

Forum: Reflections on qualitative research writing: Warrants, perspectives, structure and theory?

Peter Charles Taylor

Dear Ann,

I have written this commentary in the form of an open letter to you. I am hoping that this will enable me to be more communicative, perhaps more dialogical than might otherwise be the case, and to afford you the opportunity to respond in kind. The difficulty for me is that we have never met and so I am writing to a stranger and my writing is necessarily critical of yours. Rapport is difficult under this circumstance. Being critical comes easy to academics, it is a trademark of our profession; receiving criticism, however, is another story – I wince at it, even though it might be good for me! But my reaction does depend on how it is phrased. I remember well one reviewer’s dialectical perspective which offered me alternative takes on his reading of my draft chapter for an international handbook (the stakes were high!). It nurtured me as an embryonic writer. Feminist theory advocates a more connected way of knowing, an “I-thou” relationship of mutual respect and care, and postmodern thought warns of grand narratives that privilege claims emanating from firmly fixed standpoints. So is it possible for me to generate an engaging form of constructive criticism that minimizes the risk of offending you whilst stimulating your critical reflexivity? Well I don’t really know, but I shall endeavor to do so in what follows. But I must admit that my task is made difficult by the focus of my writing, which is to examine the epistemology of your research as represented in this article rather than to resonate and perhaps extend your arguments about the topic of including Indigenous knowledge in the science curriculum of Papua New Guinean (PNG) schools. I more readily find myself in resonance with your standpoint on this topic than with the theory of knowledge embedded in your article. But perhaps I can practice a little of what I am preaching and add a dose of critical reflexivity to my own writing.

Resonance

I brought to my reading of your article a high degree of familiarity and enthusiasm for the general topic. I have for some years mentored postgraduate research students’ critical inquiries into ways of making science and mathematics curricula inclusive of the Indigenous worldviews

of children in African, Asian and Pacific Island nations. Because my postgraduate students are indigenous to their own countries they brought to their research extensive experience of how teaching and learning science and mathematics achieves little more than a naïve reproduction of a Western Modern Worldview for the “lucky” few, while largely failing to achieve UNESCO’s aspiration of “Education for All”. Armed with qualitative research

*I once lived on a remote Aboriginal settlement in central Australia where I witnessed the benefits on children’s bicultural identity development of learning in primary school to write their own spoken language, Pitjatjantjara.*

epistemologies, my students have produced compelling portrayals of the harmful effects on local cultural identity development of imported science/maths curricula that make little or no provision for including local Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, values or spirituality in schools and in teacher education colleges/universities (Afonso & Taylor, in press; Luitel & Taylor, 2006, 2007). Their use of a range of socio-cultural theories has helped to make visible and to critique the political, cultural, social and economic imperatives that operate hegemonically in the invisible part of the curriculum development spectrum with the neo-colonial aspiration of “civilizing” children from non-Western backgrounds into a Western Modern Worldview, based on the unexamined assumption that a narrow economic form of globalization should rule the world and be the master of its educational institutions.

I was favorably predisposed to your article because it connected well with my research interests and professional values. I was drawn to your promise to make visible culturally insensitive science curriculum development policy and practices in Papua New Guinea (PNG) which contribute “to the silencing of the Papua New Guinea voice.” As I began reading the introductory section I was looking forward to your “telling of some of my experiences in some key processes and relationships involved in that development.” I was also excited about the promise of encountering your critical reflexivity as you explored your “own complicity” “as a white Western woman whose

*This tells you a little of my prejudice for a particular type of qualitative research writing in which the researcher employs a self-study lens and uses critical reflexivity and multiple genres to create self-aware and aesthetically pleasing writing. I find it difficult not to judge other qualitative research in terms of this postmodern perspective.*

values, beliefs, prejudices and aspirations form a complex lens through which I have come to understand myself” in the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge of PNG. I was expecting that you might conclude the article, in the spirit of a self-study, with recommendations for improving your

own future professional practice in this or similar contexts. And I began to look forward to reading your perspective on how curriculum designers might resolve the tension between developing science curricula that promote the Western Modern Worldview *and* the (many) worldviews of the diverse Indigenous peoples of PNG, given my culturally pluralistic view that neither perspective should be privileged to the extent of excluding the other.

Which standards?

