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Abstract

In this paper, I propose redefining transcription as a significant process within qualitative research, and as more deserving of attention and of transparency in reporting. Although interviewing has become one of the most frequently used methods of qualitative data collection, when summarizing the methodology adopted in their studies, researchers are still not likely to describe either the transcription process itself or the decision-making process that led up to it. One of the problems with transcription is that it is frequently addressed separately from the broader philosophical, ideological or epistemological contexts of a study, and dealt with as a minor independent logistics issue, and its resolution reduced to its mechanics or its physical completion. In this article, I highlight the significance of decisions made about transcription as illustrated by an account of two contrasting experiences. I explore the choices made related to who undertakes the process and how it is completed as based on theoretical underpinnings. These decisions, as illustrated in the examples, reflect views on what is to be known and what is considered to be the data, and will, ultimately, determine the limitations or the possibilities for analysis and interpretation.

Keywords

Transcription Significance, Transcription Quality, Transcription Decisions, Transcribing Challenges, Transcribing as Analysis, Qualitative Interview, Qualitative Data, Data Quality, Qualitative Methodology

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The Underreported Significance of Transcription Decisions: Perspectives Gained from Two Different Vantage Points

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In this paper, I propose redefining transcription as a significant process within qualitative research, and as more deserving of attention and of transparency in reporting. Although interviewing has become one of the most frequently used methods of qualitative data collection, when summarizing the methodology adopted in their studies, researchers are still not likely to describe either the transcription process itself or the decision-making process that led up to it. One of the problems with transcription is that it is frequently addressed separately from the broader philosophical, ideological or epistemological contexts of a study, and dealt with as a minor independent logistics issue, and its resolution reduced to its mechanics or its physical completion. In this article, I highlight the significance of decisions made about transcription as illustrated by an account of two contrasting experiences. I explore the choices made related to who undertakes the process and how it is completed as based on theoretical underpinnings. These decisions, as illustrated in the examples, reflect views on what is to be known and what is considered to be the data, and will, ultimately, determine the limitations or the possibilities for analysis and interpretation. *Keywords: Transcription Significance, Transcription Quality, Transcription Decisions, Transcribing Challenges, Transcribing as Analysis, Qualitative Interview, Qualitative Data, Data Quality, Qualitative Methodology*

In its most basic sense, transcription has been defined as "the rendering of recorded talk into a standard written form" (Edwards, 2006, p. 304), thus, transcription and interviewing are closely connected. Since its introduction at the beginning of the 20th century, the use of the qualitative interview as a method of collecting data in the social sciences has increased dramatically—so much so that nowadays it hardly requires justification; in other words, it has become naturalized (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 277). Because interviewing has turned into the most widely used method of qualitative data collection (Hawkins, 2018), it would seem reasonable to assume that decisions about transcription would have also become some of the most common issues qualitative researchers deal with in the initial stages of study design. In the last few decades, a gradual increase in attention to transcription is noticeable but has appeared mostly in specialized methodology publications as a methodological aside and not as an integral part of the qualitative reflexivity process within study reports (Bird, 2005; Cannon, 2017; Hammersley, 2010; Johnson, 2011; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Matheson, 2007). To date, when summarizing the methodology adopted in their studies, researchers are still not likely to describe either the decision-making process that led up to it or the transcription process itself. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the significance of those decisions made concerning what may be one of the most underappreciated of processes in qualitative research. First, I will illustrate the importance of decision-making through an account of my own experience with transcription in two studies in which my role was quite different. Next, I will offer an overview of the main types of challenges presented by transcription. Then, I will explore the philosophical and strategical importance of the decisions made before transcribing and propose that transcription be redefined as an integral part of qualitative inquiry. A brief discussion of new opportunities opening up for transcription will follow. Finally, I will conclude with a reflection and position statement.

