Aesthetics, verisimilitude and user-engagement: reporting findings through fictional accounts in qualitative inquiry

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Abstract

This article explores the use of fiction as a mode of representing data in social research. I show that three of the key drivers for fictionalising research accounts relate to the ambitions of aesthetic engagement, verisimilitude and user-engagement. I look at the different ways that authors have attempted to achieve these ambitions and the methodological tensions that arise from them. I show that contemporary evaluative criteria in qualitative inquiry helps us to see that fictional reporting is an important tool for researchers in creating more affective writing. However, there are divergences in how researchers conceive of and use fictional accounts, which highlight the importance of continued debate about the methodological practices of its use. In order to contribute to these debates I point to three areas that need particular consideration for researchers working in this area: (1) the structures of academic publishing and their embodiment in university audit regimes; (2) the absence of engagement with alternative forms of writing in academic professional development and training; and (3) the substantial ethical dilemmas in the use of fictional accounts.

Keywords: Fiction, user-engagement, verisimilitude, research impact, ethics, qualitative evaluative criteria, affect

Introduction

> *"…sometimes I imagine the conventional academic essay as an overfurnished baroque drawing room – designed to impress but hermetically sealed from the brute realities of the outside world"* (Jackson 2017: 64)

> *"…it is clear that we are not going to be able to distinguish fictional narratives from other kinds of narratives merely…in terms of what is 'made up', 'invented', or 'a product of the imagination'….all narration involves making or structuring and it would be hard to deny a prominent role for the imagination in the narratives of science, history or philosophy"* (Lamarque 1990: 132).

> *"Where once we were preoccupied with scientific rigor, now we feel liberated to use our poetic imagination and literary license"* (Bochner 2017: 364)

The quotations above reflect the themes that underlie the turn to fiction in social research: the esoteric and alienating character of academic writing; the difficulties of using 'truth' as a tool to distinguish fiction from non-fiction; and the importance of 'poetic' literary forms. In this article I look at how the debates around these issues are articulated by researchers who use fiction as a medium for reporting their findings, and at the methodological and practical issues that arise from its use. To be clear, my interest is with the production of fiction as a

means of *reporting* data, rather than the analysis of fiction writing as a social practice (Parkhurst et al., 1988), analysing existing fiction as a form of social commentary (Hopper, 1998; Misztal, 2016; Ruggiero, 2003), or the use of existing fiction as a resource to teaching in the social sciences (Becker, 2007; Coser, 1963; Jones, 1975; Laz, 1996; Ruggiero, 2003).

Fiction as a practice of writing in research has a long history in ethnographic inquiry (Fassin, 2014; Narayan, 1999), a slightly less well established one in sociology (Watson, 2016) and psychology (Douglas and Carless, 2018), and an emerging one in other areas such as geography (Jacobson and Larsen, 2014; Macdonald, 2014; Peterle, 2018), education (Clough, 2002), organisation studies (Rhodes, 2015) and the health sciences (Koch, 1998). While it may be growing in popularity, using fiction for dissemination remains a niche area, in large part because of the durability of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction and the idea that social *science* deals with 'fact' and not 'fiction'. This distinction is strongly embedded as a binary division in our production and consumption of cultural products such as books and films, and it relates to other distinctions such as 'true/not true' or 'real/invented'.

