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Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description

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Abstract

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Keywords

Thick Description, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, Thick Interpretation, Thick Meaning, and Qualitative Writing

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Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept “Thick Description”

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The origins, cross-disciplinary evolution, and definition of “thick description” are reviewed. Despite its frequent use in the qualitative literature, the concept of “thick description” is often confusing to researchers at all levels. The roots of this confusion are explored and examples of “thick description” are provided. The article closes with guidelines for presenting “thick description” in written reports. Key Words: Thick Description, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, Thick Interpretation, Thick Meaning, and Qualitative Writing

One of the most important concepts in the lexicon of qualitative researchers is “thick description.” In fact, the *Subject Index* of virtually every major textbook on qualitative methods published during the last three decades includes one or more entries under either “thick description,” or “description, thick” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990, to name but a few). Despite the widespread use and acceptance of the term “thick description,” in qualitative research, there appears to be some confusion over precisely what the concept means (Holloway, 1997; Schwandt, 2001). Personally, I can relate to this confusion on two levels. First, in my own qualitative research and writing over the years, I have at times struggled to fully understand the concept of “thick description.” Second, in my experience teaching and supervising qualitative research, I find that students and colleagues struggle in their attempts to understand and practice “thick description” in their work. It was this set of struggles that led me to study the concept of “thick description” more closely, and to share my findings with the readership of *The Qualitative Report (TQR)*.

The goals of this Brief Note are to (a) clarify the origins of the concept of “thick description”; (b) trace its evolution across various disciplines; (c) define the concept comprehensively; (d) provide exemplars of “thick description” in the published literature; and (e) offer guidelines for presenting “thick description” in non-ethnographic studies. In meeting these goals, I hope to bring some clarity and consensus to our understanding and usage of the concept “thick description.”

Origins of “Thick Description”

Though many researchers cite North American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, when they introduce “thick description,” the term and concept originate, as Geertz himself notes, with Gilbert Ryle, a British metaphysical philosopher at the University of Oxford. The root of the concept can be found in Ryle’s

(1949) *Concept of the Mind* where he discussed in great detail “the description of intellectual work” (p. 305). The first presentation of the actual term, “thick” description, appears to come from two of Ryle’s lectures published in the mid 1960s titled *Thinking and Reflecting* and *The Thinking of Thoughts: [colon added] What is “La Penseur” Doing?* Both lectures were published in Ryle’s (1971) *Collected Papers, Volume II, Collected Essays 1929-1968*, and can be easily located by the interested qualitative researcher.

For Ryle (1971) “thick” description involved ascribing intentionality to one’s behavior. He used the following example,

A single golfer, with six golf balls in front of him [sic], hitting each of them, one after another, towards one and the same green. He [sic] then goes and collects the balls, comes back to where he [sic] was before, and does it again. What is he doing? (p. 474)

The “thin” description of this behavior is that the golfer is repeatedly hitting a little round white object with a club like device toward a green. The “thick” description interprets the behavior within the context of the golf course and the game of golf, and ascribes thinking and intentionality to the observed behavior. In this case, the golfer is practicing approach shots on the green in anticipation of a future real golf match (which usually includes two or four players) with the hope that the practicing of approach shots at the present time will improve his approach shot skill in a real match at some time in the future. Thus for Ryle, “thick” description involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behavior. It also involves ascribing present and future intentionality to the behavior.

Evolution of “Thick Description”

The term “thick” description became part of the qualitative researcher’s vocabulary when Geertz borrowed Ryle’s (1971) philosophical term to describe the work of ethnography. Geertz (1973) stated the following,

From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, “thick description.” (p. 6) (Note: Geertz was the first to put parentheses around “thick description,” Ryle only put quotation marks around “thick”.)

Geertz (1973) believed that the data of anthropological writing was “really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (p. 9). Therefore, for a reader of anthropological work to gauge for herself or himself the credibility of the author’s interpretations, the context under which these interpretations were made must be richly and thickly described.

