

The use of the first person in academic writing: objectivity, language and gatekeeping

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Researchers have experienced difficulties in having papers which are based on qualitative research accepted for publication because the papers have been written in the first person. Arguments are presented to show why the use of the neutral, anonymous third person is deceptive when applied to quantitative research because it obliterates the social elements of the research process. With regard to research in the qualitative, critical and feminist paradigms, it is further argued that the use of the first person is required in keeping with the epistemologies of the research and in the pursuit of reflexivity. Links are made between these arguments and the process of reviewing for academic journals. Conclusions are drawn in favour of the use of the first person, where this is appropriate to the mode of research reported and where an author is giving a personal judgement arrived at on the basis of reasonable evidence. In keeping with this position, this paper is written in the first person.

INTRODUCTION

This paper arises from recent experiences of papers being rejected by refereed journals because they were written in the first person, despite the fact that one of the journals had previously published articles written in the first person. Research students also express great concern that their theses will be judged adversely by external examiners if they are written in the third person. These experiences, together with frustration caused by the stilted way in which some students write essays in their attempts to use a neutral, third person format, prompted me to explore the use of language in academic writing. My aim is to raise the issue for debate amongst writers, students and publishers so that we can write and publish in styles which are appropriate to the material that we are discussing.

A fundamental point to be raised in this paper is the fact that it is acceptable to write in the first person when giving a personal opinion or when one has played a crucial role in shaping the data or ideas presented. Indeed, I shall attempt

to show that, in such instances, *not* to use the first person is deceptive and biased. It is therefore appropriate that this paper is itself written in the first person.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline. Like other disciplines which have attempted to establish respect and credibility, such as psychology and sociology, nursing has sought to do this by imitating longer-established disciplines and in particular the traditional or physical sciences.

In an attempt to encourage the use of theoretical, literature-based arguments and evidence rather than anecdotes in their work, students on diploma and degree courses have been taught to write using the third person. When inexpertly used, this format leads to excruciatingly tortuous sentences about what 'the writer' and 'the author' think. An emphasis on the need to back statements with

evidence often leads to a seeming belief that it is not permissible to give a personal opinion. Thus, writing is often so liberally interspersed with references relating to the most mundane, obvious and incontrovertible points that the piece is deprived of 'flow' and is extremely difficult to read.

Evidence that this style is not always a requirement of academic or theoretical writing can be gained by examining respectable, refereed journals in other disciplines, for example the *Journal of Medical Ethics* and *Sociology of Health and Illness*.

I am certainly not arguing for a return to an anecdotal, non-research-based mode of thinking and writing in nursing. The third-person style is appropriate when referring to a generally accepted body of knowledge or thinking, and when reviewing a subject in the light of the available evidence. However, in our progress as a discipline 'from novice to expert' (Benner 1982), I hope we can gain more confidence in using a variety of writing styles and choosing one that is appropriate to a particular context. This paper is an attempt to provide theoretical arguments to justify these choices and make a small contribution to the maturing of nursing as a discipline.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THINKING

It is a commonplace in philosophy and psychology that language and thinking are related in deep and complex ways. Words are not simply labels that are neutrally attached to objects to allow us to describe them. These word-labels represent a classification system based on our ways of thinking about the objects concerned (Britton 1975), and the words in their turn influence the way we think about reality. Thus, for example, when we talk about natural foods or natural childbirth this reflects a belief that 'natural' equals 'good'. When this is extended to discussion of 'natural levels of radiation' we are clearly intended to carry over this notion of goodness — or at least lack of harm — to radiation levels from nuclear installations, or whatever is the issue of concern. There can be no doubt, then, that thinking and language are inextricably intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Spender 1980).

The same argument can be applied to the ideas I am concerned with in this paper. The notion of objectivity in research is conveyed by the use of the third person in academic writing, in statements such as 'It is thought...' rather than 'I think...' and 'Data were collected...' instead of 'I collected data...'. Using this form of language conveys, and is intended to convey, an impression that the ideas being discussed have a neutral, value-free, impartial basis. Its universal use in academic writing is not justified

unless the material being presented is in fact underpinned by these qualities. I hope to demonstrate that this is rarely, if ever, the case.

Objectivity

The traditional, positivist view of science is succinctly characterized by Chalmers (1982) as follows:

Science is based on what we can see and hear and touch, etc. Personal opinion or preferences and speculative imaginings have no place in science. Science is objective.

