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## Academic Voice in Scholarly Writing

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## Academic Voice in Scholarly Writing

### Abstract

Tensions across disciplines and methodologies over what constitutes appropriate academic voice in writing is far from arbitrary and instead is rooted in competing notions of epistemology, representation, and science. In this paper, I examine these tensions as well as address current issues affecting academic voice such as gender bias and the rise of social media. I begin by discussing reflexivity in research and then turn to the ways in which personal-reflexive voice has been hidden and revealed by academic writers. I also illustrate how the commercialization of academic science intersects with the use of distant-authoritative voice in sometimes corrupting ways. I examine variations in academic voice as they relate to issues of researcher emotion, class, race, and gender. Finally, I discuss the scientization of qualitative research and resulting increased interaction between scholars of varying epistemological positions which I argue can increase attention to the epistemological underpinnings of academic voice.

### Keywords

Writing, Epistemology, Reflexivity, Ethics, Publishing

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## Academic Voice in Scholarly Writing

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*Tensions across disciplines and methodologies over what constitutes appropriate academic voice in writing is far from arbitrary and instead is rooted in competing notions of epistemology, representation, and science. In this paper, I examine these tensions as well as address current issues affecting academic voice such as gender bias and the rise of social media. I begin by discussing reflexivity in research and then turn to the ways in which personal-reflexive voice has been hidden and revealed by academic writers. I also illustrate how the commercialization of academic science intersects with the use of distant-authoritative voice in sometimes corrupting ways. I examine variations in academic voice as they relate to issues of researcher emotion, class, race, and gender. Finally, I discuss the scientization of qualitative research and resulting increased interaction between scholars of varying epistemological positions which I argue can increase attention to the epistemological underpinnings of academic voice. Keywords: Writing, Epistemology, Reflexivity, Ethics, Publishing*

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As a methodological practice, reflexivity garners the most attention in the humanities and social science disciplines, primarily in the area of qualitative methodology (Hertz, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Yet with technological advances in qualitative data analysis as well as expanding interest in interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research, quantitative researchers across many disciplines have increased their engagement with qualitative methods. This expanding pool of researchers is not only helping to increase the popularity of qualitative methods, but they are also accentuating competing epistemological perspectives that have caused controversy between and within disciplines (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Some authors suggest that there is now more debate within qualitative methods than between qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Culyba, Heimer, & JuLeigh, 2004). These debates affect not only how qualitative methods are used, but also norms related to voice and reflexivity in scholarly writing across disciplines.

Researchers that employ qualitative methods hold various epistemological positions that range from science-based (objective epistemology) to constructivist (interpretive epistemology) to more critical perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gray & Jones, 2016). While an author's epistemological position may not be made explicit in published manuscripts, his or her authorial voice is informed by it (Hertz, 1997). Voice refers to the way that authors present themselves within their written work. It is the mediating link between author and subject in any style of writing, and it reflects "what the author brings to, aims for, and does with the material" (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996, p. 295). In this paper, I discuss tensions around the use of voice in academic publications and argue that these are rooted in unarticulated epistemological divisions among a diverse group of scholars.

Epistemological tensions among academics are routinely experienced but not always reflected upon during research practice. The "crisis of representation" that erupted in the 1980's alongside the postmodern movement sharpened arguments against the existence of a single overarching truth, suggesting alternatively that there are competing interpretations and discourses that continually shape understandings of social phenomena (c.f., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). This critical epistemological position

suggests that “there can be no single correct interpretation because one’s interpretation of the facts – indeed, the facts themselves – are products of one’s interpretative stance” (Flaherty, 2002, p. 479; see also Fish, 1980). Classic qualitative projects based on objectivist epistemologies such as the *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1955), faced poignant critiques from the postmodern movement and the constructivist turn in qualitative research targeting the implicit assumptions of these texts (c.f., Adler, Adler, & Johnson, 1992; Boelen, 1992; Bryant, 2003; Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 2002). In turn, many scholars adopting these positions questioned whether researchers have the authority to represent groups and individuals through the use of a distant, authoritative voice.

By challenging the authority of the author, both the postmodern movement and the proliferation of constructivist theory opened the door for increased experimentation with academic voice and self-representations in writing (c.f., Richardson, 1997, 2007). However, experimentation in the use of voice is not the norm, and instead a muted, distant voice continues to be conventionally associated with objectivity, authority, value-neutrality, and professionalism in many fields (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996). Unfortunately, the prevalence of the distant voice in academic writing can reinforce an unreflective orientation toward objectivist traditions and norms, and potentially obscure the underlying epistemological implications of voice in scholarly writing.