Geertz's (1973) adaptation of "thick description" was expanded upon by the noted qualitative researcher and Professor of Communications, Sociology, and Humanities, Norman K. Denzin, who noted,

A thick description ... does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (Denzin, 1989, p. 83)

Denzin's (1989) elaboration of "thick description" introduced Geertz's anthropological term and Ryle's philosophical concept to the disciplines of sociology, communications, and humanities. In his classic book on *Interpretive Interactionism*, Denzin devotes a full chapter to elaborating on the concept of "thick description." I believe it was Denzin's literary detail in describing "thick description" that has had the most significant impact in promoting the term's worldwide use by qualitative researchers across intellectual disciplines. In essence, Denzin extended the utility of "thick description" as an anthropological construct used in ethnography, and particularly in participant observation, to the wider audience of qualitative researchers (e.g., in sociology, psychology, education) and qualitative approaches (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory).

Defining "Thick Description"

In digesting the work of Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1989), as reflected in their long quotes in the above section, we can gather a sense of what "thick description" includes and how it differs from "thin description." A search for more specific definitions of "thick description" led me to two "dictionaries" of qualitative terms and concepts: Schwandt's (2001) *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* and Holloway's (1997) *Basic Concepts for Qualitative Research*.

In presenting their concise definitions of "thick description," Schwandt cites Geertz (1973), while Holloway cites both Geertz and Ryle (1949). Schwandt stated the following,

Many qualitative inquirers emphasize the importance of "thick" as opposed to "thin" description. It is not entirely clear just what thick description is, however. Most efforts to define it emphasize that thick description is not simply a matter of amassing relevant detail. Rather to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick. (Schwandt, 2001, p. 255)

Holloway's definition is consistent with that of Schwandt, who noted that

The notion of thick description is often misunderstood. It must be theoretical and analytical in that researchers concern themselves with the abstract and general patterns and traits of social life in a culture. This type of description aims to give readers a sense of the emotions, thoughts and perceptions that research participant's experience. It deals not only with the meaning and interpretations of people in a culture but also with their intentions. Thick description builds up a clear picture of the individuals and groups in the context of their culture and the setting in which they live ... Thick description can be contrasted with **thin description** (bold in original), which is a superficial account and does not explore the underlying meanings of cultural members. (Holloway, 1997, p. 154)

There are some commonalities in both Schwandt's (2001) and Holloway's definitions of "thick description." First, both acknowledge that the term is confusing, and therefore not well understood. Second, both attempt to give meaning to "thick description" by contrasting it with "thin description." Third, both definitions emphasize that thick description involves much more than amassing great detail: It speaks to context and meaning as well as interpreting participant intentions in their behaviors and actions. I will now explore these three definitional commonalities in greater detail.

Confusion in the Meaning of "Thick Description"

The fact that both Holloway (1997) and Schwandt (2001) find the concept of "thick description" confusing is understandable for at least two reasons. The first reason deals with the concept's evolution across intellectual disciplines. "Thick description" originated as a qualitative research tool for ethnographers engaged in participant observation research (Geertz, 1973), and then was generalized to serve as a tool for sociologist, psychologists, educators, and others operating from a wide array of qualitative inquiry approaches (Ponterotto & Grieger, in press). While "thick description" seemed fairly clear for its role in ethnography and participant observation (see Denzin, 1989; Geertz), it was less clear with regards to how it would be manifested in other qualitative approaches and procedures such as long interviews and focus groups.

A second reason for researchers' confusion over the term can be attributed to the opinion that there is no unitary or singular form or definition of "thick description." For example, in Denzin's (1989) extensive elaborative work on the concept, he introduces eleven different types of "thick description": micro, macro historical, biographical, situational, relational, interactional, intrusive, incomplete, glossed, purely descriptive, and descriptive interpretive. It is beyond my goals for this Brief Note to review all eleven types of "thick description" so the interested reader is referred to Denzin (pp. 91-98). Suffice it to say, it is not surprising that both novice and seasoned researchers are confused by "thick description" when there are so many variations.