Author Contextualization: Two Contrasting Experiences with Transcription

The description of two quite disparate experiences I had with transcription will serve as illustration of the issues I discuss below in the paper. My first relevant experience was as a research assistant when I was tasked with revising hundreds of pages of transcripts with hardly any information on the nature and purpose of the study, and without the benefit of access to the original audio recordings. My understanding was that, after the transcriptions were completed, the recordings were erased. As an inexperienced graduate research assistant, I gladly accepted the task without asking too many questions. My role was that of copyeditor of the textual rendering of over two dozen interviews, 26 to be precise, with as many different participants—faculty members discussing their early experiences in academia. As I waded through the over 300 pages, representing hours of interviews, it soon became evident that what I was reading was the result of the combined work of several transcribers, with differing levels of skill and a wide-ranging set of criteria. These seemed to have been done by different graduate assistants over the course of several semesters. Each person had completed a small number of transcriptions which varied from just one to four. The transition from one transcriber to the next was marked by abrupt changes in style, in the amount of detail, and in the quality and readability of the text. While most transcribers chose to only record words, others included innumerable comments and minute descriptions of environmental noises, non-verbal sounds—such as coughing—and other details interspersed throughout the text. While some identified the interlocutors by their first names or the corresponding initials, others used last names, and yet another chose to use “male 1” and “male 2” as identifiers.

Some of the most impactful variations were those that related to punctuation. While one transcriber used impeccable standard punctuation to organize the dialogue with clear sentence structure, another transcriber rendered each participant’s turns as strings of words with no punctuation marks at all. A majority of the transcriptions had sparse punctuation, using only some commas and periods. In these cases, important punctuation was missing, for instance, quotation marks to indicate the beginning and end of direct quotes of words spoken originally in other contexts—which needed then to be reconstructed through verbal contextual cues alone. So, my job ranged from light proofreading to major reimagining of the interactions, as reflected in an email I sent to the researcher at the time with an update of my progress:

> Just to let you know, I am just about done with half the interviews (13 of 26). As you know, *they vary a lot as to how much cleaning up or reconstructing each one needs*. Hopefully, the data will be quite usable once I'm done. (Author – Personal communication - Italics added)

Some of the challenges originated in the audio recordings. Most transcripts started once the interview was already in progress, so the context, the introduction to the topics to be discussed, and the first questions were missing. The quality of the recording was an issue in several interviews whose transcripts were introduced with a parenthetical comment about background noise and the resulting problems. For instance, in one such case the transcriber noted that the setting seemed be an outdoor café. The process, then, consisted in reconstructing the original dialogue so that it made sense, using my background in the field of study for proper names of authors and titles as well as specific concepts, and context clues for the most plausible intended common words that had been misheard and replaced by similar sounding words or phrases. Some of these cases provided moments of comic relief, within my general sense of frustration generated by the nature of the task. For instance, the phrase, "alienated by Nicole," seemed like an improbable change of topic within the context of a participant's discussion of early experiences adapting to work at a university in a northern US state. After a few minutes of re-reading the whole exchange, it was clear that the solution to the mystery was in its simplest explanation: the intended phrase must have been "alienated by the cold."

In contrast, in the second case, I experienced personally the significance of being involved at every point of the research process. This happened the following year, when I launched my first research study also as a graduate student. The fact that I designed the study, conducted the interviews, transcribed them and analyzed the data (instead of delegating any of these processes) would end up mattering more than I understood at the time. The study explored the experiences of a group of women with their children's schools just after migrating to the US (Cibils, 2017). During the course of two years, I interviewed all participants individually three times in their homes for about 90 minutes. I carried out the interviews in Spanish and transcribed them myself. I took the original Spanish interviews to be the data and only translated the excerpts I used to illustrate the themes in the analysis.

At every step, I tapped into my educational background as well as my personal and professional experience. I hold an undergraduate degree in English-Spanish Literary and Scientific Translation—which included two annual Phonetics courses and four Phonology Labs—and graduate degrees in Spanish Language and Literature, and in Bilingual Education/TESOL. Early on in my career, I worked several years as a translator of non-fiction books from English to Spanish and, years later, occasionally as an interpreter. Later on, I became a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), as well as of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL), all at the college level. Currently I live in the Southwest of the US—specifically in New Mexico, which is officially a bilingual state—and teach in a Bilingual Education/TESOL program. As I was raised bilingually in a Spanish-speaking country and focused on deepening my understanding of both English and Spanish languages and literatures for much of my education, interacting and working in both languages has always been part of my daily life.