It is through the process of rejection, revision, and acceptance that scholars learn the expectations of peer reviewers and adapt to the quality and stylistic standards imparted to them. This includes expressions of preference for particular forms of authorial voice, but the consequent tensions this can produce among scholars torn between using authoritative or personal-reflexive voice signals that this decision is far from arbitrary and not merely “stylistic.” Charmaz and Mitchell (1996) demonstrated this when they examined samples of texts that used different forms of voice. They offered instructive insights into the subtle but important ways that voice can resonate with empirical evidence while clarifying the researcher’s role, experience, and limits in relation to her/his subject of inquiry. While some scholars may be inclined to assume that authorial voice strengthens academic writing, Charmaz and Mitchell show that for discerning readers, it can reveal limits that personal-reflexive writing might actively recognize and reach beyond. This challenges the notion that silent authorship is the hallmark of mature scholarship and posits that self-reflexivity expressed through voice empowers a richer understanding of both researcher and subject.

In this paper, I argue that by understanding both the historical tensions as well as the current issues affecting academic voice we enable increased transparency, reflexivity, and trustworthiness in research. Far too often, both undergraduate and graduate level students receive little, if any, advice on how to develop their academic voice when learning how to become an academic writer. In other words, for many individuals, including professors, academic voice is part of the hidden curriculum of university life. Therefore, discussions of academic voice, in particular the ways in which it’s linked to epistemology, would be a valuable addition to university classes and research methodology courses. A more open and reflexive dialogue on academic voice would better connect the pursuit of knowledge (and the research process) with how one represents such knowledge through their scholarly writing.

The remainder of the paper will be organized as follows: I begin by providing a discussion of the importance of reflexivity in research and show how reflexive voice is used across disciplines, or in some cases hidden and later revealed by academic writers. Here, I will also introduce the idea that the commercialization of science might be affecting the distant-authoritative voice in ways not yet fully theorized. Next, I discuss the role of researcher emotion and personal voice, and show how issues of class, race, and gender, can influence as well as limit a self-reflexive position. I conclude with a discussion of the scientization of qualitative research as well as how increased interaction between scholars of varying

epistemological positions can increase attention to the epistemological underpinnings of academic voice.

### Reflexivity and Voice

Although reflexive writing does not require use of the first-person pronoun “I,” this tiny word underscores debates on the appropriateness of revealing subjectivity in scholarly writing. A consequence of this inside the classroom is that students are continually asking their professors whether or not they are allowed to use the first-person perspective in their academic papers. While some instructors encourage an active voice in student writing, others prefer that students use a distant authoritative voice and often punish them for failure to do so. As a teacher, I often encourage my students to use an active voice, yet, at the same, as a researcher I have often relegated my own personal-reflexive voice to the background of my writing. Initially, this relegation was imposed externally by a managing editor of one of my early published manuscripts. Just prior to publication, the editor removed all my uses of “I” and replaced them with distancing voice terms such as “this paper examines” and “this paper offers” (see Gray, 2006).

I speculated that perhaps the muting of my voice was related to the fact that the journal had a policy-oriented focus and strived to attract audiences in government and the professions accustomed to silent authorship and who might associate objectivity in voice with scientific legitimacy. Whatever the reason, the external suppression of my academic voice by the editor helped to avoid what Agger (1989) refers to as the “active acknowledgement of authoriality” (p. 30), thereby contributing to the misattribution of agency whereby an item that is not human (such as an academic article) is given human characteristics through the author’s choice of language. The problem however, is that this can be interpreted to mean that textual or stylistic adjustment can improve the validity, relevance, or truthfulness of the author’s content, while potentially also discouraging reflexivity.

Reflexivity enables both insight into phenomena and the knowledge of how that insight has been constructed. It allows researchers to become sensitive to their own political, social and cultural context while being aware that their knowledge is reflected in both time and social space. Reflexivity is therefore important across all stages of the research process, from the formulation of the research question, to the overall research design, the data collection methods, the analysis, and finally the presentation of the research. Even in co-authored publications where personal writing may not always be possible, reflexive writing is always possible, and it demands a critical examination of the way that all authors have engaged their research question<sup>1</sup>. Yet active incorporation of reflexivity in writing through the use of reflexive voice remains a source of academic debate with some embracing it and others resisting it (c.f., Bourdieu, 2004; Giddens, 1993; Gouldner, 1970; McMylor, 2005; Smith, 2005; Woolgar, 1988).