Defining “Thick Description” by Comparison to “Thin Description”

In part, Holloway (1997) and Schwandt (2001) define “thick description” by contrasting the concept to “thin description.” This attempt to define-by-contrast has been used by others in trying to explain “thick description” (e.g., see Denzin, 1989; Greenblatt, 1997; Ryle, 1971). Sometimes when a concept is quite complex, authors attempt to bring clarity to the concept by contrasting it with what it clearly is not. A good example is Denzin who highlights the features of “thick description.”

(1) It gives the context of an act; (2) it states the intentions and meanings that organize the action; (3) it traces the evolution and development of the act; (4) it presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted. A *thin description* (italics in original) simply reports facts, independent of intentions or the circumstances that surround an action. (p. 33)

“Thick Description” as Context and Meaning

As emphasized by all the authors heretofore referenced in this Brief Note, a central component of “thick description” is the interpretation of what is being observed or witnessed. Denzin (1989) has made a major contribution to qualitative research by carefully showing the sequential link of “thick description” to “thick interpretation.” It is the qualitative researcher’s task to thickly describe social action, so that thick interpretations of the actions can be made, presented in written form, and made available to a wide audience of readers. Without “thick description,” “thick interpretation” is not possible. Without “thick interpretation,” written reports of research will lack credibility and resonance with the research community, the research participants themselves, and with the wider audience of readers for whom the report is intended (Ponterotto & Grieger, in press). It is the thick interpretive work of researchers that brings readers to an understanding of the social actions being reported upon.

Essence of “Thick Description”

In integrating the work of Ryle (1971), Geertz (1973), Denzin (1989), Holloway (1997), and Schwandt (2001), one can extract the following essential components of “thick description.”

1. “Thick description” involves accurately describing and interpreting social actions within the appropriate context in which the social action took place.
2. “Thick description” captures the thoughts, emotions, and web of social interaction among observed participants in their operating context.
3. A central feature to interpreting social actions entails assigning motivations and intentions for the said social actions.
4. The context for, and the specifics of, the social action are so well described that the reader experiences a sense of verisimilitude as they read the researcher’s account. For Denzin (1989), verisimilitude refers to “truthlike statements that

- produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described.” (pp. 83-84)
5. “Thick description” of social actions promotes “thick interpretation” of these actions, which lead to “thick meaning” of the findings that resonate with readers (Ponterotto & Grieger, in press). I like to use the metaphor of a tree to explain the interconnection of these three concepts. The “thick description” constitutes the roots of the tree that nourish and feed “thick interpretation,” represented by the solid trunk of the tree, which in turn feeds the branches and leaves of the tree, which represent the “thick meaning.” It is the branches and leaves that most capture the viewers’ attention, as is the case with “thick meaning,” which grasps the attention of the reader of the study.

Working Definition of “Thick Description”

The five central components of “thick description,” just described, lend themselves to the following working definition of the concept:

Thick description refers to the researcher’s task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context. The context can be within a smaller unit (such as a couple, a family, a work environment) or within a larger unit (such as one’s village, a community, or general culture). Thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report’s intended readership. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context.

Thick Description in Practice

Denzin (1989) provides examples of thick description across all eleven types that he proposes. To locate these examples he draws on published sources of fiction, history, ethnography, and sociology. Below, I highlight three examples of different forms of thick description and then end the Brief Note with some suggestions for the authors of *TQR*. The first two examples are taken from Liebow’s (2003) ethnographic classic, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*, and demonstrate Denzin’s “relational” and “descriptive-interpretive” types of “thick description.” The third example comes from my own field of counseling psychology and is extracted from counseling pioneer Vasquez’s (2001) lifeworld.

Tally’s Corner was the outgrowth of Elliot Liebow’s (2003) PhD dissertation in anthropology at Catholic University of America. Many qualitative researchers consider *Tally’s Corner* to be a classic work in ethnography, and the book is required reading in

many qualitative research courses, including my own. To understand the context for the two quotes below, let me provide a snapshot of *Tally's Corner*.