As an eager novice researcher, during the interview process, I listened intently for the need to ask follow-up questions. As I had developed semi-structured interview questions to be closely aligned to the purpose of the study, I was intensely aware of and tuned into the nuances of the participants' responses that could prove to be significant. During the first interview with one of the participants, I noticed a moment when there was a marked change in tone of voice; at a certain point in the account, the participant's voice suddenly became much louder in clear contrast to the rest. In a different instance, during an interview with another participant, again I noticed an abrupt change in tone of voice (Cibils, 2017). But in this case, the shift was from loud and confident speech to an almost inaudible whisper. And this was taking place in her own home, where there was no one else but us. In both cases, I made a note of these variations in tone of voice and reflected on them in the field notes I audio recorded on the drive back home.

While I transcribed the interviews—which I did soon after each session—I made notes of these features in the participants' speech and included them in parenthetical comments on the transcripts. At the same time, I jotted down ideas that came to mind for the analysis. During this process, I noticed that the variations in tone of voice seemed to follow a pattern. There were parallels between the interviews with different participants. Later, when I worked on coding the text for different themes, I found that the sections of the transcripts with parenthetical notes on tone of voice were also grouped together. When looking closer into the thematic analysis, each occasion when the participants' voice became louder and sterner coincided with a moment in their narrative when they were quoting or paraphrasing the words of a person in authority. This became important as it supported my analysis of one of the threads of narratives and counter narratives that I had begun to distinguish in the participants' accounts. This feature was quite noticeable in the interviews with four out of the seven participants.

Similarly, I found that the moments when the participants' voices shifted from a loud and assertive tone to a whisper paralleled the accounts of incidents that involved taboo topics or situations of danger—such as an instance of naming racism in their experience or of helping survivors of domestic violence to seek assistance (Cibils, 2017). I marked this in the text of the transcription in between brackets as "lowering voice" and "lowers voice to almost a whisper. . . *the unspeakable*" (italics added). In either case, the whispering could not be explained by any danger in the interview situation itself, as there was no one anywhere near who could have overheard our conversation. Little did I know what significance these prosodic elements, the variations in volume and tone of voice, would end up having. Both my field notes and the parenthetical comments in the transcription turned out to be the first stages in the analysis, as these observations would later help me develop and support some of the major themes of the study.

As I was completely immersed in the purpose of the study, conducting the interviews gave me the opportunity to perceive nuances in how the participants told their stories and concentrate on any details that might become significant. Further, doing the transcriptions gave me another chance to listen back more carefully to those sections in each of the interviews, and confirm some of my first impressions. The process of transcribing also allowed me to reflect on my style of interviewing, and to think of possible follow-up questions for the next round of interviews. The contrast between these two experiences points to the significance of decisions about transcription made at the outset of a study. It is to be noted how being involved in the transcription offers researchers an ideal space to more fully familiarize themselves with and immerse themselves in the data.

The Least Glamorous of Qualitative Research Processes: Transcription and its Challenges

The negative aspects of transcription are hard to miss when reading about interview methodology. Transcribing has often been rendered a nuisance that should either be avoided altogether or that needs to be dealt with in special ways in order to neutralize its noxious qualities. The emphasis is often on its time-consuming nature and on its cost. In a book dedicated exclusively to qualitative interviewing, for instance, one of the few mentions of transcription appears in a section on e-interviewing in which one of the advantages of this method of data collection was described as "obviating the need for transcription, saving time and resources" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 49). Given the portrayal of the practical aspects of transcription in such a negative light, it is not surprising that some authors have gone as far as to question the need or the benefits of using electronic devices in qualitative interviewing. For instance, one argument posed against audio recording interviews is that researchers may become generally less engaged or observant during the interaction because of their reliance on the access and apparent fidelity provided by a recording (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 70). Similarly, in a specialized work on qualitative case studies the author argued that "getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, it is what they mean that is important" (Stake, 1995, p. 66). Instead, the interviewer should listen, take down some notes, ask for clarification, and reconstruct the main points of the responses soon after the interview takes place.