In the natural sciences, reflexivity in the research and writing process is less common than in the social sciences and humanities. This occurs in part, because the epistemological position of positivism implicitly guides the institutional discourse and self-representation in the natural sciences. The implicit bias against personal-reflexive voice in the natural science disciplines is often justified by interpreting researchers as interchangeable creators of

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<sup>1</sup> Incorporating a personal academic voice also becomes increasingly complicated by the growing institutional practice of co-authored journal publications. In the natural sciences, sole author publications are becoming quite infrequent while multi-author publications are on the rise in the social sciences. The dynamics of co-authorship writing may lead one to ask ‘who is the author?’ when reading a journal article containing 6-10 authors. Or, in the case of a recent biology paper in the journal *G3: Genes Genomes Genetics* – 1,014 authors! (Leung et al., 2015), and, in the famous Higgs Boson landmark particle physics paper, 2,932 authors! (Aad et al., 2012).

knowledge. Researchers' personal characteristics (e.g., social class, race, gender, academic rank, social status, financial goals) are generally considered to be irrelevant and unrelated to their academic findings. Moreover, the closer an academic discipline is aligned with the natural science model the greater the pressure can be to engage in un-reflexive silent authorship. For instance, even though psychology is generally considered a social science, "the strongly institutionalized commitment to psychology as a natural science, and the fact that experimental and statistical methods are often rigorously enforced, has kept discussion [of reflexivity] on the margins of the field" (Smith, 2005, p. 6). While some psychologists have attempted to engage reflexivity within their disciplines' methodological discourses (see Danziger, 1990; Flanagan, 1981; Morawski, 2005), most have not been as successful at challenging their traditional disciplinary boundaries as scholars have been in other disciplines such as sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Giddens, 1993; Gouldner, 1970), although there are signs that psychology is gradually increasing its openness to reflexivity (c.f., Gergen, 2009).

The assumption under objective epistemology is that knowledge is potentially open to discovery by any individual properly trained and capable of knowing how to unearth such knowledge (Fleischman, 1998). Thus, within the natural sciences, findings are generally considered separate from the researcher, justifying the use of a distant voice in scholarly writing. However, this precludes some of the complex ways that subject (the researcher) and object (the research) can be intertwined.

Disciplinary norms and theoretical tradition can restrain the use of personal-reflexive voice, but more fundamentally they can restrain a researcher's methodological reflexivity. Consider for instance the wide-reaching, cross-disciplinary example of conflict of interest disclosures. Because of the widely-accepted potential for conflicts of interest to distort research outcomes (c.f., Gray, 2013a), many academic journals now require that authors disclose funding arrangements and possible financial conflicts of interest upon submission of their work for review. However, this is a complicated request. Authors may not perceive their own conflicts of interest, or if they do, they may not include disclosure statements or reflexive discussion that acknowledges this in their manuscripts. Academics also have varying interpretations of what constitutes a possible conflict of interest, and they may be inclined to minimize any potential conflicts given the negative signaling effect it can have on reviewers and the target audience. Conflict of interest disclosure is an exercise in reflexivity that presents a great challenge for all types of scholarly writers regardless of discipline or method. At once it offers an example that highlights the significance of self-reflexivity juxtaposed against the inherent difficulty in carrying it out. To contend with these challenges and any restrictions imposed by their disciplinary norms, some researchers have offered reflexive reflections in the literary spaces beyond the main body of their manuscripts, as discussed next.

### **Hiding, Then Revealing, Personal-Reflexive Voice**

Historically, personal-reflexive voice was marginalized and delegated to the fringe areas (i.e., the "safe places for voice"). Safe places constitute the socially accepted literary spaces where voice may be used to reveal subjectivity and the personal role, goals, thoughts, emotions, or experiences of the author in the process of carrying out research. While personal-reflexive voice is considered essential in most qualitative publications and is woven throughout these manuscripts, in many other academic publications the safe places for voice are confined to the edges of writing such as appendices, footnotes, prefaces, acknowledgements, introductions, and afterwards (DeVault, 1997). These safe places are generally accepted among all scholars, even those with contrasting epistemologies and viewpoints. According to Fleischman (1998),

The idea of scholarly writing is a rhetoric that arose in the context of nineteenth-century rationalism and empiricism. It is characterized in particular by claims to objectivity, transparency, and authority. It purports to be dispassionate... technical and depersonalized... [and free from] emotion and subjectivity... the scientific voice relies on the “the authority affect.” (pp. 977-978; see also Halliday & Martin, 1993; Locke, 1992)

Some authors wishing to invoke personal-reflexive voice in their academic writing write an initial piece of scholarly work using a distant authoritative voice, then later write a subsequent personal-reflexive piece that comments on their earlier work.<sup>2</sup> James Watson (1968) did this in his book *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA*. Watson provided a reflection on his discovery of the structure of DNA (discovered alongside Francis Crick) in a book published 15 years after his groundbreaking scientific article that had been published in the prestigious journal, *Nature* (Watson & Crick, 1953). Watson’s autobiographical book, considered by some as a classic piece of nonfiction writing<sup>3</sup>, received many positive reviews for its intimately personal account of his scientific work. It was a highly unusual disclosure at that time, but one that lent tremendous insights into the nature and process of his discovery.