During 1962 and 1963, Liebow (2003), a White Jewish man born of immigrant parents from Eastern Europe, began working as a fieldworker for a larger research project on child rearing practices among low income families in Washington, DC. One component of this study was a focus on the life and worldview of a particular group of African American "streetcorner men" who often congregated in front of the "New Deal Carry-out shop," a small diner of sorts open seven days a week. The Carry-out has a 10 X 12 customer area with no chairs or tables, so customers ate their food standing up or they took it outside to "Tally's Corner." The quote below describes Liebow's (2003) first interaction with Tally Jackson.

For more than four hours Tally and I lounged around in the Carry-out, talking, drinking coffee, watching people come in and go out, watching other hangers-on as they bantered with the waitresses, horsed around among themselves, or danced to the juke-box. Everyone knew Tally and some frequently sought out his attention. Tally sometimes participated in the banter but we were generally left undisturbed when we were talking. When I left at two o'clock, Tally and I were addressing each other by first names ("Elliot" was strange to him and we settled for "Ellix") and I was able to address the two waitresses by their first names without feeling uncomfortable. I had also learned to identify several other men by their first names or nicknames, had gotten hints on personal relationships, and had a biographical sketch (part of it untrue I learned later) of Tally.

The above quote represents the type of "thick description" Denzin (1989) labels *relational*. "A thick relational description brings a relationship alive" (Denzin, p. 94). In the above quote the reader gathers a vivid sense of the Carry-out and is provided a window into the developing relationship of Liebow (2003) (researcher) and Tally (participant).

The second quote below, from Liebow, I would classify as an example of Denzin's (1989) "descriptive-interpretive" type of thick description. Denzin noted that

The descriptive and interpretive thick description records interpretations that occur within the experience as it is lived.... These types of statements are difficult to produce and obtain. They require a person who is able to reflect on experience as it occurs. (p. 98)

The context for this quote is one Saturday evening when Liebow attended a locals' dance at the Capitol Arena. There were more than a thousand people in the small dance hall all jammed together. Liebow was the only White male in attendance, and initially he found the music quite foreign and was not even able to identify some of the band's instruments, as he had never seen them before. Here is the quote from his field notes.

It was very hot, it was very noisy, it was very smelly, and it was all very exciting. It was impossible to remain simply an observer in a place like this, even for someone as phlegmatic as I. It was only a few minutes after Jackie Wilson started singing that I discovered that the noise wasn't nearly loud enough, the heat wasn't nearly hot enough, and the odor from more than a thousand closely packed people was not really strong enough at all. Like everyone else, I wanted more of everything. (p. 165)

In this quote the reader can almost visualize the event and experience the senses as Liebow records them. Clearly, the thick description included creates a sense of verisimilitude in the reader.

Denzin (1989) highlights that most thick descriptions in the literature do not capture all eleven types of thick description he categorizes. Many include one or perhaps a few of the types in one descriptive prose. Denzin believed that the full or complete thick description was able to capture at one time five of his primary typologies: *biographical*, *historical*, *situational*, *relational*, and *interactional*. Below, I draw on my own discipline of counseling psychology to present a quote that I think includes all five types of thick description.

The quote is taken from the published lifestory of Melba Vasquez (2001), a pioneer in the field of counseling psychology. Hers is one of 12 lifestories that constitute Part I of the *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2001). Vasquez's lifestory focuses on life experiences, particularly those that led her to bond strongly with women in society and with the Latino populations. These experiences led her to devote a career to counseling and advocating for Latino people, particularly Latina women. The context for the quote is Vasquez describing her early childhood school experiences as a Mexican American female in a small central Texas town in the 1950s. In this particular scenario she is describing a day on her school bus.