There is no denying the time required or the difficulty involved in completing a transcription. In Riessman's (2008) words, it "is never easy or straightforward (it is also time consuming, requiring three to four hours for every hour of interview)" (p. 29). Thus, understandably, researchers have called for the need to share any "innovative ways to make lengthy and physically taxing research tasks easier" when developed (Matheson, 2007, p. 558). But the issues related to transcription go beyond that of a mere mechanical or technical task to be completed and dealt with as just another practical matter (Riessman, 2008, p. 29; Roulston, 2010, p. 105). Besides those most obvious challenges related to the physical burden, there are other types of issues that arise in the process of transcribing related to accuracy. The challenges here have to do with the quality of the textual rendering of conversation. In his typology of challenges, Poland (1995) refers to possible "alterations of the data" and classifies these into deliberate, accidental and unavoidable (pp. 296-297). Within the accidental alterations, Poland recognizes four types of problems: omissions; poor punctuation with resulting changes in sentence structure and meaning; misunderstandings of words or phrases and replacing them with similar sounding ones; and failing to notice and note in the text instances of mimicking, paraphrasing or quotation of self or others (pp. 297-298). As described above, in my first experience with transcription I witnessed the impact of these alterations. If pervasive, these may compromise the integrity of the data and, ultimately, in a domino effect, weaken all subsequent stages in a study. It is important to note here that within the fields of discourse analysis and conversation analysis, clear and detailed conventions have been developed for transcription which have been adopted by researchers in other fields of qualitative research to avoid some of the possible pitfalls (Edwards, 2003; Roulston, 2010).

On another plane, some authors have focused on the inadequacy of written text in the verbatim transcription of interviews to represent the richness and non-linear complexity of human interaction (Benozzo, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013). Riessman (2008) eloquently describes one instance of this process of transformation that illustrates some of these limitations:

> From the taped conversation, I constructed a written record that, like all transcripts, straddles a border between speech and writing. I transformed a complex verbal exchange into an object that would serve as a representation—my imitation on a two-dimensional page of what had been said between us. (p. 29)

In describing the resulting types of loss, Riessman points to distinctive features of a participant's voice and communication style which go hand in hand with a person's identity that will not be reflected in the written representation, as the "linguistic markers of her social position disappear and the particular cadence of her speech is flattened" (p. 29). Similarly, Poland (1995) refers to aspects of the "interview context" and "non-verbal communication" which are missed in a textual rendering (p. 292). This leads him to question the description of any transcription of an interview as "verbatim," as he warns researchers against equating the full experience of the interview with the transcribed text or even with the recording (p. 291).

Finally, decisions made with respect to transcription, often viewed as mere methodological choices based on disciplinary preferences or tradition, have more profound sometimes unacknowledged ethical underpinnings. The questions raised may not always have straightforward answers and may be bewildering to both novice and experienced researchers (Roulston, 2010). For instance, the stances on the question of whether or not to "polish" or "clean up" a participant's expressions may vary according to the context and with what lens they are examined; different ethical and discipline-specific consideration may lead to opposite views. On the one hand, this kind of reworking of the text may be seen as a necessity and explained as a manifestation of respect for the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). While, on the other hand, aiming for the transcript to reflect as closely as possible the actual conversation could be considered a matter of accuracy, within the measure of trustworthiness of the research process, or may derive from a specific understanding of what details need to be considered part of the data (Poland, 1995).