The personal accounts provided by Watson presented new material for scrutiny, which most notably was offered by Anne Sayre (1975) in her book *Rosalind Franklin and DNA*. Sayre suggested that Watson’s personal memoir revealed unethical behavior and gender bias in his scientific pursuits. Sayre pointed to Watson’s portrayal of and attitude towards a female scientist he called “Rosy,” whom Watson described as an unattractive and difficult woman whom he claimed was an obstacle to Crick and his discovery. As it turns out, “Rosy” was actually Dr. Rosalind Franklin, a meticulous scholar whose research not only played a significant role in the discovery of the structure of DNA, but whose empirical work was covertly used by Watson and Crick so that they could develop and publish a model that would earn them quick ownership of the findings that Franklin had been rigorously developing in her laboratory work. She died of cancer before she could learn of their actions; while they went on to win the Nobel Prize. In Andre Lwoff’s (1968) review of Watson’s book in *Scientific America*, he reacted to Watson’s account of Rosalind:

His portrait of Rosalind Franklin is cruel. His remarks concerning the way she dresses and her lack of charm are quite unacceptable. At the very least the fact that all the work of Watson and Crick starts with Rosalind Franklin’s X-ray pictures and that Jim [Watson] has exploited Rosalind’s results should have inclined him to indulgence. (p. 231)

However, as Lwoff points out in his review, Watson seemed to experience little remorse in the unethical appropriation of her data. This can be seen in the following remark from Watson

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, see John Beattie (distant voice 1960, personal voice 1965), and Jean-Paul Dumont (distant voice 1976, personal voice 1978). Other variations in the hiding/revealing voice strategy include Barley (1983a, 1983b) who published the distant and personal voice pieces simultaneously, and Turnbull (1961, 1965) and Stoller (1989a, 1989b; see also Stoller & Olkes, 1987) who both, interestingly, published their more personal voice writings first and then followed with their distant voice publications (Tedlock, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> In 2012, The Library of Congress named Watson’s (1968) *The Double Helix* as one of the top “Books that Shaped America.” Retrieved July 29, 2015, from <http://www.loc.gov/bookfest/books-that-shaped-america/>. In addition, an American publishing company ranks *The Double Helix* 7<sup>th</sup> in their list of the top 100 best nonfiction books. Retrieved July 29, 2015, from <http://www.modernlibrary.com/top-100/100-best-nonfiction/>. The book also inspired the creation of a BBC TV movie in 1987 called *Life Story: The Race for the Double Helix*.

where he wrote, "...it had been checked out with Rosy's [Rosalind Franklin's] precise measurements. Rosy, of course, did not directly give us her data. For that matter, no one at King's College [her university] realized they were in our hands" (p. 228).

While Watson's scientific memoir provides a powerful example of the use of personal-reflexive voice, it highlights that this kind of writing doesn't necessarily mean that the author will be politically correct, behave ethically, or conduct research in a trustworthy manner. For the reader, however, Watson's (1968) personal reflections provided a glimpse into the ways that unethical research collaboration and gender bias played a pivotal role in his scientific advancement, an important insight of relevance to many researchers beyond just those who strictly study DNA. Furthermore, Watson and Crick's behavior (and the great rewards they reaped) could also contribute normative support and tolerance for various kinds of ethical lapses in the scientific process (Gray, 2013a; Merton, 1973). Thankfully, Watson's personal-reflexive accounts fueled important discussions about gender bias and scientific misconduct that have shaped scientific cultures in progressive ways.

Although Watson's reflections did not bear on the scientific credibility of his published research findings, there are other works where the act of first hiding and then later revealing personal voice did change how those results were interpreted. For instance, this occurred following the posthumous publication of Bronislaw Malinowski's personal diary, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967). The diary revealed Malinowski as a deeply racially prejudiced researcher. He had become famous for his authoritative ethnological account of the Trobriand community in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), and his personal reflections revealed through his diary gave cause for audiences to call into question the authority of his expertise and the legitimacy of his research. Given Malinowski's skill at participant observation and his examination of social systems, it's interesting to speculate what additional insights a more reflexive Malinowski might have made. Nonetheless, his 1967 diary that contained personal thoughts he most likely never planned to share, did contribute to an eventual shift in ethnography "from an objectifying methodology to an intersubjective methodology" whereby "an ethnographer can allow both self and other to appear together within a single narrative that carries a multiplicity of dialoguing voices" (Tedlock, 2003, pp. 190-191).<sup>4</sup> Subsequent autobiographies and autoethnographies have continued to illustrate the importance of self-reflexivity in academic voice. More generally, Malinowski's diaries have led to an increased awareness among social scientists of the importance of reflexivity in research (Scholte, 1972).

