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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131940802511567

Published online: 26 Nov 2008.

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The texts this review addresses thicken contemporary qualitative research scholarship by offering, in Sari Knopp Biklen and Ronnie Casella’s case, a practical guide for students conducting qualitative dissertations, and in Lisa Mazzei’s, a philosophical meditation that draws from deconstructive approaches to revision silence in discourse-based inquiry as a “meaning full” data source (xii). Together, these texts provide additional tools to approach varied qualitative inquiry projects in the current “seventh moment” of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2000 2). They underscore for this reviewer the usefulness of probing fissures in existing methodological boundaries for additional strategies yet to come.

In Inhabited Silence, Lisa Mazzei draws from such influential philosophers as Derrida, Spivak, Heidegger, and Lather, and from qualitative inquiry into the racial construct of Whiteness to render visible what might be considered the lurking constitutive Other to speech in qualitative research: silence. Arguing that the current methodological climate valorizes data that is “seen, heard and read” (xi) over other ways of knowing, Mazzei seeks to disrupt dominant methodological conventions and theorize silence as a worthy but neglected data source that is not only “‘required for the intelligibility of what is said in discourse’” (cited in Mazzei 28) but is indeed constitutive of discourse itself. Mazzei suggests that the existing problematic informing methodological conventions directs researchers’ analytic gazes toward particular utterances and actions currently intelligible as data and away from the “haunting specters” of “silent subtexts” (9) not yet recognized as “meaning full” (xii). As a result, researchers can easily overlook the “pauses, breaths, and avoidances” (20)—those “words between words” (35)—inherent to communication that may also lead to productive knowing. Like Whiteness, the racial construct that often remains unmarked despite its significant social, economic and discursive power, silence can be purposeful, strategic, polite, and privileged (83–87), and thus constitute substantive interstices between the words researchers conceptualize, seek, and privilege as data. Mazzei, a research fellow
Mazzei’s “fascination” (28) with silence emerged from varied absences that she perceived in White teachers’ dialogue about race, as well as her broader commitment to deconstructive philosophy that seeks to question, destabilize, and reach toward “excessive readings” (17) and that which “cannot [yet] be thought” (cited in Mazzei 14). In contrast to the spoken data Mazzei transcribed—which she perceived as “thin” (47)—the many silences and “not saids” (27) that “haunted” teachers’ discussions of race provided a tapestry of analytic trajectories that emphasized not only the weighty unspoken presence of whiteness in teachers’ lives but the need to theorize silence and to develop methodological processes that take silence seriously.

Although Mazzei resists prescribing formulaic (14) analytic guidelines to researchers that may, perhaps, reify existing methodological boundaries rather than trouble them, she gestures to what conceptualizing silence as a data source might look like. She argues that analyzing the “whole of speech” (32) requires attention to “pauses, breaths” (20) alongside what is “self evident” (15). To enact this shift, Mazzei adopts a stance that “does not differentiate between the so-called primary (spoken) and secondary (silent)” data (92) but considers such data components of a continuum of communication (40) equally worthy of researchers’ analytic energy. As she recounts her journey of discovering silence as data, she works through a constellation of scholars’ ideas about silence that other researchers might find helpful in their work.

The author often wields the concept of silence poetically rather than fixing its meaning, a style of expression consistent with her methodological allegiances that might intrigue some readers and trouble others. Silence, at times, seems a “discursive haunting,” (9) at times an ineffable feeling that something “more” is going on, at times a poetic space, and at other times a materialist absence in spoken interchanges signaled to the author when information respondents share differs across context or when she anticipates that respondents will discuss particular topics in particular ways and do not. This materialist conceptualizing of silence that gestures to larger discourses shaping speech is legible in Chapter 7, “Interviewing within a Problematic of Silence,” in which the author provides questions she might have used to expand participants’ responses (95–96) and thereby transform silent traces to spoken data.

_Inhabited Silence_ draws from compelling philosophical, literary, and linguistics scholarship, embodies broader efforts to work within and against contemporary methodological borders, and expands analytic tools available for qualitative endeavors. Chapters 6 and 7 provide useful analytic examples for qualitative research courses. However, instructors using the text might want to contextualize it within the history of qualitative research and methodological scholarship that has...
demonstrated researchers’ careful attention to the contours of their field—both absence and presence, speech and silence, the concrete and the ineffable: how respondents construct their identities against absent, unnamed Others; respondents who change the subject or break off speech; a woman who constrains speech but burns dinners; the hush of a room after a remark; a cafeteria with no smell of food; a respondent with a sarcastic tone or an averted gaze. Rather than “irrelevant,” “unintelligible gaps,” or “meaningless detours” (21), these symbolic, material and/or discursive silences are, indeed, for many researchers part of the field—potentially significant data to note-name-question-interpret as they grapple with “what’s going on.”

