

## Writing Up Social Research

### Chapter Summary

#### Introduction

This chapter has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it provides a practical guide on how to write up social research. It discusses annotated examples of research articles written in two traditions, qualitative and quantitative. The chapter elaborates on the format and components of both quantitative and qualitative articles, stressing the essential parts of each that help the authors to create a convincing argument and a contribution that is recognized as professional and corresponding to accepted sociological standards.

On the other hand, the chapter opens up a broader philosophical discussion on the general approaches to writing social research, particularly focusing on postmodernist and realist views on writing ethnographic accounts. The teachings of the two schools contribute to two distinctive styles of writing ethnography, one focuses on creating the authoritativeness of the account, and another stresses relativity of any social science account as reflecting researcher's subjective truth and position.

#### Writing up Quantitative Research

Generally, the articles written in both qualitative and quantitative traditions have a standardized structure that is similar in both approaches. Articles in both traditions begin with an **abstract**, which clearly and succinctly describes the significance of the research, the main research question and the most significant findings. The abstract should usually fit into several sentences or 200 words.

In the body of the quantitative research article, the writer should try to capture the reader's attention early on in the paper, spell out the rationale of the research, state the research questions (and possible hypotheses), discuss the methods and data collection, then clearly state and discuss the findings in the context of the research questions and hypotheses, and finally discuss the implications of the findings for the hypotheses and the theoretical framework adopted.

Quantitative tradition follows the stages and steps more explicitly and literally than qualitative tradition. It also elaborates on data collection, measurement methods, sampling techniques, and other aspects of the research design. These are all laid out in their own labelled area so other researchers can easily go to the place of interest.

A quantitative article typically contains the following sections:

- **Introduction:** The first four sentences should identify the topic and significance of the paper. The Introduction situates the article in the existing literature on the topic and outlines the contribution the article will make.

- **Theory:** This section discusses theoretical issues and existing theories relevant to the study. It may derive hypotheses which are tested in subsequent study.
- **Data:** Explains what the sampling procedures were, the sample sizes, the data recording techniques, response rates, etc. Sometimes the papers use the data that were collected previously by other researchers. In this case, the article is the case of *secondary data analysis* but should still describe how the data were collected and how it was used for this specific research project.
- **Measurement:** This section explains how the main concepts are measured in the research. For example, what questions in the administered survey measure the concept of social capital?
- **Methods and models:** This part describes the proposed relationship between key variables, and the methods of data analysis.
- **Results:** Results provide a detailed description of findings and a discussion of whether hypotheses have been supported. The findings must be discussed in sufficient details in order to make explicit the contributions of the study.
- **Conclusions:** Conclusions address more general implications of findings. The section relates back to the issues discussed in the Introduction and Theory sections and reflects on broader significance of findings. The findings may have broader implications for the discussed theories, and the conclusions may extrapolate a bit more broadly on this significance of findings for the situations beyond those initially studied in the given research project. A strong conclusion might inspire more research on the topic
- **Bibliography:** Accuracy is very important in the bibliography, and errors show a lack of attention by the author. The bibliography must be created in one of the professionally-recognized styles (ASA, APA, and the like), or conform to the style used by the journal itself. If website references are used, they should include the date when the website was accessed by the researcher. The bibliography entries should be organized alphabetically and chronologically, and should not be marked by the bullet points.

In sum, an article written in a quantitative tradition should explain the purpose and rationale of the research, clearly formulate the research questions and hypothesis, describe the nature of the data, present the findings in clear connection to the formulated research questions and hypotheses, and spell out the implications of findings in the conclusions. The outline with the above sections is usually followed by quantitative researchers in a straightforward sequential way. Sometimes the “Data,” “Measurement,” and “Methods and Models” sections can be combined into a single “Methodology” section, or a “Discussion” section is inserted between “Results” and “Conclusions” to elaborate on the implications of findings.

### Writing up Qualitative Research

The structure of qualitative research article is similar to that of a quantitative one. The author should try to capture the reader’s attention early in the article; spell out the rationale of the research; state the research questions; clearly outline the research design and methods used; discuss the findings, concepts, and theories generated; and present the implications of the article’s major theoretical and conceptual contributions in light of existing knowledge on the topic. The research questions in qualitative articles tend to be more general than in quantitative research, and research design and methods are discussed in less detail than in quantitative studies.

The following sections contribute to a qualitative article:

- **Introduction:** The first four sentences immediately explain what the article is about. The introduction specifies the focus of the study and aims to stimulate an interest in the study.
- **Literature review:** Review of existing theory and research on the topic.