Some reasons to hide academic voice are more corrupting to the production of knowledge than others. For instance, inside academia, ethical issues related to the commercialization of science and the misuse of distant authoritative voice continue to emerge (Gray, 2013b; Krinsky, 2003; McGarity & Wagner, 2008; Olivieri, 2003). One controversial practice is ghostwriting in academic peer-reviewed articles. There is an implicit assumption among readers of scholarly work that the authors listed on peer-reviewed articles actually carried out the research, wrote the paper, and meaningfully (and ethically) drew on their professional experience and qualifications. Yet, as the editors of *PLoS MEDICINE* (2009) note, pharmaceutical companies (for instance) have been known to hire a writing company "to produce a manuscript on a piece of research to fit the drug company's needs and then a person... is identified [and often paid] to be the 'author'" (p. 1). The author the pharmaceutical company selects is typically a well-respected medical school professor whose name gives the appearance of credibility, trustworthiness, and independence (c.f., Gray, 2013b; Gotzsche et

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on how this revealing of voice affected the discipline of anthropology and, in turn, sociology, see Asad, 1973; Lewis, 1973; Nash & Wintrob, 1972; and Willis, 1972.



al., 2007; Leo & Lacasse, 2014; Moffatt & Elliot, 2007; Sismondo, 2007; Sismondo & Greene, 2015).

The manipulative potential of ghostwritten articles exists partially in leveraging the objectivity connotations associated with the use of distant authoritative academic voice. The general public, health-care authorities, and regulatory bodies examining the peer-reviewed literature on a pharmaceutical product naturally assume that the authoritative voice belongs to the author(s), and are often unaware of the backstage presence of an industry paid ghost author. Ghostwriting is simply one example, albeit an extreme one, of how the commercialization of science and academic voice can be interrelated in ways not yet fully realized by scholars interested in issues of voice and representation.

### **Researcher Emotion and Reflexivity**

The inclusion of researcher emotion in reflexive writing increases what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as the *trustworthiness of the account* by increasing both the credibility of the narrative and the potential transferability of the experience to other social contexts. My awareness of this (and also my discomfort with it) was first sparked when I endeavored to write an ethnographic socio-legal account of the struggles factory workers face when exercising their right to refuse unsafe work (Gray, 2002). This legal right positions workers to have to confront and potentially disagree with their superiors. Not surprisingly, my ethnographic approach meant that I had participated in situations that became emotionally charged. The emotions I experienced were directly relevant to how I came to understand why people follow (or do not follow) rules or exercise legal rights inside organizations (Gray, 2009; Gray & Silbey, 2014; Hochschild, 1979). While I eventually adopted a personal-reflexive voice (see Gray, 2002), I initially felt reluctant to disclose my emotional responses as a researcher engaged in fieldwork.

Revealing emotion in scholarly writing can be professionally risky. The recent controversy surrounding Alice Goffman's (2014) *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* is a case in point. During her urban ethnography one of the participants, Chuck, was murdered, which led to another participant, Mike, attempting to find the killer in order to seek revenge. In her book, Goffman describes how she formed trusted relationships with this group of participants, so it's understandable that she might have shared in Mike's desire for revenge. In a review of her book, Steven Lubet, a Northwestern law school professor, claimed that by going along with Mike in search of Chuck's killer, Goffman committed a serious felony by essentially admitting to conspiring to commit murder. Goffman explained her reasons for accompanying Mike with this very personal and self-reflective comment:

"I did not get into the car with Mike because I wanted to learn firsthand about violence," she [Goffman] wrote. "I got into the car because . . . I wanted Chuck's killer to die." "Looking back," she added, "I'm glad that I learned what it feels like to want a man to die—not simply to understand the desire for vengeance in others, but to feel it in my bones." (Lubet, 2015, pp. 7-8)

While the Alice Goffman controversy continues to be explored (an inquiry that appears to be about representation in ethnography more so than Alice Goffman per se) it does potentially cast a chilling effect on the future willingness of researchers to reveal certain kinds of emotions in their academic work.