Nonetheless, the differentiation between accounts that report on events or practices that are real and that *did* happen (non-fiction) and those that *did not* and are *inventions* of an imagination (fiction) is fragile (Byler and Iverson, 2012). The fragility has been recognised in qualitative research communities from at least the 1980s in what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) refer to as the 'fourth moment' of qualitative inquiry, characterised by a 'crisis of representation' that emerged from the challenge to realist notions of research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This challenge - which takes form in diverse approaches including queer theory (Plummer, 2005); auto-ethnography (Jones et al., 2016); alternative ethnography (Bochner, 2000); ethnographic fiction (Inckle, 2010); critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017); indigenous methods (Denzin et al., 2008); feminism (Lykke, 2010); myriad postmodern resistance movements (Sandoval, 2000); non-representational theory and methodology (Vannini, 2015); and performative methodologies (Dirksmeier and Hellbrecht, 2008; Richardson, 2015) - involves presenting theoretical and methodological re-conceptualisations of positivistic notions of 'truth' and 'representation'. The history of these debates is well-told elsewhere and I won't review them here, nor will I discuss the relation between the various qualitative epistemologies and what are often roughly labelled as 'positivist' approaches. The important point for this discussion is that the debates have led to a variety of experimental forms of writing, including fiction writing, that have a commitment to different forms of textual representation.

Academics have begun to adapt techniques used in fiction writing for the purposes of conveying the findings of their research. These strategies include: developing characters to exemplify certain social conditions and experiences (Elliott, 2014); using dialogue to juxtapose arguments/positions (Kara, 2013); employing allegory to explore ideas through metaphor (Netolicky, 2016); writing stories to create imagined plot lines that map out particular life experiences (Christensen, 2012) or to reflect on the relationship between the researcher and the research setting/participants (Clough, 2002). This paper is not concerned with the techniques themselves, but with the motivations, implications and possibilities of using them. In pursing this I have deliberately chosen a very conventional style of academic writing. There is an irony in this as a part of the argument I explore concerns the use of

creative and unconventional forms. However, my aim is not to *exemplify* these practices, but to think about their arguments and implications; if there is one thing that an academic style should be good for, it is that.

Verisimilitude and the limitations of academic writing

It is a common starting point in reflections on the uses of fiction in social research to juxtapose engaging and vivid writing in fiction and other creative forms with the more sterile prose of academia. Bensa and Pullin refer to "the unreal impression and tremendous boredom so often felt with anthropological and learned works...," (Bensa and Poullin, cited and translated by Fassin, 2014), while Richardson confesses to the boredom of reading what should have been interesting academic texts (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). Similarly, in the classic 'Writing Culture' collection, Pratt notes that ""Ethnographic writing tends to be surprisingly boring. How, one asks constantly, could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books? What did they have to do to themselves?' (Pratt 1986: 33).

One of the ways that writers phrase this issue is in terms of the lack of emotion in academic work compared to the vivid, personal narratives of fiction writing (Christensen, 2012; Lancione, 2017; Nash, 2004; Richardson, 1993). A part of this emotive deficit relates to the ways that research participants are represented through research. For instance, reflecting on her fictionalised re-presentation of her research into women with eating disorders, Kiesinger (1998) notes that "The dry, clinical and highly analytical nature of these expert accounts fail to convey a sense of how anorexic and bulimic women themselves understand and make sense of their lives and conditions" (128). A similar set of issues is raised by Reilly et al (2018: 5) in their study of the use of poetry in representing women's experiences with breast cancer:

> *"when we examined the codes and excerpts after we completed the analysis, we noticed that the emotional resonance that affected us most deeply was missing. Though our conclusions were rigorously derived […] the themes did not communicate the depth of lived experience, feeling, and self-disclosure that these women had shared"* (Reilly et al., 2018)*.

It is not just the *participants'* lived experience that are stripped through such writing, but also the experiences of researchers (Miller, 1998; Wade, 2009). For instance, Douglas and Carless (2018: 8) give the following reflection on the experience of reading a research report that they had written:

> *"when he read back what he'd written he wasn't pleased. In fact, it was somehow devoid of the life he'd experienced while he was talking with the women—in their homes, the coffee shops, standing in a queue at the post office. Where was the energy? The humour? The spirit of resistance? he asked himself. And where was the feeling?... when he looked at what he'd written about the women and their lives, friendships, dogs, activity, he'd somehow lost something he'd known and felt when talking to the women in Cornwall"* (Douglas and Carless, 2018: 8).