As an illustration of the first stance, Marshall and Rossman (2016) refer to the researchers' responsibility towards participants and its manifestation in "how we demonstrate respect for them in transposing their spoken words into text" (p. 121). The authors present this issue as a decision to be made in answering the following questions:

> Thus, in transcribing, what stance will the researcher take on "cleaning up" words, sentences, and phrases? Is it ethical to represent our interview partners who have spoken to us in incomplete sentences or used incorrect grammar *exactly* that way? Or are we doing them a disservice in presenting their imperfect [sic] speech to the world in dissertations or articles? (pp. 212-213, italics in the original)

They seem to answer this question for the readers by offering as a model the work of a researcher who "'cleaned up' some of the utterances, so as to protect the personal dignity of participants, and took the liberty of altering original phrasing when such considerations arose" (p. 212). However, from a descriptive approach to language, in contrast to a prescriptive one (Lyons, 1968), the opposite stance may be embraced, with a different ethical explanation. It may be argued that standards of language are arbitrary and reflect larger social structures and resulting power dynamics by which certain social or regional variations of language are considered more valuable than others, are adopted as the norm, and held up as the standard of correctness (Bourdieu, 1991). "Cleaning up" a person's language would imply unquestioned acceptance of those standards, and would render the original expressions invalid (Delpit, 2006; McKinney, 2017). Instead, in a descriptive approach to language, combined with an anti-deficit perspective, all utterances would be taken into account, viewed as worthy of respect, and considered as instances of language variations currently in use—or even of interlanguage, in the case of second or additional language learners (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 44). Thus opposite decisions might be reached for ethical reasons, because they are informed by differing language ideologies or views on language in relation to societal power dynamics. Transcribing always involves a process of selection, choosing what to include and what to leave out, whether this is done knowingly or haphazardly.

Invisible Yet Important Decisions

At different stages of the research study, a myriad of decisions associated with the process of transcribing need to be made but these are hardly ever spelled out in much detail. Each one of these decisions is significant and "tells a story" (Roberts, 1997). Some are related to "who," others to "how," and sometimes even to "if." A list of just a few of the many questions that need to be addressed gives a sense of the different types of issues involved. How will the interview data be recorded? Will there be an electronic audio recording or video recording, or will there only be note-taking? Will the transcription be done by a person or will it be taken care of by software? If it is to be carried out by a person, who will be chosen to do it? Will the transcriber be the same person who conducts the interviews, and the same person or part of a team who carries out the analysis? Or will transcription be outsourced to a transcribing service provider, or assigned to a student research assistant? Will it be completed by one or several people? Besides assuming this role, how else will the transcriber or transcribers be involved in the research? Will they be closely associated with the study, or will they be assigned the transcription as an isolated task? How do the transcribers position themselves in relation to the participants whose words are being transcribed? How familiar are they with the purpose of the study? And what assumptions do they bring to it? What background does the transcriber or do the transcribers have in language studies or in communication studies or in other disciplines that may prepare them for carrying out this process? Are they prepared to listen for subtleties in the interviewees' responses? Will they adopt any existing set of conventions, if so which? How detailed will the transcription be? What if anything besides the words will be reflected in the transcripts? In other words, what will be considered the data? As discussed above, should the actual phrasing used by the participants be left intact or should it sometimes be tweaked or "polished" in the transcription? (For other sets of questions see Green, Franquiz, & Dixon, 1997; Hammersley, 2010; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

One of the problems with transcription is that it is frequently addressed separately from the broader philosophical, ideological, or epistemological contexts of a study, dealt with as a minor independent logistics issue, and its resolution reduced to its mechanics or its physical completion. But the level of detail required and the focus of the transcription are closely connected to and should be dependent on other aspects of the study. As is true with every other methodological choice in qualitative research, these decisions render the best results when made in alignment with the purpose of study and the epistemological assumptions (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). Further, the researcher's disciplinary focus, her specific interests, and the depth of her curiosity will also have significant weight on these decisions. As Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) remind us, "Qualitative researchers commonly speak of the importance of the individual researcher's skills and aptitudes. The researcher—rather than the survey, the questionnaire, or the census tape—is the 'instrument.'" (p. 819). So this holds true with transcription. The choices made about each aspect of it will depend, at least in part, on the researcher's background and experience. Ultimately, these decisions are influenced by our epistemological intent, which defines what knowledge is constructed and how knowledge is formed. The choices made as to what, how, and how much to convey in a transcription of what is recorded in an interview are based on theoretical understandings of what is to be known and what is considered to be the data, and will, ultimately, determine the limitations or the possibilities for analysis and interpretation (Bird, 2005; Roulston, 2016; Tilley, 2003). This was best expressed by Green et al. (1997) in these terms: "a transcript is shaped by and, in turn, shapes what can be known" (p. 174).