### **Personal Voice in Academic Writing**

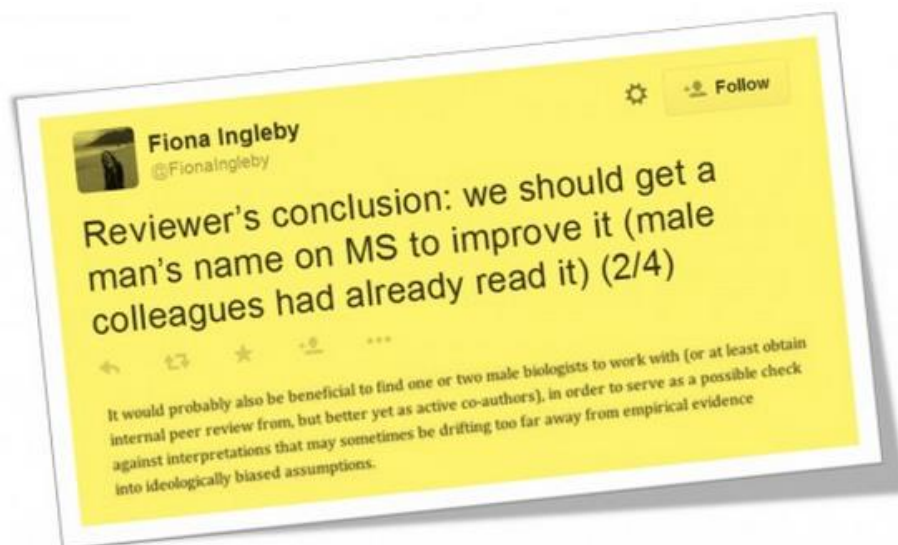
Academic norms demarcate types of writing where there is greater acceptance for the use of personal voice (personal writing from first person perspectives), and this is often based on individual factors. According to Fleischman (1998), personal voice is most accepted when the authors are “from groups traditionally marginalized within the Academy: blacks, women, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, and academics from working-class backgrounds” (p. 1008). It has also been suggested that historically men and women exhibited differences in writing styles and, in turn, academic voice. For instance, Tedlock (2003) notes that ethnographies written by husband and wife authors have often exhibited segmentation along gender lines. Male partners tended to write on topics central to their disciplines using a distant, authoritative academic voice, whereas the female partners tended to write on topics that were considered more feminine and peripheral to the discipline, using a more personal voice.

Previous studies exploring variations of academic voice within the same text written by spouses, partners, and family members however, fail to convincingly support the claim that gender primarily explains differences in the use of academic voice and self-representation in writing (c.f., Cassell, 1987; Flinn, Marshall, & Armstrong, 1998; Tedlock, 2003). Nonetheless, some scholars have gendered the traditional authoritative voice as male, and more personal writing as female. As Fleischman (1998) notes,

Writers who take the personal/autobiographical turn, whether or not they are women themselves, are certainly aware that in the academic setting, and in a larger context, the personal is culturally coded female or feminine. And the fact that many observers perceive personal writing to be more relational, conversational, and emotional/expressive than standard scholarly writing also seems to mark this type of writing as gendered female. (p. 1002)

Historically, males have dominated the scientific community leading to feminist critiques of early literature and theoretical models. Many scientists today are turning to social media as a contemporary forum to expose and critique gender bias in science, in particular the assumption that authoritative voice is associated with masculinity. For example, on April 29, 2015 two female researchers (Dr. Fiona Ingleby of the University of Sussex and Dr. Meagan Head of the Australian National University) received a rejection letter from the journal PLoS ONE, with the following anonymous excerpt from one of the reviewers of their rejected manuscript: “It would probably... be beneficial to find one or two male biologists to work with (or at least obtain internal peer review from, but better yet as active co-authors).” The inclusion of a male co-author, the female authors were told, would help prevent their manuscript from “drifting too far away from empirical evidence into ideologically biased assumptions” (Bernstein, 2015; see also Figure 1 below). This glaringly sexist reviewer comment caused a media storm in some academic circles.

Figure One: Tweet revealing PLoS reviewer comments to manuscript authors Fiona Ingleby and Meagan Head (Bernstein, 2015)



An even larger social media storm took place just seven weeks later. On June 8, 2015, Sir Tim Hunt of the University College London, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in physiology, made the following attempt at a joke during a speech at the World Conference of Science Journalists in Seoul, South Korea: “Let me tell you about my trouble with girls. Three things happen when they are in the lab. You fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them, they cry.” He also noted that he was “in favor of single-sex labs.” Following these comments, which were “tweeted” shortly thereafter, female scientists from around the world began using social media to protest. However, the criticisms took an unusual but highly effective turn, with female workers posting photos of themselves engaged in their everyday science workplaces using the twitter hash tag *#DistractinglySexy* (see Figure 2). By making a joke of the sexist comments, social media was used to both publicly shame Sir Tim Hunt for his comments in Seoul as well as to draw broader attention to gender bias in science. In addition to exposing gender bias in science, these types of social media critiques also have the potential to challenge traditional scientific discourses that associate authoritative voice with masculinity.