This absence of emotionality and depth is not just an aesthetic deficit, but an ethical issue relating to the adequacy of representation. As Kusserow put it in relation to her research on refugees; 'It seems unethical to dilute the horrors of poverty and AIDS in a slum bus station only through literature reviews, homage to the academy, footnotes and excess verbiage" (Kusserow 2017: 80).

Indeed, the narrative form of academic writing is a strong area of critique in the turn to fiction. Banks notes that research writing "often is disturbingly vacuous, because it lacks the traditional qualities of good storytelling, qualities like plot development" (Banks 1998: 11). There is, as Ingold puts it, a lack of 'word craft' in much academic writing with its "formulaic concoctions of academic prose, weighted down with arcane vocabulary, honorific name-calling, and ever-extending lists of citations" (Ingold 2015: viii). The 'dialect' of academic writing (Waterston and Vesperi, 2011) is seen by many as highly alienating as it relies on linguistic forms that are largely divorced from everyday talk. The historical relation of this writing style to, broadly, 'positivistic' conceptions of science means that even in forms of qualitative work, writing often "construes the author as a neutral, authoritative, and scientific voice" (Ellis and Bochner 1996, p. 19, cited in Rinehart, 1998: 3). This 'neutrality' is embedded in language that avoids use of the first person, makes generalised claims, projects objectivity and certainty, and produces closed answers and emphatic arguments. Academic writing is also characterised by stylistic devices such as organising arguments according to rationalised, numerical lists; frequent use of references to other texts; and a highly technical and often verbose language. In his discussion of the stylistic features of academic prose, Pinker argues that that such practices make academic work difficult to engage with and are 'turning our profession into a laughingstock" (Pinker, 2013: (no page number)). Indeed, Lancione points to the way that the academic language produces a gap between the researcher and the researched: as he puts it "Through academic language, I wasn't able to challenge marginalization, but I was concretely (re)enacting it…People were not able to understand, to join in, to make use of what I was saying and, in the end, a space of encounter was not generated" (2017: 4). In other words, there is a paradox in academic writing which aims to develop innovations and new understanding, but is also extremely conservative and alienating in its form and structures (Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Krizek, 1998).

There is now a strong and sustained reaction to this conservatism (Christensen et al., 2018; Elliott and Culhane, 2016; Pandian and McLean, 2017; Vannini, 2015) that can be found in areas such as arts-based research (Chilton and Leavy, 2014), autoethnograhy (Anderson, 2006; Jones et al., 2016), poetic representation (Richardson, 1993), performance ethnography (Alexander, 2005), creative non-fiction (Caulley, 2008; Perl and Schwartz, 2006), creative analytic process ethnography (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005), new ethnography (Goodall Jr, 2000), narrative research (Netolicky, 2016), and other unnamed esoteric areas of practice (Banks and Banks, 1998; Johnston and Pratt, 2019; Raynor, 2019). Through such work, researchers aim to redress the lack of emotionality and user engagement found in conventional academic work, and to create more vivid research outputs such as music, theatre, poetry and creative writing (Chilton and Leavy, 2014).

Poetry in particular has been used to turn data into more nuanced form, using interview transcripts and other data to generate thought provoking writing. Reflecting on their use of this method in researching women's experience of breast cancer Reilly et al (2018) note that

the poems "inject life, blood, and yearning back into the analysis. These poems allow us to access deeper insights into the landscape of what it means to be a woman navigating breast cancer" (18). These forms of writing can give researchers a way to create engaging work that, as Adams and Homan put it in relation to autoethnography, "…set a scene, tell a story, and create a text that demands attention and participation (Adams & Holman Jones 2008: 375), or, in Kusserow's words "…using the insights of [poetry's] acutely nuanced language and artistic aesthetic to bring a wider array of meanings" (Kusserow 2017: 76). Work such as this is part of what Clifford and Marcus (1986) referred to as 'a turn to poetics', and a commitment to finding new modes of narrative representation (Jacobsen et al., 2016) that can embrace ambiguity as an aesthetic in the telling of stories.