Rethinking Transcription as a Significant Qualitative Research Process

Transcription, then, needs to be redefined as a significant process within qualitative research. Thus, it should be reimagined in relation to the same criteria that guide qualitative inquiry in general. Qualitative researchers have discussed and developed alternative perspectives on quality that move away from the early approach that imposed on all research the positivistic standards governing quantitative research, only slightly modified. In contrast to the consensus existing over these criteria used to evaluate quantitative research, there is not one homogeneous, unambiguous, cut-and-dried checklist adopted unanimously to determine what makes a good qualitative study. Instead, myriads of concepts exist to describe the quality of qualitative inquiry. However, there are certain criteria that appear as a constant;

among them, contextualization and trustworthiness top the list (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Poland, 1995; Tracy, 2010). In turn, among the factors that contribute to trustworthiness and credibility of a study, rich data, thick description and reflexivity distinctly stand out as desirable characteristics in strong qualitative research (Tracy, 2010).

Attention to detail may well be the signature characteristic of a good qualitative study. As qualitative inquiry in its various genres originally derived many of its tools from anthropology and, specifically, from ethnography, quoting Geertz (1973) and his use of the term “thick description” is almost a rite of passage for any novice qualitative researcher. For instance, in a qualitative case study, it is not necessarily better to be brief. Showing all the possible explanations, and different facets, even contradictions and tensions is considered good practice. Rather than avoiding ambiguity, the goal is to explore as many possible explanations as possible, and to do so in great depth (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238). Level of detail and contextualization, then, should matter as much in transcription as they do in interviews. In reporting a study, it is considered a questionable practice to present short decontextualized snippets of participants’ responses without including the question, as a sense of the whole interaction and the role of the interviewer in it would then be missing. Just as contextualization of the responses of an interviewee is important for transparency of the research process (Roulston, 2010), so are the details of how a transcription was generated.

Discussing the adoption of a specific set of conversational analysis transcribing conventions in a study, Roulston (2011) illustrates how choices about the different levels of detail required go hand in hand with the focus of the study:

> These conventions provide additional information concerning how talk is produced—including pitch, re-starts, elongations, pauses, gaps and overlaps in talk. Through analysis of these features of talk, additional insight into how speakers make sense of one another’s talk may be gained. For example, speakers’ delays in providing an answer may indicate that the response is “dispreferred,” or one that is routinely avoided. For those excerpts in which the analytic focus concerns the substantive topic of the talk, these features of talk are omitted from transcriptions. (p. 350)

In my study, transcribing gave me the opportunity to revisit the moment of each interview, to conjure up the details of the interaction as it happened, and vividly re-experience both my own thoughts and feelings at the time of the interviews, as well as my awareness of the participants’ engagement in the process, and the glimpses I got of what made them tick. It allowed me to recollect the texture of the exchange, visualize the context, and re-listen to the emphasis in the participants’ words when expressing a heart-felt conviction, as well as their significant pauses, silences and hesitations. Adopting the role of the transcriber, reliving each interview—that process of creating dialogue together with each participant—allowed me to delve deeper into the possibilities of understanding the perspectives of the participants. It gave me the chance to keep the views they had shared with me alive and more immediately present throughout the process of analysis. Just as the role of the interviewer in co-creating the interaction in a commitment to a shared purpose is not that of a mere data collector, the role of the transcriber involves much more than accurate typing. As my two contrasting experiences illustrate, it is crucial for the researcher who plans to use interviewing to design this stage of the study with a clear understanding of the factors that will inform these decisions, rather than leave them to chance.