Figure Two: Sample photos from #Distractinglysexy thread on Twitter, as reported by BBC. Retrieved July 20, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-33099289>



 **Stephanie Evans**  
@StephEvz43 Follow

Idk how any men were able to function when I was in this bunny suit and integrating a satellite. #distractinglysexy

5:44 PM - 10 Jun 2015

← ↻ 241 ★ 324



 **Tom Bishop**  
@FilesInLakes Follow

Following Sir Tim Hunt's useful advice I've updated the laboratory signage #distractinglysexy

3:40 PM - 10 Jun 2015 - Southampton, England, United Kingdom

← ↻ 1,070 ★ 696

### Feeling Like an Outsider Inside Academia?

The classical distinction of insiders/outside in academia is useful in discussions of academic voice (c.f., Collins, 1986; Mannheim, 1936; Merton, 1972; Simmel, 1921). According to Patricia Hill Collins (1990), subtle paradigms exist within academic disciplines based on shared beliefs, values, and techniques. “Group insiders have similar worldviews, acquired through similar educational and professional training, that separate them from everybody else. Insider worldviews may be especially alike if group members have similar social class, gender, and racial backgrounds” (p. 25). For those scholars from different backgrounds, there is a tendency, Collins (1986) notes, “to remain outsiders within” academia (p. 26).

For those who feel like an outsider while being inside academia, there is also a higher likelihood that they may be more personal in the way they use their academic voice. For example, men with working class backgrounds tend to use a more personal academic voice in their scholarly writings. In Dews and Law’s (1995) book, *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, they make visible the working class backgrounds of academics and how it can lend itself to greater self-reflexivity among scholars on issues of stratification and hierarchy. A recent study of university professors by Haney (2015), based on a random sample of 176 professors from 95 different Canadian universities, also revealed that “working-class faculty members are hyper-aware of the ways in which their class backgrounds affected their educational trajectories” (p. 160; see also Lubrano, 2004; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Zandy, 1990). Interestingly then, while a working class background may initially contribute to perceived lower levels of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990), it also facilitates increased self-reflexivity inside academia and an awareness of the epistemological foundations in the hierarchy of academic knowledge.

The insider/outsider distinction can also emerge in subtle ways when academics engage in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary research. I recently experienced this tension when I (a qualitative sociologist), collaborated with a (quantitative) political scientist in revising a journal article that demonstrated how researchers in the field of public policy and administration could draw on qualitative methods in the application of the *Narrative Policy Framework* (NPF)—a framework that had positivist and quantitative origins (see Gray & Jones, 2016). In showing how the NPF, which represents a structuralist approach to the study of policy narratives, can be used qualitatively within constructivist or critical paradigms in addition to an objectivist paradigm, my co-author and myself were able to extend beyond our own individual fields to produce what some might label as transdisciplinary knowledge. The goal of transdisciplinary knowledge is “a shared understanding that is broader and deeper than one likely to emerge from within a single discipline alone” (Reme, Caban-Martinez, Young, Arlinghaus, & Gray, 2015, p. 552).

However, we first needed to integrate competing disciplinary and methodological perspectives, in particular in fields both open to and hostile towards qualitative methods and interpretivist analysis. Thus, it’s not surprising that we both initially received pushback from our respective home fields (qualitative sociology and quantitative public policy), but ironically in the opposite direction. Sociologists have long studied narratives through qualitative methods in order to better understand the social meanings of the actors involved. However, as a qualitative sociologist, my proposal that there is also value in a structuralist approach to the study of policy narratives led to some original pushback with one of my qualitative sociology colleagues jokingly stating that my interest in a structuralist approach made me sound like ‘an empiricist’ (which, for a qualitative researcher, is sort of like saying you sound like a positivist). Yet, my co-author, a quantitative political scientist in the field of public policy received far greater pushback for putting forth a “qualitative structuralist approach” to the study of policy

narratives. He was originally encouraged to not bother putting forward this non-science based (i.e., “not quantitative”) narrative policy approach. In other words, the critique for him was that he was not sounding enough “like an empiricist” (which, for a quantitative public policy researcher, is sort of like saying you sound like an interpretivist).