Fiction is a form of writing within this general creative commitment that involves producing invented stories that move beyond data to tell stories. In methodological terms, fiction shares with other creative writing methods the commitment to *verisimilitude* – i.e. to produce text that can 'simulate' the social worlds being researched, "allow readers to imaginatively feel their way into the experiences that are being described by the author" (Denzin, 1997: 12). In the social sciences, verisimilitude is closely related to the idea of empathy in that it facilitates engagement with the lived experiences of research participants: "moves beyond the epistemological question of fidelity to the methodological question as to how one can best create the *appearance* of truth or reality without, however, abandoning the ethical and political demands that even appearances may be judged by" (Jackson 2017: 51). Dadds' (2008) concept of 'empathetic validity' is useful as a way of characterising how empathetic research in general can "transform the emotional dispositions of people towards each other, such that more positive feelings are created between them in the form of greater empathy" (Dadds, 2008: 279). Fictional reporting of data is seen by those who use it as a valuable form of empathetic prose.

In the next section I look at how the commitment to creating verisimilitude through fictional writing has created debate regarding the relationship of fictional accounts to data, truth claims, and research methodology.

Data, truth and representation

Fictional forms of writing may facilitate rich descriptions, but they can also invoke the complaint that they are empirically baseless and simply the invention of a researcher's imagination. However, a central theme in discussions of the analytic work of fiction is to describe them as *representations* of society. This idea relates to the general claim that, as Nisbet notes, the arts are "… interested in throwing light upon reality, and in somehow communicating this light to others" (Nisbet, 1962: 68). Researchers who produce fiction often also describe what they do in these terms, referring to the invented but *authentic* representation of *real* social experience through fiction. As Miller (1998) puts it, these 'invented' stories are 'superordinate research narratives'; distillations of data that take form in fictionalised stories that (re)present the data in a new fictionalised accounts. Drawing on her own experiences as a fiction writer and ethnographer, Christensen (2012) argues that the experiences of the lead character in her fictional account of homelessness in Canada "are representative of those experienced by many homeless women in the Canadian North." Müller (2017: 210) notes that in her fictional story of academics working in higher

education "the narrative explores the very real tension that academics might feel between their social identity and professional identity in the higher education context". As a final example, Krizek (1998) offers the following reflection on the fictional narrative that he wrote as a part of his research dissemination:

> *"all the individual details, characterizations and experiences recounted in my narrative were witnessed by me at some time during my data collection, although the events did not transpire in the precise order in which they are written. The dialogue is a composite of various interactions written to represent the categories, themes, and cultural understandings uncovered in my 'doing' of ethnography" (94).*

The idea underlying these characterisations is that fictional narratives present social experience in a new form: they depict things that do/have happen(ed) and that have been witnessed, as Krizek's account highlights, through a *principled* research process. Wade echoes this idea, noting that "Instead of reporting the research findings in themes or even vignettes, the writer invents a fictional account *truthful to the findings but not necessarily to the original context of research*." (Wade, 2009). Rabbiosi and Vanolo (2017) compare this kind of correspondence to the ways that Weberian Ideal Type's work as generalised descriptions of social phenomena without reference to specific instances. The authors suggest that these ideal types function as metaphors and, like metaphors, are not 'true' in the sense of corresponding to some specific reality, but have analytic value in showing the general character of some feature of the world. Fictional invention, then, can facilitate greater leverage in our understandings of the world, "promising to reveal a more intractable and encompassing form of truth" as Pandian and McLean (2017: 3) put it.