As I read on, however, the absence of an account of the methodology of your research which underpins this article began to worry me and I started to speculate about your epistemology (or theory/ies of knowing) and the ethical code that guided your fieldwork relationships. Given that you were drawing on your extensive experience as an expatriate Australian living and working in PNG, I wondered how you, as a qualitative researcher, had managed to avoid some important “validity traps.” I wanted to know what steps you had taken to ensure that, as an ardent advocate of social justice (for cultural inclusiveness), you had avoided privileging your own perspective over those of other stakeholders, especially fellow expatriates with whom you conflicted, but also the Indigenous PNG officers with whom you worked closely. Related to this, I wondered how your use of “postcolonial discourse” theory had enabled you to conduct critical but sympathetic readings of the perspectives of key stakeholders (including both protagonists and antagonists) so that you produced a fair and balanced representation of your problematic curriculum development relationships.

*I actually like reading the researcher's own voice, especially when she purposely uses a literary genre to express heartfelt feelings. Arts-based research can give rise to very engaging and provocative writing.*

These concerns arose from my understanding of what constitutes good quality qualitative research. Within the broad church of qualitative research there are many and varied epistemologies and related ethical perspectives (and ontologies), and creative combinations of these. Indeed for newcomers, such as my postgraduate students (and me), there is an overwhelming diversity of research epistemologies made mysterious by ambiguous terminology and unclear part-whole relationships (e.g., Should it be “method” or “methodology” or “approach” or “epistemology”? Is there a hierarchy that structures the field? Do I collect or generate data, or both? Should theory be *a priori* or emergent or both?). There is also a confusing plethora of quality standards to choose from, such as:

- trustworthiness criteria of member checking, negative case analysis, and progressive subjectivity
- authenticity criteria of fostering fair, empowering and ethically sound relationships amongst research co-participants
- literary criteria for producing expressively heartfelt, spiritual, even polemical, research writing
- impact standards of transferability, pedagogical thoughtfulness, conscious raising, and praxis
- critical standards of reflexivity, voice, deconstruction, and empowerment.



And recently, in addition to the conventional propositional-analytic logic favored by scientifically oriented research journals, a range of additional logics has emerged for embellishing our reasoning: narrative, storying and poetry, dialectical and metaphoric thinking, imaginative and futures envisioning, and use of visual imagery (Taylor & Wallace, 2007)

My way of addressing this *crisis of choice* is to try to be critically open to all qualitative research approaches that I encounter, especially in my role as a journal reviewer. However, I have developed one important yardstick for evaluating research reports. I am prepared not to impose my own preferred quality standards as long as the research article/report/dissertation that I am reading contains a well justified account of the epistemology and associated quality standards that have shaped the researcher's actions in conducting and writing up her research, whether it be an empirical or theoretical study, whether it subscribes to the canons of objectivity, critical intersubjectivity, fictive imagining or social justice advocacy. I try not to impose my own standards as a default reading if the author explains the standards she has employed (and is honest about ways in which they have not been fully adhered to; traditionally known as outlining a study's limitations).

As I continued to read your article, however, I was unable to find a clear account of the research epistemology and quality standards that governed your study (or the writing of this article), and I found myself struggling at times to judge the adequacy of your knowledge claims, reacting sometimes with a degree of incredulity about what appeared to be unwarranted inferences, especially when you asserted them quite strongly.

## Perspectival writing

I would like to consider the following passage from your article.

I would argue that, as I discussed above, some aid organizations in Papua New Guinea expect passive implementation of their policies and this is consistent with neo-colonial attitudes. In Freire's (1970) terms there is no real relationship, built on true dialogue, between the people working for aid agencies and Papua New Guineans, nor is there a sense of an ongoing obligation, responsibility, or renewal. There is no intellectual space to engage in meaningful discussions about "naming" the world. Those who hold economic power and control do not want the world named in any way other than their own.

Now, whenever I read a qualitative research report implying that "something is the case" I find myself doing a double take over the term *is* because, despite its apparent insignificance, it tends to convey (often unwittingly) a very high degree of certainty about what exists (reality or being) and its significance (or meaningfulness), especially when compared with perspectival terms such as *seems*, *perhaps*, *can*, *might*, *tends*, and *appears*. These latter linguistic markers of probabilistic reasoning convey a wide range of possible states, more befitting the emergence of tentative understandings of complex social relations. By contrast, *is* and its close companion *should* are deeply implicated in the single-minded pursuit of positivism (searching only for confirming evidence – for "what is"), and they enjoy a long-established intimate relationship with the dominant but narrow form of Reason known as propositional logic (if A then B, but not not-A). Thus, *is* and *should* have a very strong affinity with the seductiveness of objective truth and the moral high ground of universal prescription (as conveyed by imperialistic epistemologies such as scientism). In my experience as a qualitative researcher, this language of modernism threatens to seduce researchers (despite their affiliation with critical postmodern thought and logics) into overlooking the inescapably contextual nature of their work and the necessarily limited scope of their findings. I have witnessed many unwary qualitative researchers being hijacked by the imperialistic language of modernism, especially when the moral high ground of social justice fuels their passionate commitment to generating praxis for socio-cultural reconstruction.