- **Design and methods:** The author(s) outlines why a qualitative approach is appropriate for the topic, how the research was done, who was studied and why, how the participants were recruited, the number of participants (interviewees and interview context) and the type of research done (ethnography, unstructured interviews, etc.). This section also discusses the analytical approach used in the study, for example a thematic analysis of interview transcripts.
- **Findings:** Discussion of the meaning and significance of the results obtained.
- **Discussion:** The findings are discussed in the context of the research questions and existing theory. The different findings might be organized into separate sections. The discussion refers to broader research questions, and might include further reformulation of the initial research concepts and a generation of theory.
- **Conclusions:** As above, conclusions link back to the issues discussed in the Introduction and Literature Review. Authors return to the ideas that started their research. They discuss the implications of research findings for the existing literature, the discipline, or public policy.
- **Bibliography:** Same as above.

In summary, qualitative research article starts with more general and open-ended research questions compared to the quantitative one, its design and methods section could be less detailed, and the discussion section could elaborate, extend, and develop the initial research concepts more than a quantitative article. This pattern is related to the *inductive nature* of qualitative research, where the concepts are redefined in the research process and theories or theoretical statements can be generated as a result of the study.

### Postmodernism and Its Implications for Writing

Can there be only one possible research report, or only one possible research account? This question is particularly relevant for writing up results of social research, since social accounts are necessarily open to interpretation. Social scientists have different answers to this question, and they have to be briefly considered here because these answers affect the style, the form, and contents of research reports that can be produced.

On one extreme of the continuum in answer to this question there are **postmodernists**, who do not consider any single account as definitive or authoritative. Postmodernists think of any single research report merely as representing one particular perspective on the investigated topic. This is because postmodernists question the very notion of pre-existing reality. For them, knowledge is relative, and no study offers definitive, completely accurate portrayals of the subject matter. At best the author can present “readings” and “interpretation” of data rather than “observations” and “findings.” No account is final or complete because it cannot encompass all possible representations of different experiences. This position directly affects the forms and possibility of producing ethnography as an account.

Postmodernists and other critics of classical ethnography argue for example that there is no “neutral language” through which the social world can be depicted—any depiction represents someone’s position and stake. This corresponds with the position of feminists that no “neutral observer” or author is possible; anyone who studies others always does so from the position of privilege. Feminists argue that because of this privileged position of the author, the voices of suppressed and marginal groups are often excluded from classical ethnographies; there is domination of the observed by the observer. They propose to overcome this inequality by giving voice to otherwise marginal people.

The idea of domination of the researcher’s account in qualitative studies led to several innovations in writing ethnography. One proposal defends a dialogic form of writing, which represents a multiplicity of voices in the field, not only the voice of one author (Manning, 1995). Lincoln and Denzin (1994) similarly argue for “polyvocality,” many voices and interpretations of the topic. Their position emerges out of postmodernist rejection of “meta-narratives,” or accounts that do

not allow for alternative visions of reality. Postmodernists defend the multiplicity of stories, because multiple stories challenge the whole idea of a singular truth or a singular representation of reality.

Another innovation promoted by postmodernists and modern-day ethnographers is an increased attention to *reflexivity* in social research. In most general terms, **reflexivity** is awareness by social researchers that their values, biases, and decisions can influence the accounts of the social world they create. Reflexivity also encourages sensitivity to the cultural, social, and political context in which research is conducted. The researcher is not a mere transmitter of knowledge from the observed situations, but the active knowledge creator who creates it through social interaction. Contemporary ethnographers thus call for the “self-reflexivity” of the researchers by inviting them to reflect on how their biases, social position, and origins frame the narratives that they create. The trend towards reflexivity in social research is growing in the recent period.

In the end, postmodernists simply expose the perennial tension in ethnography between striving for “authenticity,” a true account of reality, and a recognition that knowledge is socially, historically, and politically situated.

### Writing up Ethnography

On the other end of the continuum of possible accounts of social reality is the position of classical ethnographers, who defend the *realist* orientation to reality. They are looking to represent the social reality “as is,” from the first-hand observations by the researcher or from narratives by the participants. In their view, the task of ethnography is to give an authoritative account of reality, the one based on observation and uncontaminated by researchers’ biases or influences. For this reason, ethnography is often designed to convince readers of the truthfulness in descriptions of the studied people and events. These accounts are sometimes referred to as “realist tales” (Van Maanen, 1998).