Using fictional accounts to report research leads to questions about the relationship between the practices of fiction writing (in the sense of novels, short stories and so on) and academic social research. Vannini (2015:1) suggests that in embracing the creative turn researchers may become "all but" fiction writers. Indeed, while fictional representation of data may blur disciplinary boundaries, there are important differences between the activities of fiction writing and social research: As Richardson and Pierre put it:

> *Declaring that one's work is fiction is a different rhetorical move than is declaring that one's work is social science. The two genres bring in different audiences and have different impacts on publics and politics – and on how one's 'truth claims' are to be evaluated'. (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005: 961).*

Bochner has noted that "No ontological basis exists for drawing a line between newspaper articles, novels, and sociological research studies" and that "The differences can only be drawn by reference to practical matters and to arbitrary, not empirical, stipulations." (Bochner 2000:269). These 'practical matters' relate to the conventions of practice through which researchers undertake their work. In the social sciences, these conventions are manifest in the enshrined methodological practices that define the various disciplines and paradigms of research work. As Strivers puts it, "The methods an investigator brings to the process, and the interpretations she makes based on them (including the judgement of what counts as a fact), are grounded in the consensual rules of the relevant knowledge community rather than in transcendental standards" (Stivers 1993:410). In other words,

what counts as 'social research' - and evaluations of its quality and worth - are made by members of the research community (Seale, 1999).

There are various examples of evaluative criteria that in qualitative research, and I focus my discussion here on two of the most influential: Richardson and St Pierre (2005) and Tracy (2010). Richardson and St Pierre's criteria are whether a work makes a *substantive contribution to* knowledge (and help the reader experience the world)*;* whether it is *credible*; has *aesthetic merit* (e.g. is it engaging, complex and, ultimately *not boring*); involves *reflexivity* (about the authors and their relation to the people in the story); and has an *impact on the reader* (by motivating them to write or to be involved in research)*.* For Tracy, "high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence".

In insisting on the *credibility* of knowledge, both sets of criteria prioritise research practice and the demonstrable relation between claims and research data. Similarly, they both emphasise the importance of a reflexive relation between author and text, which is equally critical to exploring the nature of fictional claims-making. However, at the same time, the criteria emphasise the importance of writing as a practice of engagement with an audience and the possibilities of more innovative and affective writing. When we compare these criteria with Leavy's (2016) criteria for evaluating fiction-based writing the extent of the overlap between the aims of fictional reportage and general qualitative aims becomes clearer still (See Table 1). Along with an emphasis on the role of fiction as a feature of publicly accessible scholarship (Jones and Leavy, 2014), Leavy's criteria are "resonance, aesthetics, structure, thoroughness, trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and the writer's personal style of writing" (Kalu, 2016: 132).

Table 1: Criteria of Evaluation for Qualitative Research

Richardson and St Pierre (2005)	Tracy (2010)	Leavy (2016)
- Contribution to Knowledge	- Worthy topic - Significant contribution	- Public scholarship
- Credibility	- Credibility - Meaningful coherence	- Trustworthiness
- Aesthetic merit	- Resonance	- Resonance - Aesthetics
- Reflexivity	- Sincerity	- Thoughtfulness
- Impact on reader	- (Resonance)	- Verisimilitude
		- Writer's personal style
	- Ethics	

The aims of creating impactful, resonant, aesthetically pleasing writing is by no means an unfamiliar idea in the qualitative research community. The real controversy, I suggest, lies in the extent to which research claims can be shown to emerge from research practices. As Krizek argues,

> *"creative writing cannot be employed as a methodological shortcut. Only the meticulous application of the methods of fieldwork, including the analysis of the fruits of the fieldwork – notes, transcribed interviews, audiotapes, etc., can direct with any fidelity the recording of the contexts, characters and dialogic content of the cultural setting presented in the report."* (Krizek, 1998)

Similar, Rabbiosi and Vanolo note that:

> *"in producing fictional vignettes, their logics and rationales have to be fully discussed, the balance between the fictional and observed data has to be clearly stated, and the overall result has to be judged in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness, rather that* [sic] *realism or, even more, adherence to a supposed reality."* (Rabbiosi and Vanolo, 2017).

