**Take your reader there: some notes on writing qualitative research**

Les Back

*"A pickup up truck drives slowly down the street. The trucks stops as it comes abreast of a man sitting on a cast-iron porch and the white driver calls out, asking if the man wants a day's work. The man shakes his head and the truck moves on up the block, stopping again whenever idling men come within calling distance of the driver. At the Carry-out corner, five men debate the question briefly and shake their heads no to the truck. The truck turns the corner and repeats the same performance up the next street. In the distance, one can see one man, then another, climb into the back of the truck and sit down. In starts and stops, the truck finally disappears.”*

Elliott Liebow Tally's Corner (1962: 29)

Writing is a movement of imagination. On the page we take our readers to places, often to situations where our research has led us, to things we have seen and people we have listened to. This is what Elliot Liebow does in the opening lines of his analysis of life on *Tally's Corner*, an African-American district in Washington DC just a short walk from the White House. It is the early 1960s and black America is in the throes of the Civil Rights struggle. A white employer is driving around trying - with limited success - to recruit low paid black casual labourers. The scene Liebow creates on the corner is both an *empirical puzzle*and an *epiphany*.

What is going on here? Is the white driver a "labour scavenger" cruising a black neighbourhood? Or, are the men who shake their heads simply lazy and feckless unwilling to do an "honest day's work"? Liebow's description animates these questions but also he invites the reader to imagine the link between them and larger issues relating economic life, work and race-relations.

Taking the reader to a particular time and place is a literary strategy I have used many times myself, a way of introducing a context in which important issues are unfolding, of focusing on a problem but also bringing it to life. It is a technique I recommended to younger scholars countless times as they struggle with how and where to start in their writing. I ask them to think about the research project's 'primal scene', the moment when they realised "I am on to something." Most pieces of research have such moments, or sometimes many moments like this. A single vivid description can convey to a reader more of a sense of what is at stake than pages and pages of literature review that rehearse elegantly the beautiful ideas of other academic writers. So my first suggestion is to take the reader where you have been in your writing.

Taking the reader there is not simply about context or background because the empirical scene is always pregnant with mystery and meaning. On *Tally's Corner* first impressions are distorted by the legacy of racial stereotypes and already written social scripts. For the driver 'black men are lazy', despite the opportunity he extends to them 'they simply don't want to do work'. Liebow challenges racist intuition and judgement and invites a different movement of imagination. He explains that most of the men on the corner on this weekday morning do have jobs, they work nights or there are other personal reasons why they are not working on this particular day. A small minority shake their heads because they choose not to work. Through Liebow's descriptions of the streetcorner men like Tally, Tonk and Boley he shows that we cannot trust our senses. Empirical evidence rubs racial common-sense against the grain and produces counter-intuitive insight. Liebow doesn't just stop there.

It is not simply that that the white truck driver's distorted by prejudice. Liebow argues there is a deeper ambivalence to paid work in this community where "getting a job, keeping a job, and doing well at it is clearly of low priority" (Liebow 1962: 34). The low pay and poor working conditionslimit any possibility of an improving future. Liebow concludes "The job and the man are even. The job fails the man and the man fails the job"(Liebow 1962: 63). The truck driving past Tally's corner is a symbol of the violating nature of low paid work and the limited opportunities of racial capitalism in America.

A student asked me recently "how do you learn to write?" One way to learn is through reading and getting inside the books you love. A good place to start is to make a list of your favourite writers. I did this in a graduate seminar recently and the list was very wide ranging including Jean Paul Sartre, Susan Sontag, David Harvey, Abdu Maliq Simone, Jorge Louis Borges, Julia Kristeva, John Berger and even Yoko Ono! Then I asked the young scholars what qualities they admire in these writers, what is it about their books that they like? The group produced an interesting list of literary qualities to accompany the list of authors - vivid, calm, intense, active, funny, poetic, accessible, insightful, well-structured and surprising. It is possible to cultivate these qualities in one's own writing.

What I learn from *Tally's Corner* is the importance of taking the reader to the place where the social action is going on. One of the limits of the emergence of devices like the tape-recorder or the camera is that as researchers we pay less attention to contextual texture because we think it is preserved in the recordings and photographs. Qualitative data is reduced to faithfully transcribed "block quotations" from interviews. However, transcription is not description. Much of the power of context and what remains unsaid is lost if we only focus on what is said in an interview. Our dependence on the tape recorder and its recent digital equivalent has limited our attentiveness to the world. This in part is because there lingers the presumption that if it is not on tape it does not exist. My second suggestion is don't depend on the research device to deliver your data. The raw fruit of transcribed speech, or moving image footage or a photograph will not on its own be able convey the social vitality of the lives you have studied.