This objectivity is represented in traditional scientific writing by the use of the third person. Thus a study is set up, hypotheses are derived, data are collected, statistical tests are applied, statistically significant findings may be found, and conclusions and recommendations are stated. All this is presented as if the scientist(s) who carried out the work had no involvement in the process and

knowledge is treated as something outside rather than inside the minds or brains of individuals.

(Chalmers 1982)

In reality, of course, 'doing science' is a highly social enterprise and scientists' personal beliefs and values enter the process throughout. The subjects they choose to study will depend on their previous personal studies and reading, and the hypotheses or research questions will represent their own ideas on the subject. The methods of data collection and the ways the data are analysed are also the result of numerous personal decisions taken by the particular researchers, and their own perceptions will condition the interpretations they make (de Groot 1988).

If anyone ever had any doubts that this is the case in traditional scientific research, a reading of accounts of the discovery of DNA will rapidly disabuse them of the idea that 'the scientific method' is a hygienic process involving certain pre-ordained stages leading to a final product. Accounts by Watson and Crick themselves are enough to show that conducting traditional scientific investigations involves social elements such as drinking in pubs and playing tennis, and discussions with other workers in related fields, as well as rivalry with other workers and a desperate personal quest to be the first to make a discovery (Watson 1969). More critical followers of the discovery of DNA, however, portray an even more 'socialized' version, with the ground-breaking work by other scientists — particularly Rosalind Franklin — being obliterated from the 'straight' versions (Rosser 1989).

Knowledge

As Smith (1987) states, 'knowledge is a social accomplishment' The use of devices such as 'anonymity, impersonality, detachment, impartiality, and objectivity itself' gives the impression that scientific knowledge is something 'out there', over and above us, able to control and dominate us, and unamenable to our control 'Cancelling out the actual act of knowing', for Stanley (1990), results in

alienated knowledge, a product apparently complete, bearing no apparent trace of the conditions of its production and the social relations that gave rise to this

This cancelling out is important because traditional science is based on the idea that its theories and explanations derive from what actually exists 'out there' and can be observed To omit from accounts of doing science certain highly influential aspects of what has gone on 'out there' in the process of generating the knowledge seems to introduce a form of the very bias which the positivistic approach eschews so strongly in its emphasis on replicability

The facts never 'speak for themselves' (Berger & Luckman 1979) They are only 'facts' when seen against the background of a particular theoretical framework or from a particular perspective In research it would be more appropriate to speak of the selection rather than the collection of data, because the type of data and how they are used are matters of personal choice on the part of researchers The word 'findings', implying that it is almost due to chance that certain information has come to light, misrepresents a deliberate search for certain data as against others New knowledge is constructed rather than 'found'

Writing in the third person is therefore a form of deception in which the thinking of scientists does not appear, and they are obliterated as active agents in the construction of knowledge Linguistic devices such as these are part of the conventions of traditional positivism even although they are not consistent with its social practice When other approaches are considered, the use of the third person in academic writing is an even greater contradiction

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Interpretative or qualitative research is conducted within an entirely different paradigm from traditional, positivist, quantitative research (Kuhn 1970) According to Fay (1975),

An interpretive social science is one which attempts to uncover the sense of a given action, practice or constitutive meaning, it does this by discovering the intentions and desires of particular actors, by uncovering the set of rules which give

point to these sets of rules or practices, and by elucidating the basic conceptual scheme which orders experience

These meanings, shared assumptions, definitions and conceptions are identified and understood by means of *verstehen*, or a process of empathizing with those being studied, and using one's 'sociological imagination' (Wright Mills 1959) to interpret the action

The interpretative research process is even more overtly social than the traditional one Researchers may use participant observation or in-depth interviewing over an extended period of time in order to get to know the research context from the 'inside' All forms of research involve social interaction but with interpretative approaches researchers will inevitably invest and divulge much of 'themselves' in their research Just as others respond to us in personal ways in any social encounter, so in a research encounter they make judgements about researchers' backgrounds, motives, intentions, beliefs and preferences and respond as they judge appropriate These processes of mutual *verstehen* on the part of researchers and researched are part and parcel of the research and cannot be ignored

If the interactions took place differently, interpretations and responses of both researchers and researched would be different, and acknowledging and accounting for these interpersonal aspects within the research is a fundamental requirement Robertson & Boyle (1984) emphasize that meaning is widely accepted as 'context dependent' and that 'reality is knowable in an infinite number of ways', therefore 'many equally valid descriptions are possible'