Noticing this shift, one of our manuscript reviewers argued that we should remain within the traditional epistemological norms of the NPF’s current public policy audience. That is, we should use, as well as recommend that others use, an objective epistemology when adopting qualitative narrative policy research. The reviewer argued that there should be no underlying epistemological differences between either qualitative or quantitative approaches because, in his/her view, these are simply different tools for researchers to employ in the examination of social phenomena (c.f., Brady & Collier, 2004; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). While adopting this assumption would have made our task less complicated and perhaps more appealing to quantitative and qualitative researchers who adopt an objective epistemology, we decided to remain inclusive, advocating that there is clearly space for multiple epistemological positions in the application of a narrative policy analysis.

### **The Scientization of Qualitative Methodology**

The great capacity for data analysis brought about by technological advancement has subtly shifted the focus towards data processing as opposed to fundamental issues such as reflexivity in the qualitative research process. The scientization of qualitative research expands upon the gradual process of making qualitative methods more systematic, a trend that began in the 1960s (c.f., Bruyn, 1966; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Junker, 1960; Malinowski, 1967). It has gained momentum as computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has attracted many quantitative researchers and mixed methods researchers to qualitative research, increasing the popularity of qualitative methods across many academic disciplines. Structural changes in higher education and research funding that increasingly favor applied research and interdisciplinary approaches have also contributed to this growth. While qualitative methods have grown in popularity, this expansion has also brought with it further unarticulated epistemological divisions among scholars who are now conducting qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers today hold various epistemological positions and on a single interdisciplinary project a science-based scholar (objective epistemology) may rub shoulders with a constructivist researcher (interpretive epistemology) or others espousing critical perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Gray & Jones, 2016). For instance, a few years ago, I was invited to participate in an interdisciplinary project (with non-social scientists), because there was desire to have “a qualitative person” on their research team. At one point, I asked them whether they believed that the knowledge we were seeking to uncover [through field observations and interviews] was contextual, open-ended, and therefore open to various social meanings and interpretations [an interpretivist epistemology], or whether they believed that there is an objective reality or truth that we can empirically measure and capture in this qualitative study [an objectivist epistemology]?” The response from the leader of the team was laughter followed by the response, “the later [objectivist] perspective, of course!” This casual endorsement of an objectivist epistemology (which lends itself to the use of a distant authoritative voice) from this group of interdisciplinary team-based researchers is not atypical of a growing segment of researchers from disciplines that have traditionally not drawn on qualitative methods but who have now begun to do so.

This new pool of non-traditional qualitative researchers is not only helping to increase the popularity of qualitative methods but are also, at the same time, contributing to the scientization of qualitative methods by subtly pulling qualitative research away from postmodernism. Many popular qualitative textbooks today suggest that there is no underlying

epistemological difference between qualitative and quantitative research (c.f., Brady & Collier, 2004; King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). In other words, both methodologies share an objectivist epistemology and simply use different tools or qualitative equivalents to quantitative methodology. For qualitative researchers who adopt an objectivist epistemology, the growth in CAQDAS and a focus on data as opposed to methodological reflexivity suggests that personal-reflexive voice may continue to be considered inferior relative to distant authoritative voice in the conveyance of scientific legitimacy.

### Conclusion

The socialization process of academic writing often encourages a distant voice in order to produce an authoritative effect. Alternately, scholars who use a more active and personal voice are often perceived to face issues of scientific credibility (c.f., Fleischman, 1998). As Agger (1989) notes, “science’s legitimacy is enhanced the more authorial presence is obscured” (p. 36). Moreover, the distant authoritative voice can be used to obscure concerning practices such as ghost authorships or to support self-censorship intended to appeal to funders (c.f., Gray & Bishop-Kendzia, 2009). Unfortunately, it remains the case that the more one includes personal-reflexive dimensions in their scholarly writings the higher the risk (in some circles) of it being “read as evidence of problems and weakness that more abstract texts conceal” (DeVault, 1997, p. 222).

In the natural science disciplines, the self-conscious practice of reflexivity in research is far less common than in the social sciences (Kuhn, 1996; Morawski, 2005; Smith, 2005), and with the scientization of qualitative methods these influences can reach into the writing of social scientists and humanities researchers as well. I must admit that over time, I have found myself internally imposing the standards of a distant objectifying academic voice in my scholarly writing, even while I strongly advocate for reflexivity in the research process and endorse the use of personal-reflexive voice. This leads me to conclude that individual experiences with self-representation of academic voice are embedded within broader systems of writing and representation, with disciplinary traditions and norms acting as powerful influences that can take precedence over the active recognition of epistemology. It is likely (but not inevitable) that the positivist strands of the human/social science disciplines will continue to implicitly encourage a distant authoritative academic voice in order to maintain the perceived scientific legitimacy of ideas. However, thanks to increasing engagement with qualitative work across disciplines, the potential for epistemological contestation can serve to produce a richer discourse and understanding of social phenomena.

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