One day, a large White boy, about two or three years older, who often bullied us all, came and roughly pushed my sister and me into a corner of our seat because he wanted to sit in that space, across from his friends. I remember the fear and humiliation I felt for myself and my sister. Yet, we did nothing but sit silently, squashed by his large size. An African American young girl, about his size, saw what happened, and came up, pushed his shoulder and said in a very loud assertive voice, "What are you doing? You can't do that to them. They're sitting there, can't you see, and you're crowding them. Move. Now!" He looked at her defiantly and said, "This ain't your business." She glared back and said, "It is now." The whole bus got quiet. She repeated in a low voice, "Move. Now." He got up and moved. The young Black girl went to her seat, came back, gave us each a piece of hard candy, and watched over us and others like us for the rest of the year. (p. 69)

I believe this quote captures aspects of the five key types of thick description advocated by Denzin (1989), and that represents, for him, the exemplar of "thick description." It is *biographical*, in terms of placing the scenario chronologically (1950s)

in the context of Vasquez's life growing up as a Mexican American female, in a small Texas town where racism was common. It is *historical* because it "attempts to bring an earlier historical moment of experience alive in vivid detail" (Denzin, p. 92). It is *situational* because it "creates a visual picture of the situation" and locates the person in the situation (p. 94). It is clearly relational in that it brings a relationship alive, in this case the relationship of Vasquez to her sister as well as to a helping school mate. Finally, it is interactional because the vignette focuses "on interactions between two or more persons" (Denzin, p. 95).

Understanding "Thick Description" Beyond Ethnography and Lifestory Analysis

The examples of "thick description" provided above, as well as those highlighted in Denzin (1989), focus, to a large degree, on excerpts taken from ethnography and biography (including autobiography and lifestories). However, as noted previously in this article, "thick description" is used across many disciplines (e.g., education, sociology, psychology, program evaluation) and inquiry approaches (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory, case study) (see Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto & Grieger, in press). A majority of qualitative studies in a variety of disciplines (e.g., psychology, education) rely extensively on long interviews (Polkinghorne, 2005). In this final section, I propose how "thick description" might be manifested in a common interview study organized along the American Psychological Association's recommended manuscript structure of *Method* (*Participants* and *Procedures*), *Results*, and *Discussion*.

Participants

"Thick description" of one's sample would entail describing fully the participants of the study without compromising anonymity. A thickly described sample facilitates the reader's ability to visualize the sample including their relevant demographic and psychological characteristics. For example, an interview study with college students seeking services at a university counseling center might report demographic characteristics such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic, academic standing, immigration status, generation level, and so forth. Psychological characteristics reported might include presenting concerns, past experience with counseling, history of trauma, levels of racial and ethnic identity, and so forth.

Procedures

Describing the setting and procedures in adequate detail provides a context for understanding the study's results. Returning to our university counseling center example, a detailed description of the campus and surrounding environment is important, as are more general characteristics of the university such as size, demographic make-up, affiliations, competitive level, and so forth. Factors such as the location of the interviews, the length and recording procedures for the interviews, and the interviewer's and interviewee's reactions to the interviews all provide a sense of verisimilitude to the reader, and makes understanding (and critiquing) the author's interpretation in the Results and Discussion sections more accessible.

Results

“Thick description” of results presents adequate “voice” of participants; that is, long quotes from the participants or excerpts of interviewer-interview dialogue. Again, a sense of verisimilitude is achieved as the reader can visualize the participant-interviewer interactions and gets a sense of the cognitive and emotive state of the interviewee (and interviewer). “Thick description” of results flows smoothly from a Method section that is thickly presented.

Discussion

A thickly described Discussion section of a qualitative interview report successfully merges the participants’ lived experiences with the researcher’s interpretations of these experiences, thus creating thick meaning for the reader as well as for the participants and researcher. The reader is, thus, able to digest the essential elements of the findings, and is able to discern whether she or he would have come to the same interpretive conclusions as the report’s author.

Conclusion

This Brief Note has reviewed the origins, evolution, definitions, and some examples of “thick description.” The concept of “thick description” is often used and widely cited in qualitative research across disciplines and research approaches. Despite the concept’s popularity, it does cause confusion among scholars and students alike. Hopefully, this Brief Note, based in part on my own struggles to understand the concept, has brought some clarity to the concept of “thick description.”

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