Some Alternatives to Traditional Transcription Practices: Challenges as Opportunities

Views on transcription reflect larger debates within the changing landscape of qualitative research, and within the context of our ever-changing modes of living and meaning-making. For some time now, qualitative researchers have sought alternative takes on transcription that would make up for its perceived inadequacies. One of the first approaches within the creative exploration of different types of representations of qualitative data has adopted the form of poetic transcriptions (Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1994; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). Instead of verbatim transcriptions, qualitative researchers who embrace this approach seek a nuanced way to convey the meanings gathered in interviews, through poetry. Researchers who adopt poetic transcription do so with an awareness that "different mediums allow us to see and to say different things about those lives" (Glesne, 1997, p. 219). Through poems based on the words of the research participants, they explore different levels of meaning while they redefine data representation and analysis in their creative experimentation with form. Poetic transcription also allows the researcher deeper levels of reflexivity to "re-present, query, and interpret the research process/method," as well as to "highlight the difficulties of identity in the field, conducting interviews, and being reflexive and conscious as well as the joy and confusion in connecting to those we study" by integrating "the scientist and the poet" (Faulkner, 2005, p. 941).

In recent times, the process of transcription has undergone transformations similar to those experienced in our daily life, opening up new options. With the explosion of technological possibilities, and with them becoming more broadly accessible, the limits of data collection and transcription are being extended daily. Within the voice-to-written-text concept of transcription, an alternative to the method of listening and typing appeared when voice recognition software was developed. Since its advent, the variety of possibilities have become more and more sophisticated, and new questions have arisen (Johnson, 2011; Matheson, 2007). Further, researchers have started incorporating other modes of expressing meaning as options for transcripts, through multimodality and hypermodality, with the combination of sound and image, with an emphasis on data visualization developed specifically for qualitative research different from that typically used for quantitative data (Cannon, 2017; Chandler, Anstey, & Ross, 2015; Jocius, 2013, 2017). Adopting a philosophical perspective, Cannon (2017) recently explored "transcription as operating in the liminal" (p. 1), in the spaces in between. The author writes about her experience of recognizing the inadequacy of transcription to communicate completely the interaction with her interviewee and situates her inquiry within the context of "the crisis of representation" (p. 2). The author eloquently expresses her process of realization in terms reminiscent of Riessman's: "As I typed her transcript, I was struck by its flatness, my striving toward some perfect form, trying to do *it* right. No matter the form, it could not represent her" (p. 2, italics in the original). Cannon resorts to a search for creative ways of representing data in all its complexity, including musical, poetic, and visual forms of representation. The author recognizes that "this (re)search was always and is still between art and science, truth and fiction, researcher and friend, and and and" (p. 2). The opportunities for conveying meaning created through the use of multimodal texts are expressed eloquently by Hull and Nelson (2005) in these terms, "The point is that images, written text, music, and so on each respectively impart certain kinds of meanings more easily and naturally than others" (p. 229). We can only imagine an outburst of creativity in different directions. Certainly, each innovation will also bring with it new types of quandaries.

Conclusion

Given the centrality that interviewing has gained in the arena of data collection methods, more attention to the process of transcription and more transparency about it are warranted. The decisions made about if and how to transcribe data gathered from interactions with participants in qualitative inquiry have more impact on the quality of a study than may often be attributed to them. The quality of the data is highly dependent on the process of transcription and its tight coherence with the rest of the study. If transcription is to be carried out by software, by a researcher or a research assistant is a major decision. When transcription is carried out by a human transcriber, it matters what training or background that person brings to the process, as well as how involved they are in the whole study. Methodology writings have focused on how what works for one researcher may not work for another, as the emphasis of our work and our curiosity are often guided by our disciplinary biases or interests (Stake, 1995, p. 57). Our experience in different fields of study will also have made our insight into certain aspects of communication more acute than for others. Finally, as is true of all methodological decisions, the purpose of the study needs to determine both the type of transcription to be done, as well as the level of detail required.