This body of work, in which the ideas in *Inhabited Silence* might be situated, speaks to methodologists’ initiatives from varied epistemological perspectives to question what constitutes “data” and “good data,” to attend to contours, absences and emotion in discourse, and to extend data gathering and analytic processes. For example, Lather (1996) excerpted data from her study with women living with HIV/AIDS to emphasize painful insider/outsider dynamics and exclusions shaping women’s experiences in “support” groups. What isn’t said in group dynamics, and in Lather’s representation of data, seems as vital as what is stated. Poindexter (2002) used varied theoretical frameworks to transcribe and analyze interview data that reveal “not saids” (69), emphases, and emotive content vital for understanding HIV caregivers’ experiences with stigma. Gordon (2005) led readers through the silences and detours that marked her research in urban schools to demonstrate that her Whiteness was a potent methodological presence shaping her data collection and findings. Some suggestions Mazzei offers parallel those of other methodologists who, for example, suggest that researchers replay interviewing tapes to immerse themselves in the rhythm of respondents’ speech, or who conceptualize “listening” as a layered, multidimensional process comprised of nuanced dialogic and corporeal components (Anderson and Jack 1990). Although some researchers strive to improve the quality of elicited data—the relentless privileging of spoken data Mazzei usefully critiques—they share in spirit her desire for “self questioning” (14) and reflexivity, for interrogating accepted methodological practices, and for heightening researchers’ attention to meaningful unspoken undercurrents that frame respondent speech.

What may present fraught labor for researchers is how to interpret silence without romanticizing it as inherently “meaning full” (xii) or investing it with an authorizing power that simply inverts the speech/silence hierarchy. Indeed, a “careful reading (listening) of what our participants are in fact saying, even when they are not speaking” (xii) seems risky territory if such readings construct silent aspects of speech as more truthful, authentic, or stable ground from which to make claims than the always slippery terrain of words. Just as Scheurich (1995) argued that speech and its textual representation in transcripts can offer little assurance of stable meanings or a captured world, the construct of silence is also an unstable
vessel for transporting respondents’ meanings and, like speech, is subject to the partial, situated interpretations of the researcher. An analyst codes silent data, like spoken, with interpretive frames borne of her/his predilections, training, theoretical orientation, and the historically-constituted discourses available for analysis.

The author’s approach to White teachers’ silent data speaks to the challenges of enacting analysis that takes silence seriously without “supplanting it” (49) with “another voice of our own creation” (90) or ascribing to its mists “monolithic” meanings (40) or inherent significance. Mazzei’s refusal of an authoritative stance and recognition of the instability of interpretive work is understandably difficult to sustain throughout the text. In mobilizing the theoretical lens of Critical Whiteness Studies to scrutinize and “savor” (67) silent data for “more complete, more nuanced understanding” (41), perceived participant detours are read as specters of racial discourse and the normalizing power of whiteness rather than other forces that may shape the un/spoken: researcher/participant dynamics, participants’ public, gendered performance of Self, context-specific sharing, or the vagaries of memory. Assertions that silences reflect teachers’ “reticence to engage questions of race and culture” (4) and lack of “desire to see White as a racial category” (76) bear authoritative inflections that, although compelling and consistent with Critical White Studies theorizing, gesture to stable conceptions of silence at odds with the text’s premise. Methodologists grappling with the meaning of perceived silences (like spoken words) must determine, as the author demonstrates, when silences are and are not significant and which interpretations silent data can bear. Varied forces, including project purpose and theoretical allegiances, shape their signification.

Productive trajectories for an analytic of silence might include considering how much analytic weight researchers should give to silent aspects of speech; whether data differently placed on the “continuum of communication” (40) necessitate different analytic approaches; under which circumstances researchers should honor silent data; which research/topics call for poetic constructions and which demand other approaches; and whether silent data necessitates rethinking measures of validity and credibility. Mazzei’s reflective style invites such questions; the author reflects on her own analysis throughout the text, pointing out potential critiques that echo, perhaps, the questions haunting her, and constructing textual spaces that strive to destabilize her own work as a Master Narrative on silence, even as she continually marvels at its possibilities. Indeed, Mazzei’s argument may inspire readers to consider the “purposeful” silences in the text and their possible meanings.

In *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*, Sari Knopp Biklen and Ronnie Casella undertake a different project altogether, one that mentions, only fleetingly, such deconstructive methodological approaches as Mazzei’s, and focuses on providing concrete guidance to students conducting interpretive qualitative dissertations. Whereas Mazzei’s text seeks to destabilize methodological conventions and boundaries, Biklen and Casella emphasize existing dissertation
conventions to help students navigate their contours. Collectively, the chapters work to disaggregate The Dissertation into its constitutive components—the proposal, the committee members, the literature review, the defense—to demystify and render feasible what, for many students, seems a formidable process. Analytic complexities, laments, and “war stories” (1) are swept aside in favor of concrete strategies to expand student control. Particularly useful in this effort are the examples authors offer from their work with doctoral students. In Biklen and Casella’s treatment, qualitative terrain appears navigable and, indeed, welcoming for doctoral study and the dissertation a promising site to conclude that work. Biklen is Professor of Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University and Casella, a former advisee of Biklen’s, is an Associate Professor of Education at Central Connecticut State University.