*I am reaching back to the early 1990s when interpretive research was being first introduced into science education by Jim Gallagher (1991) via the work of Frederick Erickson, an educational anthropologist. Erickson excelled in grounded theorising and the production of hierarchies of "assertions" from inductive analysis of interview texts. He laid out a set of quality standards which included the concept of evidentiary warrants (Erickson, 1998).*

In the passage above that I have extracted from your article, you make a number of assertions that are embedded in a propositional logic and which appear in the form of matters of fact – “something *is* the case.” From an interpretive-ethnographic perspective, I feel that your warrants for these assertions are not clearly evident. Although you found compelling support in the literature for casting a suspicious eye on the economic (as opposed to culturally inclusive) priorities of international aid agencies, including those funding PNG development projects, it is not clear to me how you can justifiably infer the non-existence of dialogical relationships between (all or some) aid agencies and local PNG people that would otherwise enable the latter to “name” the world and thus shape the terms of development projects so that they meet locally defined needs. This is not to say that I doubt that this detrimental situation exists (indeed the history of Western colonialism and imperialism leads us to expect this); rather my concern is that you do not seem to have provided compelling evidence to substantiate the credibility of your assertion. Yes, a *prima facie* case exists in the literature, and yes, a postcolonial perspective expects to find evidence of neo-colonialist policy and practices, but theoretically buttressed expectations are, to my mind, insufficient to adequately support assertions of matters of fact, especially those that take on the beguiling appearance of generalizable objective truths. What form could compelling evidence take? Aid agency policy document analysis, interviews of key stakeholders (such as employees of aid agencies) and/or narrative (storied) accounts of personal experience (such as yours) would lend considerable evidentiary weight. Even then, I think it would be important to use perspectival language to signal the interpretive nature (and inherent epistemic uncertainty) of your understandings of the intentions and actions of any particular aid agency.

Whose perspective?

Another concern that arose for me while reading your article is the apparent privileging of your own perspective on the nature and cause of the conflictive relationship between the CRIP (Curriculum Reform Implementation Project) and Curriculum Unit (CU) teams and the relative absence of the perspectives of your co-workers. My concern is shaped by a constructivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and related quality standards for optimizing the *trustworthiness* and *fairness* of the findings. From this view, I would expect to have encountered the meaning- perspectives of a representative sample of key stakeholders, including members of

both the CRIP and CU teams, explaining their respective official terms of reference and perceptions of the nature and cause of conflicts in the relationship between the two teams. It would also be insightful to read the perceptions of PNG government officers responsible for the CRIP and CU teams, especially their opinions of the salience (or lack thereof) of the *Matane Report: A Philosophy of Education for Papua New Guinea* (1986) to the contemporary needs of PNG science education, given that this report had been serving as a key referent for development and implementation of your curriculum model. The paraphrase of a conversation amongst various curriculum officers (i.e., the Assistant Secretary of the Curriculum Development Division, the Super, Thecla, Jo, and Julian) seems to do little more than provide evidence that conflict exists; it doesn't help to understand the nuanced nature, multiple sources or scope of the conflict. Based on this limited evidence, you employed your postcolonial lens to generate assertions about the negative impact of CRIP actions on you and your colleagues in the Curriculum Unit, and you seem to have attributed to CRIP full responsibility for enacting a "politics of exclusion" in curriculum development that resulted in ignoring the PNG voice.