We need to acknowledge the messiness of qualitative research, the complexity of representation, the multiplicity of meaning, and the limitations of our means to recreate the whole. However, within the messiness and limitations, a keen ear and attention to the relations between levels of analysis are of paramount importance. In a traditional verbal textual transcription, we are imposing a linear organization to a complex untamable and elusive relationship, which is situated in place and time and which cannot be captured in all its integrity. The moment of communication passes; when we record it, only a small portion of that interaction is preserved. If we were part of that interaction, we can humbly hope that we can relive that moment. However limited, this interaction happened, and it mattered. There was a commitment on both parts to construct knowledge together and, at a specific moment in the interaction, the interviewee shared her truth in many more ways than one. She not only chose her words carefully, and insisted on recounting some events on different sessions, with more and more detail, but she used different tones of voice in different segments of her responses.

As discussed above, the challenges that face transcription have different origins and vary in nature. The issues that researchers have encountered and have explored in the literature are practical/physical, methodological, and philosophical/epistemological. For decades, the practical difficulties of the actual activity of listening to audio and typing have brought about discussions of how to lessen the burden of the physically taxing task. The second set of conundrums have to do with questions of accuracy and methodological rigor. Within this debate, the advent of voice recognition software offered a solution, but added some new questions with this new instance of mediation. And, the third category of challenges focuses on philosophical, existential, epistemological and ethical quandaries. Within the philosophical questions, there is the matter of voice, of the (im)possibility of representation, and also the mediated aspect of data transcription. New conceptions of meaning-making as multimodal, and as including more than just words now come into play.

The most compelling questions around transcription are anything but new. The ultimate questions center on the possibilities of knowing, the ways of knowing and what constitutes knowledge. They all point to the trustworthiness of our methods: whether our transcripts do justice to the responses of our conversation partners, and ultimately, to them as whole persons. When we develop a transcript, we are representing a lived interaction, which took place in a specific time and space, through a unidimensional linear text, with words organized into paragraphs, through punctuation marks. Similarly, our interpretations of these words are recreations, which are not offered as unequivocal universal truths, but as some of the possible understandings of people's worlds, that we interpret within the context of larger bodies of work and larger socio-political realities. These are ways of knowing; limited as they may be, they are strategies that we have used for understanding. And there is also the actual lived interaction, the experience of communicating with a fellow human being, with whom we may share some interests and we may differ in other profound ways. Ultimately, it becomes a matter of trust in human relations, in our human interactions at the basis of our research, in the possibility of learning with and from each other.

Qualitative interview is conversation, but it is more than conversation. If qualitative interview and its sister method of transcription are to be placed above doubt, we, the researchers must acknowledge its messiness. Detailed description of the decisions that are made and their rationale need to appear in our research reports: the choice of language, of persons, machines or software involved; the limitations and the opportunities that each choice offers; what the researcher has prioritized and why; both the misgivings and the certainties involved. Some of the specific choices that need to be made carefully at the outset, taking into consideration the purpose of the study, include the type of transcription conventions used, and the rationale for the selected level and type of detail. Further, at all stages, it is important to take notes of the rationale for these decisions, as well as of any change in direction along the way. Reflexivity memos become invaluable sources for writing up reports with thick description of these processes. Similarly, recognizing the significance of the role of the transcribers requires their inclusion as part of the research team, which should involve a shared understanding of the purpose of the study, as well as of the practical approaches to ensure consistency in transcription criteria and conventions. Acknowledging early on the significance of each and every aspect of the qualitative research process will ultimately contribute to enhancing the quality of the data and of the reporting of a study.

Building trust requires transparency of the processes, as what is considered a weakness from a positivistic point of view—such as subjectivity, bias, and variability—has been embraced as a strength in qualitative research. This remains true, as long as choices are open to examination, the steps in decision-making and action are described thickly, in detail, and are named within the ongoing processes of a qualitative researcher's positionality, reflexivity, and contextualization. More detailed descriptions of the whole process of transcription—acknowledging the decisions made, the criteria applied, the difficulties encountered, as well as the moments of clarity—will contribute to a richer exchange of experiences and insights within the community of qualitative researchers. Further, greater transparency will especially benefit graduate students and novice researchers who are likely to encounter and to have to work through similar situations in the initial stages of their research.

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