The conventions of academic writing – particularly in dissertations, theses, journal articles, conference papers - promote structures that embed these methodological practices, so that a report/paper/thesis typically starts with a literature review to frame a question, which is followed by an explanation of method, a description of the data and analysis, and a review of how the study contributes to knowledge and society (Strobel, 2006). By far the majority of academic fiction work published in journals is conventional in its format and includes many or most of these 'contextualising elements' (e.g. see Christensen 2012; Breen 2017; Peterle 2018; Reilly et al. 2018). The fiction is used for the specific purposes of verisimilitude in the reporting of data and it is based on principled research, just like any data reportage.

As data remains the basis of fictionalised reporting, researchers are faced with the challenge of whether (and how) to make that data visible. One response is to present the original data alongside the fictionalised narrative, although there are very few examples of this in the literature. One project that adopts this approach is Breen's (2017) work on the life experiences of people with disability. Breen presents extracts of original interview transcripts along with his invented dialogue, so that selections of coded text are shown next to the fictionalised story. However, Breen does not explicitly state a reading of how one relates to the other, leaving it to the reader to discern what the quotations might reveal as an alternate narrative. The data does not 'authenticate' the reading but acts as another (fragmented) narrative that also requires interpretation by the reader to establish its textual relation.

A different, and much more common response involves emphasising the constructed nature of all research artefacts, including data itself, and to present the fictional account without the data on which it is based. For instance, Richardson's (1993) early work in this area presents a play-like rendering of a discussion at an academic conference in which participants debate the relevance of a fictionalised reading as research knowledge. Through the dialogue and her reflections on it Richardson opens up a question about the obsession with the relationship between research texts and the 'original' data they relate to. Richardson problematizes the notion that research data such as recordings of conversation, fieldnotes or transcripts are 'faithful renderings', or are the 'true' or 'correct' account that the researcher needs to privilege. In so doing, Richardson "strips those methodological bogeymen of their power" and "resituates ideas of validity and reliability from "knowing" to "telling" (Richardson, 1993: 704). This approach is strongly present in arts-based methods more broadly, where research accounts are treated as one kind of performance among

many other possible genres. In this view, any text (fictionalised or otherwise) is acted on through an interpretive frame and providing original transcriptions does not necessarily create more certainty about their authenticity as accounts and as a set of claims.

A component of this idea involves emphasising the complexity of relationships that emerges between researchers and research participants, and the fact that formally recorded data is often only a small aspect of that. As Douglas and Carless (2018: 7) put it: "as important as it undoubtedly is to listen, there is more to it than this. It is not just the words captured by our digital recorders that tell the tale [...] our bodies can support and hold the kinds of insights that words cannot readily communicate or encapsulate." The emphasis of the sensorial aspect of data collection – the ways that researchers feel in research settings; the sounds, smells and textures of their environments; the ethereal 'sense' of the setting that researchers try to describe in rough categories like 'comfortable', 'hostile', 'relaxed', 'homely', 'tense' - further shows that data is only one part of the knowledge produced through research.

A very small subsection of work is more radical and adopts structures that are less conventional, playing with the writing in more esoteric ways. Such experimental writing is restricted to outlets that are prepared to publish work that eschews normal academic writing practices, notably the journal Qualitative Inquiry and in books such as Banks and Banks (1998), Christensen et al. (2018), Clough (2002), Pandian and McLean (2017), Vannini (2015). In such work, it is not just *data* that is invisible, but also the very process of analysis. As Macdonald explains in his piece about a Scottish Archaeologist "I do not see narrative and analysis as discrete projects, stories being subject to a detached and instrumental interpretation. Analysis does not always declare itself as such. It can find expression in allegory and be tucked away in the shadows of significant narrative detail" (2014: 478).The rejection of conventional forms of representation and expression that these kinds of practices represent can be seen as a part of a post-realist challenge to neoliberal discourses of knowledge and its technologies of evaluation. They are often part of a critique of the idea that, as Pandian and McLean eloquently put it "Fidelity to the real may consist in acknowledging that it will always exceed the accounts we are able to give it" (Pandian & McLean 2017: 23).