Rigour

This brings us to questions of rigour in qualitative research for, if many different descriptions of a research context are possible, how are all these various versions to be evaluated? Some writers have attempted to modify the cannons of rigour used in quantitative research for use with qualitative methods, aiming to demonstrate that the two approaches are equally 'scientific' Others have rejected this approach as inappropriate because, if interpretative research represents a different paradigm, there is no logical requirement for it to conform to the rules and procedures of a different (positivist) paradigm (Sandelowski 1986)

Replicability, or the possibility of repeating a piece of research and reaching the original conclusions, is a valued aspect of quantitative research Replicability depends upon being able to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the methods and instruments used With qualitative research validity and reliability cannot be defined and evaluated in the same way because the methods used are so different

Various terms have been proposed to describe alternative approaches to establishing rigour in qualitative research 'Credibility' has been suggested by Guba & Lincoln (1981) as a criterion of rigour They define a study as credible

when it presents such faithful descriptions or interpretations of a human experience that the people having that experience would immediately recognize it as their own

Demonstrating credibility depends on viewing qualitative researchers 'as subjects in their own studies' and 'deliberately focusing on how the researcher influenced and was influenced by a subject' (Guba & Lincoln 1981) 'Auditability' is an aspect of demonstrating credibility

A study and its findings are auditable when another researcher can clearly follow the 'decision trail' used by the investigator in the study In addition, another researcher could arrive at the same or comparable but not contradictory conclusions given the researcher's data, perspective and situation

(Guba & Lincoln 1981)

In order that other researchers can follow the decision trail, the development of events in the study must be presented so that their logic may be understood, and the original researcher must describe and justify precisely what was done and how this was accomplished

Dependability

'Dependability' is the term used by Hall & Stevens (1991) to encompass these processes of establishing that qualitative research is credible, consistent and true to the context studied Another descriptive term is 'reflexivity', which requires researchers to reflect continuously throughout the research on their actions, respondents' reactions to them, how they are collecting data, what they are observing and hearing, and how they are making interpretations These reflections must be written up as part of the research report for, unless they are available to readers, it will not be possible to evaluate the research

Swanson-Kauffman (1986) used a reflexive approach as part of a 'combined qualitative methodology' in a study of women's experiences of miscarriage She reports the study 'in the first person, in keeping with the nature of my study' She believes that

Trying to put a description of this reality into the traditional third person research reporting style would not only be awkward but also untrue to the philosophical premise upon which the study was conducted.

Hall & Stevens (1991) also call for a 'strongly reflexive approach' which avoids the 'objectivistic stance and anonymous, invisible voice' Sandelowski (1986) similarly believes that

the typical language used in quantitative reporting, the neutral passive voice, is intended to convey the distance between researcher and subject

This is inappropriate in reporting qualitative research because of its valuation of subjectivity rather than objectivity and because it requires

engagement with rather than detachment from the things to be known in the interests of truth

(Sandelowski 1986)

These arguments demonstrate that it is not only acceptable but indeed essential for writing about qualitative research to use an active, first-person form or language To do is inconsistent with the epistemology of the approach and constitutes a form of mystification in which the social elements of the research encounter are hidden from scrutiny, preventing readers from evaluating the adequacy of the research

ACTION RESEARCH AND FEMINIST RESEARCH

Action research and feminist research may both employ a variety of approaches to data collection, including qualitative methods When qualitative methods are used within any such research perspective it is appropriate to write reports in the first person However, within both action research and feminist research there are further reasons for the use of the first person

Action research arises from the critical paradigm associated with social scientists such as Habermas (1979) Thompson (1987) describes critical scholarship as

a way of seeing, thinking, and speaking about the social world that has broken, irrevocably, with conventional forms of scholarship in nursing Critical scholarship is defined here as a pattern of thought and action that challenges institutionalized power relations or relations of domination in the social reality of nursing

Within the critical paradigm, action research involves a relationship between researchers and those they study which is different from that in both the quantitative and qualitative paradigms A fundamental principle of action research is that researchers become actively involved with those in the research setting, who then become participants

and collaborators in the research. Together, researchers and participants study the research setting, identify aspects they wish to change, work together to implement and monitor the changes, and learn from each other in the process (Webb 1991). Thus power relationships are completely changed from control by researchers to co-operation among all participants.

