by whom, and how. More deeply than in a sheer "methods" account, we should see how key concepts emerged over time, which variables appeared and disappeared, and which categories or themes led to important insights.

4. A good report should provide basic data, preferably in focused form (vignettes, organized narratives, or data displays) so that the reader can, in concert with the researcher, draw warranted conclusions.

5. Researchers should address the conclusions' broader meaning in the worlds of ideas and actions they affect. (This guideline brings us full circle to the "goodness" questions we explored in Chapter 11.)

6. Bottom line: Don't be boring.

PROGRESSIVE PRESENTATION MODES

Miller et al. (1998) insightfully rendered their field work account about a soup kitchen for the homeless through three different tale types or styles—the realist, confessional, and critical. But other possibilities exist. Imagine if their field work could have been represented through poetry, as a short documentary film posted on YouTube, as a series of monologues and scenes performed on stage, or as a photography exhibit of images taken by the homeless participants themselves with accompanying audio recordings of their life stories—a method called *photovoice*. The genre(s) you select for telling your research story should be the most effective one(s) for presenting an account that is persuasive yet provocative, emotionally rich yet factually grounded, and analytically rigorous yet elegantly presented.

Reports can go beyond words. We've restricted our analytic and presentation modes in this book, but some qualitative researchers have created studio art installations of their research, and others have posted interactive websites dedicated to their field work and findings. There are other qualitative report possibilities such as slam poetry, ethnodramas, novels, and even comic books. Such accounts are typically "larger than life." Like all good fiction, they make these accounts compelling to the reader because they describe situations that are more extreme or archetypal than most instances of daily life. Yet compellingness and novelty are not enough to ensure the goodness of a progressive qualitative report. These progressive presentation modes must, first and foremost, be excellent artistic products based on excellent research. The trick is to find a proper balance between the academic and the aesthetic—a genre coined as *faction*.

Though progressive forms of qualitative inquiry are not the primary focus of this book's purpose, we acknowledge that they can be just as revelatory and rigorous as more traditional approaches. See Knowles and Cole (2008), Leavy (2018), Norris (2009), and Saldaña (2011a) for more on these innovative arts-based genres.

ON THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

One of the primary readers of this book is the graduate student. So, we offer a few recommendations for guidance through the qualitative thesis and dissertation document process and refer you to the appendix for excellent titles on writing up qualitative research. Since each college/university has its own unique protocol for graduate programming and document preparation, we can discuss only a few general guidelines.

Support and Supervision

First, have a separate meeting and conversation with your mentor or supervisor on writing after the prospectus has been approved—not necessarily on your research topic or field work matters, but on *writing* itself. It's assumed that the supervisor has written a comparable document of some type, plus other works such as articles, books, and so on. Discuss the writing process itself—personal ways of working, dilemmas, self-discipline, emotional roadblocks, problem solving, and so on. Sharing stories about the craft and art of writing with a mentor demystifies the process and creates a sense of community about what is primarily a solitary act.

Peer support, we've learned from our students, can be either a blessing or a curse. Some students enjoy shop-talking with each other about their particular research projects, and their dialogue informs each other about method, the literature, theory, and the like. Other students prefer that a peer serve primarily as a form of social and emotional support—a friend to go out with for dinner or a movie to just "get away from it all," and to be there when a desperate phone call or text message signals the need for compassionate understanding in moments of academic angst. And some students are lone wolves who prefer to work privately by themselves, and who perceive others' outreach efforts as an annoying interference rather than a sincere attempt to connect.

Don't hesitate to tell peers what kind of student you are and what you need (or don't need) from them. Most doctoral students we've supervised have traveled a rough road toward their degrees, mostly from the stress of looming deadlines, an erratic work-life balance, and the need for affirmation that what they're doing is worthy and worthwhile. An occasional cry is the norm, not the exception. We do not intend to paint a bleak picture about graduate life; we just want you to know that *virtually every student working toward a graduate degree we've supervised has experienced these same feelings*.

Select a mentor or thesis/dissertation supervisor carefully. He or she should be someone you trust and someone who "has your back." Committee members and readers should be those who have expertise in your topic and who can offer constructive feedback on your document. Don't hesitate to come to them for assistance; their job is to help you succeed and complete your degree. If they don't perceive their roles that way, then select different committee members who do.