Biklen and Casella’s advice on aspects of dissertation writing particular to the conduct of qualitative inquiry is relevant for other projects. Their recommendations for crafting a persuasive argument and for approaching the writing process are relevant for researchers in varied fields as is the gentle reminder that conviction in the value of a project can sustain writing energy. It is “easier to write,” the authors suggest, “when you are confident that you have something to say that others will find interesting” (91). They recognize the various complexities of student lives and offer practical suggestions for sustaining progress. The authors emphasize the power of “perseverance” (38) and mobilize excerpts from completed dissertations to offer readers subtle hope that they, too, will complete their projects successfully.

Biklen and Casella also address the delicate matters of navigating committee dynamics and responding to constructive criticism, emphasizing the advantage students’ qualitative training can offer in this regard. Given that “situations do not have intrinsic meaning” but “carry meanings attributed to them” (105), faculty members, like students, experience dissertation and committee work differently. Critique of student research may emerge from a faculty member’s knowledge base, eclectic interests, social location, or from pressing gaps particular to the student’s manuscript that she/he “ought to have addressed” (112). The authors remind the reader that, however painful to hear or frustrating to address, such feedback can strengthen student work. They recommend that students engage with feedback productively by treating all questions as “good questions” (111), adopting the position of spectator, conceptualizing faculty engagement with their work as respect for its potential, approaching suggestions as opportunities and challenges, and maintaining an open stance.

The text differs from other dissertation guides in its focus on issues particular to the conduct of qualitative inquiry. It opens with a statement of the key elements of a “good” qualitative dissertation: “a good idea, rich data that you analyze thoughtfully, and the discipline to write a finished product” (1). Although some might analyze the silences lurking here, the sentence paints an optimistic picture for
the qualitative student. One chapter, devoted to “navigating” Institutional Review Boards (IRB), provides an overview of efforts to protect human subjects, guidance for completing forms, and examples from a researcher’s quest for IRB approval. Also, the authors are sensitive to the varying institutional climates for conducting qualitative research. Although they proceed from the standpoint that interpretive inquiry is a worthy endeavor, they urge students to become sensitive to contextual nuances so they are equipped to navigate their environs as smoothly as possible to pursue the methodologies their research questions demand.

The authors include in their guide practical, psychological, and stylistic elements of the dissertation writing process. Some suggestions echo the sage advice of writers Harry Wolcott (2001), Howard Becker (1986) and Anne Lamott (1994): breaking topics into manageable segments, instigating lifestyle changes that prioritize writing, attending to writing style, and turning to such routine work as polishing bibliographies when energy for conceptual work flags. Such techniques prod students to approach writing as a job and remain ever-vigilant of routine and audience. Biklen and Casella also recommend that writers use particular stylistic devices to represent qualitative findings, including active voice and past tense, rather than the ethnographic present, so as not to convey the impression to readers that cultural processes are forever frozen in time when a researcher exits the field. Other useful suggestions include writing “self-pitying fieldnotes” during slumps (96), claiming narrative authority, and approaching literature reviews as participating in a “conversation that already exists in relation to your project” (76).

Biklen and Casella remain silent on some political and economic machinations shaping higher education that influence the doctoral process and dissertation writing. Also, given the methodological and contextual specificity of any research project, they necessarily offer some advice in general terms. In addition, their final chapter conceptually severs “nontraditional” dissertations from the body of their discussion and closes with an abrupt caution not to “bore” readers with ineffective innovative writing (116–122). The effect of this disconnect is a sense that nontraditional work combining, for example, poetic or narrative methods with social science methods is dangerous terrain to traverse—the Other, perhaps, to an academic qualitative norm finally slipping out from the shadows of quantitative research. Indeed, the authors adopt a “cautious stance” (122) toward such projects, suggesting that “energy,” “persona,” and strong writing skills (120) are among the resources needed to challenge qualitative conventions. They provide points for students to ponder in deciding whether to undertake a nontraditional project.

These pragmatic reminders that genre compliance may be the safer road for “this particular research exercise” (122) may trouble students interested in deconstructive methodologies such as Mazzei’s, intended to push the boundaries of accepted practice and existing ways of knowing. Indeed, Derrida’s question why certain practices become “intelligible, valued, deemed as traditions, while
others become . . . unimaginable” (Derrida cited in Mazzei 20) seems productive to consider in the context of dissertation writing, given the power of conventions to define what a “good” qualitative dissertation might look like. The work of Laurel Richardson, Patti Lather, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, among others, provides reminders that the terrain of qualitative inquiry continues to shift and the complexity of the social world necessitates varied methodologies and representational practices. As students “put to work” (Lather 1991, 124) the suggestions in Biklen and Casella’s guide, they may be better prepared to negotiate current convention with the authors’ useful reminder: “Your goal should always be to write an important work on a topic you care deeply about” (115).

REFERENCES