“Realist tales” are meant as dispassionate third-person accounts of culture and behaviour, as opposed to “confessional tales,” which are more personalized accounts of ethnographers going through the process of study. “Confessional tales” are about the experiences of ethnographers. They reflect the growing concern with reflexivity in qualitative research and often emphasize how the research was carried out rather than what the findings of the study are. “Impressionist tales” are the third type of ethnographic accounts, where the experiences of the ethnographer and the descriptions of “what is” are combined in stories about dramatic events that helped the researcher to uncover and better understand the culture and the people whom he or she studies. There are four characteristics of realist tales:

#### 1. *Experiential authority*

- Ethnographer is not present in the description of the events; the author disappears from the account, giving way to a description of people and events they study. This type of account discounts the possibility of bias in the researcher’s story; his or her story is to be believed and considered as the only possible story we have.
- The authors use their academic authority and rhetorical devices to appear as an authority on the story, and even the descriptions of hardships encountered in the research are meant to enhance this authoritativeness and reliability of their account.
- Extensive quotations from conversations and interviews with participants are important not only as evidence that supports the findings, but also as a way to establish the credibility of the report.

#### 2. *Typical forms*

- Descriptions of the people studied are said to represent characteristics that are commonly found in their group or society, although usually the studies are conducted in a very specific situation and a specific group of people. Yet individuals are seen as representing a general tendency.

### 3. *Subject's point of view*

- Seeing the world through the participants' eyes is very important in establishing the authoritativeness of the realist account. The author claims to have done sufficient research to accurately portray the thoughts, feelings, interpretations, etc. of the people studied.

### 4. *Interpretive omnipotence*

- The interpretation provided by the author is presented as virtually incontrovertible, and the evidence he or she presents is carefully selected to support this singular interpretation.
- Alternative interpretations are not given serious consideration.
- Written ethnography is thus considered as very important in *representing* the fieldwork. The ethnographer has a monopoly on how the culture should be interpreted. This contrasts with the postmodernist view that any realist tale is only one possible “spin” on the story, one possible interpretation of the studied culture.

The above discussion demonstrates that describing the results of the study is related to the philosophical positions of the author, and can have a substantial influence on how the ethnographic accounts are presented and perceived.

## Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you should learn to do the following:

- Develop understanding and skills for producing research reports in qualitative and quantitative traditions
- Recognize the components that make up a research report and different ways in which research can be written up.
- Appreciate the difference between postmodernist and classical approaches to writing ethnography, which derive from their broader philosophical assumptions about the nature of social reality and possibilities of getting knowledge
- Understand how the styles of writing the ethnography have changed overtime from the *realist tales*, providing a dispassionate third-person account of the studied culture and people, to the gradual emergence of *confessional tales*, emphasizing the experiences of the researcher, or the *impressionist tales*, blending the descriptions of culture and experiences of the researcher.
- Understand the increasing emphasis on the researcher's reflexivity emerging in the most recent qualitative research writing

## Media Resources

**Massengill, R.P. Writing sociology: A guide for junior papers and senior theses. Princeton University.**

[http://sociology.princeton.edu/files/undergraduate/soc\\_ug\\_writing\\_guide.pdf](http://sociology.princeton.edu/files/undergraduate/soc_ug_writing_guide.pdf)

- What are the main elements of a sociology research paper?
- What are the different forms of research questions in sociological research?
- How do you write about methods in a sociology research paper?

**Grubb, S. (2007). Understanding the polyvocality of autism discourse: A critical autoethnographic approach. MA Thesis, Brock University.**

<http://www.bahaistudies.net/neurelitism/library/polyvocality.html>

- What is the main discourse in the article?
- How does polyvocality expand the discourse?
- Is there a reflexivity component to the article?

**College Research Papers: Tips on How to Write a College Paper**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQzu7yunLP4&feature=relmfu>

- What are the three secrets to a good paper?
- How much research should you do?
- How do you personalize your paper?

**Hammill, J. The Research Process, Part 1: Getting Started. UPEI.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BuJLRjd9vAc>

- What are possible reasons that the researcher identified for childhood obesity?
- What other possible reasons can you think of?
- Where does the thesis statement get written?
- What does a thesis statement include?

**Hammill, J. The Research Process, Part 2: Effective Reading. UPEI.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgwAmrSQZLo>

- How does mind mapping help with research?
- When does mind mapping take place?
- What is the significance of having questions generated before starting to research?