In 1967 Ned Polsky, in his classic collection *Hustlers, Beats and Other*s, anticipated these limitations:

"*Successful field research depends on the investigator's trained abilities to look at people, listen to them, think and feel with them, talk with them rather than at them. It does not depend fundamentally on some impersonal apparatus, such as a camera or tape recorder...*" (Polsky 1998 [1967]: 119).

We don't have to share Polsky's antipathy to gadgets to acknowledge that the reliance on sound recorders has confined our attentiveness to the mere transcription of voices from tape to text. The words don't speak for themselves. Rather, an unfolding portrait of a life is what is needed rather than a series disembodied quotations that fracture that life into precisely transcribed fragments. One way to avoid this is to build the portrait of the participant throughout the course of the article or book, so that the reader meets the participant repeatedly, each time learning a new dimension of his or her life. Teresa Gowan's study of homelessness in San Francisco is one of the most successful recent books to achieve this combination of voice, description, theory, and evidence (Gowan 2010). This links to my third point which is the importance of portraiture and developing a picture of a whole life that is unfolding.

However, there is scepticism about the humanistic practice of portraiture from a wide variety of poststructuralist and anti-humanist traditions of social analysis. There are important philosophical and political choices to be made with regard to how one writes or translates a person. An interviewer committed to Freudian psychoanalysis will be listening for hidden meanings within a biographical portrait, a phenomenologist inspired by Merleau-Ponty would be attentive to how the speaker's lifeworld was expressed, while a Foucauldian poststructuralist may not be interested in the specific portrait of the interviewee as a subject at all but rather take note of the discourses and forms of power that shape the words articulated. So there is no right way to write social life but rather choices to be made that relate to the kind of knowledge we seek to make through writing.

One of the challenges of writing with qualitative research is that we encounter the social world often as a tangle of issues and important things. Each description or interview transcript can be used in innumerable ways or can be related to a variety of themes. As a result social life seems to have an 'all at once' quality as we approach the task of how to understand it. Part of the task of writing is to disentangle the issues and to taking apart the social issues that are at play. It is simply impossible to write about all the issues that are at play in any given social context. We have to often make artificial choices about what aspect to focus on and how to analyse it. My fourth point is not to be afraid to set priorities within the data and make choices about which arguments are best illustrated in any piece of empirical evidence.

A common mistake that qualitative researchers make is they feel it is necessary to include every piece of relevant research data in their writing. This can lead to a kind of 'ice cream cone' version of research writing, where quotations and descriptions are heaped upon each other without purpose. A point, or an argument, is not made stronger by merely duplicating the empirical evidence. Often less data can be more effecting or persuasive as long as it captures vividly the point the writer is trying to make. Repetition has its uses and it is not necessarily the same as duplication. It can often be very effective to return the reader to an earlier point or a vivid description or a quotation because it helps to thread the key arguments through the piece of writing. Fifthly, use repetition in the writing to return the reader to the important themes within the overall argument.

Another perennial question raised by students: 'If I am to "take my reader there," how much should I write about my own presence of being there?' In *Tally's Corner* there is very little trace of the author. Pierre Bourdieu would have called it a "view from nowhere" (Bourdieu 2000: 2). Over the past thirty years there has been an intense debate about 'reflexivity' in research, or how researchers should write themselves into the story they are telling. Young scholars sometimes complain and resist the expectation to include a chapter of "compulsory reflexivity" in their thesis. In the US it is called "Me-search" or what Anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to as "I-witnessing." It is a matter of "rendering your account credible through rendering your person so ... To be a convincing 'I-witness,' one must, so it seems, first become a convincing 'I'." (Geertz 1988: 79). However, it is very difficult to write the 'I' of the researcher without distracting the reader's attention from the people we are listening to in the first place.

Geertz's dislike for what he calls "author-saturated" texts is because of their focus on tales of estrangement, hypocrisy and disillusion. The researcher seems corrupted by "being-there" and this requires his/her guilt to be exorcised through the "unbearably earnest field worker's" confessional writing (Geertz. 1988: 97). There are a few principles that I find myself following to try to avoid falling into this syndrome: firstly, write as a situated observer while remembering that you are the least important person there; secondly, focus on what your interactions with the subjects of the study reveal about the issues you are trying to understand and not yourself; finally, think about what other researchers might learn about the craft of research from your experience.

In writing research we have the opportunity to cultivate a way of 'telling about society' (Becker 2007). In my own work I have often tried to introduce moments that surprise the reader with an insight or an observation that is counter-intuitive. Increasingly, I have made a self-conscious effort not only to transport the reader to a place but also to write in a more affecting style. Writing affords us not only the means to convey arguments and findings but also an opportunity to develop an intellectual signature through the way we represent what we record and bring back from the field.

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