This final piece of advice is directed toward thesis and dissertation supervisors: Conduct monthly reality checks with your students. Research suggests that students are more likely to "deliver" their work (even late work) when their teachers give the impression, "I've got my eyes on you, and I'm watching you like a hawk." Sometimes, we assume that the master's or doctoral student is mature enough to work independently and responsibly without our intervention and to successfully complete major tasks such as a thesis or dissertation by an expected deadline. But periodic follow-up adds a little pressure and motivation to make progress and keeps lines of communication open. These reality checks can be as simple as a phone call, e-mail, text message, or submission of a one-page summary progress report at the end of each month.

Writing Fundamentals

From the very beginning, create the template or shell of the thesis or dissertation document itself in finished form with strict adherence to format manual guidelines prescribed by your college or university. Saldaña tells his students, "Make your first draft *look* like a dissertation, and it'll start *feeling* like a dissertation." Creating the front matter such as the title page, abstract, table of contents/figures, and acknowledgments pages (even if there's nothing below the headings at these early stages) gets you prepared for what eventually needs to go in them. When you start separate files for your chapter drafts, set the page margins, spacing, fonts, page numbers (one of the most frequently missing items), and all other technical format matters from the very start. What you actually write on the pages can be a first draft or messy prose as a start, but it's the shell or template for the document that's always in finished format.

Write at least one page a day; and in a year, you'll have a draft or two—if not the finished document itself. This sounds like a relatively simple and simplistic formula, but you'd be surprised how many do not follow it and end up spending 4 to 6 years writing (or mostly procrastinating) a work that could have been completed in 1 to 2 years. Granted, field work has to be completed before your conclusions can be confidently asserted, but a good amount of the document can be drafted during the prospectus and field work stages. One page a day may motivate you to continue and write two additional pages, or even five or more. But hold yourself to one page a day *minimum*.

Also, don't assume you have to write Chapter 1 first, then Chapters 2, 3, 4, and so on. Write on whatever can be written about when you sit in front of a monitor, regardless of where it appears in the document. If you're in the middle of field work and caught up on your transcription work, you can tighten up your literature review section. If you're tired and feel unmotivated to write, then start assembling or cleaning up your references or bibliography. Imagine yourself as a time traveler, who can jump back and forth from one portion of your document to another as the need arises. Each day, write on whatever can be written about.

Warning: Never show a supervisor or committee chair a rough draft, unedited, or unproofread document. The reader will be so distracted by spelling, grammatical, punctuation, and format errors that his or her mind won't be able to focus on the contents and ideas in the work. The thesis/dissertation displays you at your scholarly best, and it must be nothing less than perfect—even in the second-draft stage. Drafts that are for-your-eyes-only can be as messy as you're comfortable with. But substandard early work for a supervisory reader makes a bad first impression and reduces the chances of constructive feedback for revision you might receive.

Finally, *stick to deadlines*. That may sound like obvious advice, but not everyone adheres to it. A recent televised news story reported that "personal drama" was the major reason for the loss of a worker's productivity. And as we reflect on that reason, it seems to apply to college and university students as well. Personal drama (e.g., extended illness, caretaking responsibilities, relationship difficulties, financial matters, and emotional upheaval) interferes with field work, writing, and meeting deadlines. Certainly, each individual should reconcile what gets personal priority during those inconvenient and tumultuous periods of daily living. Sometimes, family needs to come first; and keeping a roof over your head is vital for other good things to happen. But if you want to meet thesis or dissertation deadlines, try as much as possible to eliminate the personal drama—yours or someone else's—from your life. Having a detailed, long-range calendar of due dates for tasks (e.g., prospectus approved, Institutional Review Board application submitted, field work completed, first draft of Chapter 1 completed) and fiercely sticking to it also helps.

CLOSURE AND TRANSITION

The vast majority of graduate students, scholars, and research practitioners can write *competently*. But only a few individuals from these groups write *well*. We advocate that if you want to become a better writer of qualitative research, then read a lot of it—with conscious attunement to the author's word choices, sentence structures, overall organization, report genre, and general style. The purpose is not to imitate other outstanding writers' ways of documenting social life, but to acquaint yourself with a broad spectrum of possibilities for reporting qualitatively.

The final chapter now follows. It brings closure to the book by recapping the qualitative research process and offering final strands of advice.