

# Writing with Qualitative Data

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## Writing with qualitative data – some essential questions for you to resolve.

- What/who are you writing for? Audiences. Purpose.
- What are you trying to say? What is your argument? What ideas are you developing? What assumptions do you want to challenge? You can't just 'report findings' or 'summarise everything'. What is the story you want to tell? Qualitative writing is creative and analytical – in both process and product.
- This ties in with how are you engaging with theory, or writing conceptually (in the argument you are making/story you are telling)?
- How are you using data? How are you using knowledge? (what constitutes knowledge?)
- How are you going to get yourself, and keep yourself, WRITING! The process of writing. You need some personalised strategies.

# 1. Using theory to make your argument

- Explanation – less scary and more manageable than lofty heights theory. Importance of theoretically orientated and creative questions. Theories are simply propositions about how things work/what things are.
- **Having** and **using** ideas: 'The generation and imaginative use of ideas that guide our exploration and interpretation of the social world' (Coffey and Atkinson)
- Thinking about your data in theoretically and conceptually inspired ways
  - Thinking about theory with data
  - Thinking about data with theory
- Practical 'ways of proceeding' rather than rules and procedural orthodoxies eg about how you get theory from data

# Using Theory - Styles of empirically informed theoretical writing

(You can think of your own)

- Conceptually rich empirical accounts (eg Jamieson's *Intimacy*)
- Data rich (data driven?) theoretical work (eg Smart and Neale *Family Fragments?*; Finch and Mason *Negotiating Family Responsibilities and Passing On*; Savage et al *Globalisation and Belonging*; Smart *Personal Life*)
- Theoretical work that draws on empirical data (eg Bourdieu *The Logic of Practice*; Strathern *After Nature*; Carsten *After Kinship*; Urry *Sociology Beyond Societies*)
- Data light (or data free!) theoretical work (eg Bauman's *Liquid Love*)

The point isn't to produce a typology, but instead to notice the differences, and work out what kind of writing you want to do.

# Using Theory

Theoretical style and approach – ie how you will write in a theoretically engaged way

- Have a go at locating yourself/what you are aiming to do with theory in relation to approaches to theorising that you admire. Are you an Urry, a Smart, a Bauman, a Jamieson (or equivalent)? How do they do it? How can you emulate that?

Theoretical content – using ideas/theories that develop your 'propositions about how things work'

- Useful/obvious, relevant literature/theory
- Useful/inspirational (can be 'outside' the obvious/your topic)
- Useful/to react against, as a foil

Using ideas - what to avoid

- Squeezing yourself completely into an existing theoretical framework. This actually stops you having ideas.
- Negating or rubbishing all other approaches.

## 2. Using data to make your argument

Some ways of arguing with data

- Evidentially – an argument based on evidence that is thoroughly and rigorously marshalled and assembled
- Interpretively, narratively – a convincing story, or a reasonable argument using a range of sources
- Evocatively, illustratively, aesthetically – an argument that is gripping, has high 'real life' or emotional resonance, is compellingly crafted, using particularly evocative examples
- Reflexively, multivocally – an argument based on a satisfying or meaningful range of perspectives, brought together
- Not mutually exclusive. Creative tensions between them. You can use more than one in the same article. Even more scope with book or thesis.

(Mason, 2002)

## Using data – four key principles

- **Being selective** (with examples, quotes, cases, pictures etc). Think! - What are you expecting them to do (don't expect too much of them – they are not self evident)? Always be guided by the argument, the story, and what data you need to select and show to tell your story, evoke it, substantiate it. Don't overwhelm the reader with too much detail and context, however fond of it you are – they will get bored, and your argument will get lost.
- **Being rigorous and thorough** – inspiring confidence that you've analysed carefully and fairly, rather than trying to present everything. Make clear the relationship of the data you have selected to those you have not. Making sure you don't cherry pick – selecting data that suits your argument and ignoring those that don't (count, and use numbers, judiciously for this purpose). Connecting data to contexts and providing enough information about them. Testing and challenging your own arguments and assumptions in ways that the reader can see. Asking and answering questions is a good device.

## Using Data – four key principles

- **Being investigative, creative and imaginative.** Use your data to follow lines of investigation (using a detective story style as a device can be helpful). Use your data and knowledge in different ways – can be done within an article, in different chapters of a book or thesis. Case studies, cross sectional analyses, composite narratives. Consciously use different styles of writing about data in different places for different purposes. Literary devices. Characters in a plot (Smart 2010))
- **Being reflexive** (but not self absorbed). Don't pretend you 'weren't there at the time', or don't have an informed interest, as though that would somehow be more 'objective'. Reflexivity about reader too. Imagine yourself into their perspective. Making arguments as a relational process.

