



Social policy framing and the researcher

Global Social Policy
1–3

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14680181231201946

journals.sagepub.com/home/gsp**Rosina Foli**

Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Ghana

In the first few weeks of graduate studies, we were inundated with how to write academically. The instructor emphasized how academic writing differs from other forms of writing. Then, the class was given a written assignment, with the comments suggesting that we were not there yet. So, the next couple of months were spent mastering this style of writing. Yet, the process of learning never ended! Time and again, manuscripts are returned with revision or rejection comments that take issues with the proper academic writing style. This is such a universal experience that at a workshop on reflexivity in social policy, a colleague openly expressed their frustration and fear that their manuscript may not be accepted because of the way it has been written or framed.

Constructivist or interpretivist research perspectives view reality as experienced differently and thus, socially constructed both by the participants and researchers (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). In acknowledgement of the role and influence of the scientists' lived experiences on their research and its interpretation, self-reflection is encouraged in the process of research. Similarly, scholarly work could be validated through a process of self-reflection (Dennis, 2018). By extension then, this process of intra-activity can impact the way a study is communicated either through writing or presentation. While communicating social policy by following all the requirements of academic practice is important, communicating it in a way that feels authentic to the scholar is important, too. However, the demand of academic writing means that, in scholarly works especially, qualitative studies must align with what Dennis (2018: 110) describes as the

truth correspondence logics and empiricist forms of realism [which] set anchor into [our] methodological conversations about validity in such a way as to make it quite difficult to free ourselves from related assumptions when we enact validity practices in our research. (Dennis, 2018: 110)

The positionality of a researcher in academic practice is intimately linked to the interpretations that are made of data. Consequently, writing and presenting social policy research – especially as it relates to different contexts – could involve adopting a

Corresponding author:

Rosina Foli, Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, P.O. Box LG 64, Legon, Accra, Ghana.

Email: rfoli@ug.edu.gh

'subjective way of writing' to bring to bear all the intricacies and all that matters to the phenomena being described. Framing of research work, and 'frames' in general, then becomes central to the writing process – making it political. According to Campbell (2002: 26), frames, which refer to 'normative and sometimes cognitive ideas that are located in the foreground of policy debates', are a component of ideas besides world views, principled beliefs, conceptual models and theories. Framing, then, is a way of making one's work or writing acceptable. It is viewed as an active process of constructing meaning which 'implies agency and contention' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614). Although the role of the researcher (agent) is pivotal in framing, it is also contentious because how social policy is framed in one's writing may differ from existing frameworks or laid down canonical ways of presenting academic writing, and this could become problematic for researchers who would like to frame their research output in specific ways.

From the perspective of frames and framing then, writing is contentious, generally. This is because what one communicates and how one communicates may divert from normative and cognitive ideas prevalent in a society or in an academic field. Does it matter if academics fail to conform to laid down structures or ways of writing? Framing a research output to conform to existing frameworks may be helpful in that it promotes uniformity, replicability (from the positivist standpoint) and probably predictability – but as Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984) demonstrated in their research work, how a scenario is framed elucidates varied meanings and responses. Thus, if research output is aimed, for instance, at instigating policy reforms, the framing of such a work is critical to the response that would be generated. Besides, since the practice of social policy varies by context, communicating social policy then should pay attention to contextual variations not to conflate the meanings so generated in the process of academic study. For instance, while most African countries may not fit neatly within the framework of Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare state typology, it does not suggest the absence of a welfare state. In most cases, traditional systems of social provisioning co-exist with new forms introduced through colonialism, and the governmental and society-wide changes that it generated. Accordingly, 'if we are making interpretive claims about the lives, stories, and experiences of Others, we have to render an understanding of how those interpretations were located within the context they were offered up' (Dennis, 2018: 117).

As a bonafide part of the research process then, the researcher is responsible for communicating their output in ways that pay attention to their context and the context of research participants involved in the process to generate the meaning and responses desired. In performing such a task, the researcher may present their output in ways that may not conform to academic writing standards. But these different ways of writing can be validated on the basis of the position of the researcher in the research process, and their desire to communicate appropriately what they observed in the process.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Benford RD and Snow DA (2000) Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–639.
- Campbell JL (2002) Ideas, politics, and public policy. *Annual Review of Sociology* 28: 21–38.
- Creswell JW (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dennis B (2018) Validity as research praxis: A study of self-reflection and engagement in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry* 24(2): 109–118.
- Esping-Andersen G (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kahneman D and Tversky A (1979) Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica* 47(2): 263–291.
- Kahneman D and Tversky A (1984) Choices, values and frames. *American Psychologist* 39: 341–350.
- Mertens DM (2015) *Research and Evaluation in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author biography

Rosina Foli is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science of the University of Ghana. Her research focuses broadly on Public Policy, Social Policy and transnational policy processes. In her recently published book, *The Making of Anti-Poverty Policies in Ghana: Transnational Actors, Processes and Mechanisms*, she examines the role of transnational actors in the framing of social programmes in developing countries using Ghana as a case. Find her other published work using this link: Rosina Foli–Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?start=0&q=Rosina+Foli&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5).