It seems self-evident that in action research the social aspects of carrying out research which were discussed earlier are even more salient. What happens within the research will be strongly influenced by the personal investment which researchers make in the project. Their contribution will be unique, and events would inevitably turn out differently if other researchers had taken part in the project. This being the case, the deception involved in writing up such a research report in the distanced third person would be enormous.

Action researchers are obliged as part of the research to describe and evaluate their own personal contributions to the research, and should do so openly using the first person. Habermas (1979) states that language functions to reproduce relations of domination. Action research is designed to work towards eliminating domination, and so to report it in the third person would be inconsistent with its philosophical underpinnings and would serve to continue the domination of those researched by their researchers.

Many of the same arguments apply in the case of feminist research, which is also critical in the sense of questioning previously taken-for-granted definitions, assumptions and power relations. In Hall & Stevens' formulation, feminist research has three features and these are

First, research questions reflect the concerns of particular groups of women. Secondly, feminist inquiry is done for the purpose of finding answers for women. Thirdly, in feminist inquiry, the researcher's history, assumptions, motives, interests and interpretations are explicitly scrutinized in the process of study. The objectivistic stance and the anonymous, invisible voice of authority are avoided in favour of a strongly reflexive approach to inquiry.

(Hall & Stevens 1991)

From the arguments presented in favour of the use of the first-person mode of writing in qualitative research and action research, it follows without question that this language style is also mandatory when reporting feminist research (Smith 1987).

GATEKEEPING

Similar arguments relate to the process of selection of papers for publication in refereed journals. Experience

shows that papers appropriately written in the first person are likely to be rejected automatically by some reviewers, who adhere to the canons of a traditional scientific mode of reporting. Just as researchers in traditional, interpretative, critical and feminist paradigms all 'have an active role in shaping a discipline' (Spender 1981), so do editors and referees of academic journals.

Academic publishing is a highly competitive arena, not only because writers are eager to have their research and ideas disseminated widely amongst their peers but also because, increasingly, academic 'productivity' is measured by the number of publications achieved in refereed journals.

Editors and referees have the power to control what is published, or to exercise what has been called a 'gatekeeping' function. Spender, who is herself a journal editor, accepts that

because we recognise that the printed work has an aura of authority, particularly in the academic context, and because we recognise that issues can be formulated and shaped through the process of selecting what gets printed and what does not, we [editors] are in a position to use what we know
(Spender 1981)

She also points out that preservation of the anonymity of reviewers and authors should not be confused with objectivity in the reviewing process. Reviewers, like all human actors including researchers, as already discussed, have their own personal beliefs, values and intellectual backgrounds which inevitably influence their preferences for what is published and what is rejected. The serendipitous nature of refereeing is illustrated by many academics' experiences of having a paper rejected by one journal but then accepted unchanged by another. In some cases this must inevitably reflect the editorial policy of the journal, with the editor choosing reviewers who will or will not like any particular paper (Spender 1981).

In other words, just as there can be such a thing as objectivity as it is commonly understood in research, so there can be no objectivity in the reviewing process.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the use of the third person as a linguistic device to convey an impression of objectivity in the research process is inconsistent with the underlying philosophies of interpretative, action and feminist research. Use of the first person is essential to counteract the notion that researchers do influence, exercise choices, and make decisions about the directions of their research and the conclusions they draw. Establishing rigour

in these paradigms depends upon a reflexive stance, in which researchers discuss honestly and fully what these influences, choices and decisions were, and how and why certain options were taken

I have also attempted to show that the notion of objectivity in positivistic research is not entirely unproblematic. This is also the case with the refereeing process in academic publishing

The use of the third person in students' writing is a related issue. As teachers in a relatively immature academic discipline, we have attempted to encourage students to eschew an anecdotal approach in favour of reasoned arguments backed up by theoretical or research-based evidence. Unfortunately, this often seems to lead students, who are themselves insecure in their linguistic skills, to use a stilted and tortuous form of expression which detracts from the meaning of their work

As we all grow and mature as academics and researchers, we should be able to have greater confidence in expressing ourselves and in giving a reasoned opinion that is grounded in firm evidence. It is perfectly justifiable and appropriate to do this in the first person, and once again it would be deceptive to disguise such a personal evaluation of evidence by using the apparently neutral and objective third-person form

In keeping with these arguments and following an examination of writing styles in academic journals in other disciplines, I have written this paper in the first person. This seems consistent with my stance and with recommendations that honesty in academic and research writings requires an acknowledgement of authors' personal contributions to their work.

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