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Commentary: emphasizing the role of positionality, theory, and ethnographic writing conventions in reflexive texts

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ABSTRACT

This commentary provides a critique of Crabtree's (2025) strong article on best practices for qualitative reviews. Crabtree's challenging premise covers all aspects of qualitative research, from lab-based qualitative studies to ethnography, which, of course, has many kinds, including ethnomethodological and anthropological ethnography. In this response, I take the liberty of extending the arguments to focus on more anthropological ethnography, especially of the confessional and impressionistic variety. In doing so, I will focus on three areas: 1) Reflexivity, Positionality and Rapport, 2) Structure, Sensitizing Concepts, Including Theory, and 3) Embracing Differing Ethnographic Writing Conventions.

1. Reflexivity, positionality and rapport

Crabtree argues, based on Soden et al. (2024), that requests for metrics are inappropriate in that they betray an interest in generalizability and are not appropriate for the higher-level epistemological goal of understanding socio-historical processes. This is an excellent point, which I largely agree with, but I take exception to including demographics in that list. Like Crabtree, I find reflexivity core to qualitative work, especially my own anthropological ethnographic work. If we are to arrive at apodicticity and our findings are to be self-evident, we must understand our ethnographic process. For ethnography, this means understanding how we generate rapport and our relationship with our informants.

In doing so, it is critical for us to understand both sides of the relationship in balance. We need to understand our informants and all their demographics. We need to understand their gender presentations and identities, their class markers, their racial and ethnic identification, and their disabilities. We do not do this with a goal of generalizing, but because doing so is critical to understanding our own positionality. How do our own demographic characteristics shape our relationship with our informants? It is critical for the ethnographer to examine their privilege and how it shapes the ethnographic encounter, both through positionality statements and by discussing data reflexively (not "neutrally") using thick description. Only in doing so can we counter the historical precedent of colonialist anthropologists presuming to speak on behalf of the marginalized other. Doing so is critical to unpack the technocolonialism endemic to ethnographic studies of technology.

Demographics need to be discussed reflexively in the context of data and meaning-making. Positionality statements cannot be performative (Liang, 2021), and must avoid the potential harm of forcing minoritized researchers to disclose personal information in unsafe circumstances (Singh et al., 2025), and yet ethnography does not strive for the "interpretive omnipotence" of positivist science (Burawoy, 1998). Data collection is as such a relational encounter

and as such there is no need to minimize reactivity, the impact of the experimenter, as long as we are reflexive about its impact. Instead, Burawoy (1998) writes, "reflexivity, unlike positivism, embraces intervention as a data-gathering opportunity," and we must reflect on how our own presence changes the nature of the data we collect. After all, Fine in his seminal "10 Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research," discusses how such neutrality is a methodological impossibility (Fine, 1993). This means demographics cannot be tucked neatly into a table, and the method cannot be bracketed into its own section. Instead, reflexive text may find themselves presenting these issues together as they become relevant, and reviewers need to understand that the stylistic conventions of structuring ethnographic writing differ to afford discussion of reflexivity, positionality, and rapport.

2. Structure, sensitizing concepts, including theory

Structure, Sensitizing Concepts, Including Theory

Crabtree draws on Blumer's (1969) sensitizing concepts as the "means by which we establish a connection with the empirical world" (Crabtree, 2025), giving examples of articulation work or Suchman's situated action as core sensitizing concepts. Crabtree is correct in that with qualitative work, it is not necessary for the data to be reliable, replicable, or representative, but rather we must find structural patterns of meaning such that the value of the work becomes self-apparent. Further, I concur with Crabtree that "[t]he unique contribution of qualitative studies is the provision, elaboration, extension and/or refinement of sensitizing concepts, analytic descriptions that orient us to important features of the human world and human conduct including the role and impact of technology within it" (Crabtree, 2025). Ultimately, another word for a sensitizing concept is theory.