*But perhaps your intention was not to conduct an ethnographic type study of the culture of curriculum development in your PNG workplace. Perhaps instead you were investigating phenomenologically the PNG Indigenous experience of being disempowered by a colonising other? In which case focussing largely on your own experience would be a legitimate interest! (Max van Manen, 1990)*

Whilst not doubting the actuality of your experiences, I feel that from this perspective your research analysis falls somewhat short of being empirically *trustworthy* because you have not portrayed the experiences (social realities) of members of the various curriculum groups. I am referring here to the need to ensure a fair representation of key stakeholders and to seek disconfirming evidence of your inference that the blame for conflict lay entirely with the culturally different "other" (ironically, expatriate Australian curriculum professionals). Perhaps you might indulge me a little speculation here for the sake of illustrating my concern about the danger of not being critically reflexive and not challenging your own interpretation of this important issue by seeking disconfirming evidence. Please permit me to take, momentarily, the standpoint of a devil's advocate and suggest an alternative (albeit extreme) reading of your relationship with the CRIP team (no offence intended!). If I factor in: (i) some of your polemical statements which indicate an adversarial relationship between self and other (e.g., "I became very ashamed of belonging to the Western culture. I was ashamed of the values and attitudes that

were being knowingly supported in questionable 'educative' practices.

... [The expatriates'] presence and their demand for exclusive guarded enclaves contribute to obvious segregation between the haves and have nots; a segregation that promotes an atmosphere of misunderstanding and fear.”); (ii) your failure to deliver on your promise to explore your own complicity in the devaluing of the Indigenous knowledge of PNG within science curriculum documents; and (iii) your penchant for marshalling only confirming evidence that fits your *a priori* theoretical lens of postcolonialism, then I believe that you might be vulnerable to the following (jaundiced) perception of your role that I elicited from a hypothetical CRIP team member, which I have sketched as an impressionistic vignette:

She is an idealist who is out of touch with modern curriculum development trends in Australia. She has an uncompromising “nativist” mindset in as much as she seems to have rejected the modern world and over privileges traditional PNG culture; a modern day Rousseau who wants to create an apartheid system of education that would deny access for PNG children to the modern industrial and technological world. She is hypercritical of the excesses of her own Western culture and she projects that resentment onto us. She seems to have resented losing her privileged curriculum authority as the only (Western) science education specialist. She has a cynical view of our lack of in-country experience, high salaries, and secure living conditions; but we had no choice about where to live, especially given the lack of internal security in PNG and the escalating domestic crime rate.

*Writing polemically can be ok in qualitative research. John van Maanen's Tales of the Field (1988) provides an excellent account of how and when the postmodern ethnographer can and should be polemical.*

*“The group interviews and responses to literature allowed my study to be “less colonial” by providing opportunities for participants to co-create perspectives on various issues.”  
(Adler, 2004, p. 109)*

Now although I do not attach any credibility to this hypothetical perception of one of your CRIP antagonists, my point is that, because of the above factors, you may have left yourself open to this type of prejudicial reading. And so I wonder whether postcolonial research might actually generate mutual respectful understandings amongst the holders of apparently conflicting worldviews and catalyze a decolonizing process of curriculum development?

Theory: *A priori* or emergent?

And lastly, I want to mention that a problem facing readers like me, who prefer a narrative approach to inquiry because of the compelling nature of narrative truth, is the absence in your article of a *diachronic* narrative structure (Polkinghorne, 1997), that is, a story structure

that would reveal the unfolding moments of your inquiry from your own first-person eye-witness perspective: your process of puzzlement in striving to make sense of unanticipated dilemmas and disarray, your supposition and pursuit of emergent research questions, your seeking of confirming and (with disarming honesty) disconfirming evidence, and your portrayal of the scholarly process of moving back and forth between fieldwork analysis and theoretical lens formation whilst reading research literature. Given the largely *synchronic* (or apparently timeless) structure of your article (which appears to be a hallmark of modernist writing), it seems that your development of a postcolonial lens might have preceded your fieldwork experiences and directed (perhaps channeled) your subsequent resistant actions in the curriculum development process. Perhaps this is what happened, but more likely not, I feel. I have a strong suspicion that your postcolonial lens was developed relatively recently, after you had left PNG, and that in writing up your research, particularly this article, you retrofitted the empirical analysis to confirm the explanatory power of the theory. That would explain your tendency to over theorize the meager evidence you have presented in this article.

*Perhaps the purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the explanatory power of postcolonial discourse theory?*

#### Coda

Ann, I hope that I have gone some way towards achieving my goal of providing a commentary that leaves open a dialogical space for your response. I know that you have written much about your research methodology in your doctoral thesis, and so I look forward to your drawing on that scholarly work to clarify some of the concerns that I have raised here.

Best wishes,

*Peter Taylor*

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