Discussion

Through the discussion so far I have shown that the ideals of aesthetic merit, verisimilitude and user-engagement have been central to the turn to fictional writing, and I illustrated that these are also central to the aims of qualitative inquiry more broadly conceived. Furthermore, the turn to fiction is not a turn against the idea that empirical research should form the basis of knowledge claims, and notions such as 'rigour' and 'reflexivity' remain critical to the judgement of research worth. I illustrated, however, that there are substantial divergences in how, and the extent to which, researchers make visible the relation between research practice, data and fictionalised accounts. This suggests that the question of *whether or not fiction should play a role in research reporting* may be much easier to answer than the question of *how such accounts should be constructed*. It is well beyond this paper to make strong pronouncements on these matters, but it is certainly clear that substantially more analysis around the epistemics and methodology of fictional reportage is critically

important. In the remainder of this paper I aim to contribute to these debates by illustrating three areas that require particular debate in the turn to fiction.

Academic publishing and public engagement

It should be clear that the motives of fictionalised reporting fit well not just with qualitative ideals but with much broader ideas about 'user-engagement' and 'widening participation' that are now normal parts of the academic lexicon and which have their origin in debates about the relationship between academia and the general public (Burawoy, 2005; Katovich, 2017). These agendas have become embedded in regimes of research funding and in academic promotion procedures, where engagement has become a core part of how academic success is judged. Given this, there would seem to be a very important role for fictionalisation as a resource to dissemination. However, there are deep contradictions between this aim and the practices of research dissemination that underpin academic work. While there are of course exceptions, most of the work that uses fictional accounts is published in qualitative journals or in books produced by academic publishers. These tend to be more special interest journals and not the larger journals with a broader (inter)disciplinary readership. Furthermore, of the articles that I have referenced here, nearly all are published in journals that require payment or institutional subscription. There is an increasingly common practice of making individual publications available on institutional websites and on platforms such as academia.edu which undoubtedly helps to increase access. However, the broader point is that fictionalised reporting tends to happen *inside of academia's conventional dissemination routes* and there are serious questions about how much engagement non-academic audiences have with these and how likely they may be to actively track down work where it is not obviously accessible in journals.

One explanation for why this writing appears in journals is because publishing articles is a requirement for academics' career maintenance and development (Bacevic and Muellerleile, 2018; Piwowar et al., 2018). Many journals specify particular writing structures and even conventions of writing, including grammatical preferences, ways of presenting data, the use of particular tenses, person pronouns and so on. Further, there are economic realities which mean that journals are restricted in the length of articles they publish which can pull against the presentation of long narratives or data extracts. All of this means that there are limitations on the extent to which fiction, or even just *experimental* writing can be a part of the work published in mainstream journals.

In short, the academic publishing industries and the ways that publishing has been used as a metric of 'quality' operate in tension with the aims behind the turn to fiction. Such practices may actually disincentivise the production of writing outside of academia and can both privilege conventional writing and marginalise the use of fiction. As others have emphasised (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018), the 'publishing fetish' places emphasis on publication as measurable output rather than on the experience of writing, which pulls against much of the create exploratory ideas embedded in fictional writing. This is perhaps partly what Rhodes refers to when he describes the feeling of being "bullied by audit regimes that try to wring out the passion and romance of though" (Rhodes, 2015: 290).