Qualitative work can make theoretical contributions in different, valid ways, in keeping with the range of methodological traditions. For instance, Tolmie et al. (2002, 2007), in keeping with their ethnomethodological traditions in discussing the "accomplishment" of housework, avoid doing so using the theoretical construct of gender; instead, they offer the sensitizing concept of unremarkable computing. As I write elsewhere, "they acknowledge that participants can engage in managing their gender identity in the context of social expectations of what men and women do (Garfinkel, 1984) … it rejects the notion of a cultural construction … of gender having an explanatory force and yet engages with the performances of gender support[ing] the relevance of gender to CSCW" (Rode, 2009). At the same time, though, other qualitative traditions engaged with theory more directly.

Theory, as Dourish writes, is often marginalized in computing, and yet he suggests the most useful strategy for reading for ethnography is reading for theory (2007). Theory here could include engaging in any type of critical theory, including various Frankfurt school theorists, and could cover topics such as critical race studies, feminist STS, or queer theory, amongst others. I use my own anthropological ethnography as a basis for constructing grounded theory using the theory of technology as masculine culture as a starting point; doing so allowed me to arrive at a model of the co-construction of gender and technical identity (Rode & Poole, 2018). This could certainly be considered under Crabtree's framing of sensitizing concepts, but the important takeaway here is that sensitizing concepts can have roots in critical theory. Various qualitative traditions have different attitudes toward the appropriateness of critical theory (consider the difference between Glaser and Strauss and Charmaz with regard to the appropriateness of engagement with prior theory), and it is imperative when considering sensitizing concepts to understand these epistemological views and judge the use of theory in concert with them.

3. Embracing differing ethnographic writing conventions

If I were to add a sixth point to Crabtree's list of qualitative reviewing criteria, it would be this: *"Have I engaged with the epistemological values and writing conventions of the author in evaluating this work?"* Different styles of ethnographic work require different structures. This may mean three radical departures from quantitative data presentation:

- **Methodology discussed throughout**: Aspects of the method will emerge in the context of findings as one reflexively explores how one's positionality impacts meaning-making.
- **Thick description**: Ensuring findings are self-evident and suitably reflexive requires thick description. Whereas some qualitative work might include brief quotes supporting a theme, ethnographic texts often include ethnographic vignettes, detailed descriptions of the ethnographic encounter. Instead of providing numerous examples, an ethnographer may simply discuss one particularly impactful one in depth. In confessional ethnographies, this might include detailed comments on what the fieldworkers' reaction was to this situation, both at the time of the fieldwork and later when analyzing in a bid to provide reflexivity.
- **Integration of data and discussion**: Whereas in quantitative work and some qualitative work, an author can cleanly bisect data from discussion, this is not always possible in ethnographic work. For instance, in some of my prior work, I relied on Charmaz's Constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, and as themes are co-constructed by the researcher and participants, it is difficult to disambiguate between presenting data and discussing findings entirely. In these instances, a structure of the paper that integrates data and findings is methodologically consistent.

Qualitative data writing conventions may differ. Methodology, data, and discussion might occupy different forms. It is imperative that qualitative reviewers familiarize themselves with different forms of qualitative writing, especially its less familiar forms such as the differences between realist, confessional, and impressionistic ethnography (Van Maanen, 1998). Ultimately, the goal of data analysis is to help the reader make sense of data. There is value in both a chart and an illustration. Moreover, there is value in both technical drawings and artistic renderings. Just as the metrics of what constitutes a "good" chart and the illustration are different, so too are the properties of a technical drawing and an artistic rendering. We need to acknowledge this variety of purpose and interpret how it is made manifest in light of the values that influenced its creation. There is space enough in HCI for data in all these forms. Crabtree has outlined five critical questions to ask when engaging in qualitative reviews, and I have added a sixth. Together, these ensure that the reflexivity and sensitive concepts provided by good qualitative work can be valued by reviewers.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Jennifer A. Rode is a Professor of Equity and Human Computer Interaction at UCL. She is a distinguished member of the ACM, and an expert in ethnography, HCI, and examining the intersectional values embedded into technology.

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