## Two examples – scrutinizing how others use theory and data in their writing

1. Janet Carsten 'After Kinship'
2. Jennifer Mason 'Personal Narratives, Relational Selves: Residential Histories in the Living and Telling'

You can do this too – try it out with the work of writers who you admire, and arguments that you have found convincing and compelling. Then have a go at using the same kinds of techniques and devices when you write.

## Janet Carsten – After Kinship

### Houses of Memory and Kinship

For many people, the memories of houses inhabited in childhood have an extraordinary evocative power....

(general claim, appeal to commonsense everyday knowledge)

My own powerful 'house memories' focus on a large kitchen table at which not only cooking and eating but also most family discussions, communal homework, and many games took place...

(personal experience, elements of reflexive validation, evocation)

## Janet Carsten – After Kinship

As the example of my parents' house suggests, for those who are later uprooted, the memories of houses occupied in childhood, or by previous generations, may be especially powerful. Dislocations in space may be erased by evocations of past practice that are given a stable location in the house.

(link to general point with some concepts and a theoretical proposition)

This formulation comes from Joelle Bahloul's evocative description of a Jewish-Muslim house....

(attribution of that particular conceptualisation to another study, suggesting some external validation)

## Janet Carsten – After Kinship

*There follow examples from anthropological research on houses and homes....*

(looking across more studies to substantiate and strengthen argument)

Why begin a book on new kinship with an exploration of the house? The answer I hope is obvious: because for many people all the different processes involved in living in houses, taken together, make kinship.

(link to big theoretical idea – theorising what kinship is. Houses as a site)

## Jennifer Mason – Living away from relatives

‘Thinking aloud’ about kinship and geography

Living near relatives can be a mixed blessing...Local and everyday familiarity with each others’ lives can feel intrusive as well as friendly and supportive. Yet living far away is problematic too. Independence may feel easier to establish and maintain, but it is easy also to feel too far away, especially in times of crisis or need....

(appeal to common sense knowledge – evoking, recognition)

Kinship can modify people’s sense of distance, making a few miles or a few hundred miles seem too far or not far enough....

(link to conceptual claim/proposition)

## Jennifer Mason – Living away from relatives

I explore how people make sense of living a long distance away from kin, how people who have lived away reason about distance, proximity and kinship, and what being at a distance does to the significance of kin relationships.

(developing conceptual questions from initial proposition)

I draw in particular on 3 contrasting case studies involving people who have moved a long way away from relatives under rather different circumstances....*Followed by 3 case studies, compared...*

(use of strategically selected case studies to explore the questions – cases are different in theoretically useful ways)

## Jennifer Mason – Living away from relatives

*Followed by a discussion identifying different styles of reasoning about proximity, distance and kinship – 'distance thinkers', 'reluctant distance thinkers' and 'local thinkers'.*

(proposing a conceptual framework for understanding differences in the data)

The discussion draws in comparisons with the rest of the data set,

(linking the chosen cases with the others in relation to questions being pursued, grounding the argument in more data)

and constructs an argument about which factors are influential in the development of different kinds of geographical reasoning, and what that means for kinship].

(building an explanation)

### 3. The process of writing analytically and creatively

- Writing helps you in practically managing masses of qualitative data, in ways conducive to theorising.
- Writing as a way of helping you to think analytically, theoretically and conceptually.
- Writing yourself into the practice of theorising with data – getting used to doing it. Try out different styles. Shamelessly copy the styles of writers/theorists that you admire (but don't plagiarise!)
- Writing as a way of getting a dialogue going about your analysis and your ideas, eg with a colleague, or your supervisor.
- Writing as a way of working out how to be reflexive without becoming self obsessed or making oneself the focus of the thesis.

# Writing analytically and creatively – some practical ideas

- Know yourself! Recognise how and when you prevaricate. Recognise what inhibits you from writing. Find ways to deal with that 'overwhelmed with qualitative data' feeling.
- Make notes that are (virtually) data free in the systematic sense. Diagrams and charts. Think pieces.
- Notes that use examples from the data to flesh out or substantiate the story/explanation that has been established.
- Notes that try out an idea, or explanation or concepts using the data (eg is this way of conceptualising right? How does this explanation work? What happens if I pursue this idea? Can be done case by case using analytic induction type methods). Question and answer pieces – 'if I ask this question, I get this kind of answer'.

## Practical ideas (continued)

- Notes that describe or summarise the data around certain 'small' themes. Notes that develop 'what is going on' in a particular case.
- Behind all of this, pursuing questions, seeking explanations, following ideas, getting inspired. Don't forget this bit.
- Interaction between these – they are all important at different times.
- Get feedback.

## References

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- Smart, C. (2010) *Disciplined Writing: On the Problem of Writing Sociologically*, Realities Working Paper No 13