Ethics and expertise

One of the central problems of fictional reporting relates to the ethics of representation. The methodological issues around transcription have been a long-standing concern to researchers as all of our choices of representation in relation to research participants (what we call them) and how we show what they said and did (stylistic/symbolic features such as accent, emphasis and myriad lexical phenomena) all impact on our reading of the people behind the text and the meaning and significance of their actions (AUTHOR CITATION). If a character or invented plot device is to 'stand for' some people/behaviours that have been observed, then these dilemmas are even more acute.

One dilemma concerns the rhetorical power and purpose of fictionalisations as against those of empirical data. We have seen that fictionalisation enables researchers to say things that may be troublesome if stated in more open and empirically grounded terms. However, as Elliott reflects in relation to her own experiences of using a story format to report ethically complex issues, "Must I hide behind composites, behind fiction, to tell an honest story […]" (152). In fictional form, a concrete set of events may become more like a parable than an *example* or *evidence,* and as a result the report may lose its resonance and the sense of urgency of a *real* social problem. A closely related dilemma concerns the idea that fictionalising may be disempowering for the participants themselves, as it is not at all uncommon to find that participants want to be seen and heard, which they often regard as empowering and important for social change (Ní Laoire, 2007; Richardson, 2015). Freedom from the constraints of data may be empowering for researchers, but it brings risks to participants who can potentially become absent voices in their own stories.

This brings us to a third ethical issue, which relates to the writing process and the skills needed to produce affective fiction. One response to the exclusion of research participants from writing fictional stories is to make the writing a collaborative process where researchers and participants work together in telling stories (Christensen et al., 2018; Lassiter, 2008). However, writing fiction is a skill, and it seems risky to assume that academics (or anyone else) can automatically produce engaging fiction without training/guidance or substantial practice.: "…fiction can be as much a dead letter as academic prose" (Pandian and McLean, 2017: 23), and just because something is made up does not mean that it will be engaging.

One place where researchers have become quite vocal about this issue is in relation to doctoral education. Weatherall (2019) has clearly articulated the problems that early careers scholars face in adopting experimental forms of writing in the context of PhDs, describing the challenges of trying to write messy, confrontational, and emotional writing in a different structure to the conventional academic form. As she puts it, "From structure, to grammar, to tone and to content, the conceptualisation of academic writing for a doctoral thesis is extremely orthodox. These seemingly concrete boundaries – maintained like the 'necessary' chapters of a thesis – are framed as obligatory in order to demonstrate sufficient scholarly aptitude." (Weatherall, 2019: 103). One of the clear messages to come from this work is that in as far as they are supported in their writing, students – like all academics - are trained to write conventionally. Without wishing to undermine the importance of that training (or to diminish the strengths of the PhD format) the point I wish to emphasise is

that, whatever level of their career they are at, there is a serious question that needs to be explored regarding how well academics are supported or enabled in producing writing *other than* conventional publications.

Concluding remarks

Fictional forms of data representation offer an important tool for researchers as they facilitate the production of nuanced, empathetic, affective stories that have the potential to engage audiences beyond conventional academic boundaries. While fictional reporting remains a reasonably esoteric practice, I have shown that its aims are consistent with those of broader paradigmatic criteria in qualitative inquiry, but that there are also real and complex tensions in the uses of fiction found in the literature. I suggest that these differences reflect extremely complicated questions regarding the nature of the epistemic claims that are made through qualitative inquiry, and the divisions between academic work and other forms of knowledge producing practices. These issues represent critical area of debate for qualitative researchers using fictional accounts.

In order to contribute to this discussion, I showed that there are a number of issues that pull against the production of fictionalised work and argued that substantial discussion and development is needed in three areas. First, to explore practical ways to challenge academic publishing culture in order to create spaces where experimental writing can be undertaken and to facilitate forms of non-conventional publication. Second, to substantially develop the creative engagement with writing for academics at all levels, including for doctoral students, in order to encourage a culture of experimentation and aesthetic curiosity towards writing. Third, to deepen the ethical engagement with the issues surrounding fictionalisation, which remains an under theorised topic in the publications reviewed here.

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