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## **Výzkumná zpráva – I. část**

### **Presenting qualitative research up close**

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# Presenting Qualitative Research Up Close

*Visual Literacy in Poster Presentations*

Holly Skodol Wilson  
Sally Ambler Hutchinson

**A** nurse scientist who had completed a powerful phenomenological study related to the experience of surgery among men who had been sexually abused in childhood presented a poster session to report it at an important regional research conference. He learned later that his poster was seen as disorganized and carelessly constructed. Consequently, either his presentation failed to attract the attention of the audience or his research tended to be discounted based on the poor form in which it was communicated.

A team of senior qualitative scientists traveled from the United States to Bogotá, Colombia, to present their collaborative work on “living with dementia” at an international qualitative research meeting. They had planned their poster presentation to rely substantially on the videotapes they had filmed and edited to communicate their ethologic findings. Not only could the setting for the poster presentation not accommodate the technology for reasons as fundamental as the inaccessibility of proper electrical outlets and equipment suitable for U.S. video playback, but the conference venue was prone to approximately six hours of electrical “blackout” each day that could not be predicted. Technology did indeed fail, and the researchers had no backup plan for presenting their poster session.

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A qualitative research team with noteworthy talent in designing and producing slides and transparencies using contemporary computer software packages generated a superbly attractive poster reporting their research on the use of traditional Chinese herbs and remedies to treat pain and depression. Their poster addressed all the conventional guidelines for effective poster presentations, and they had run “spell-check” to proofread their work. Regrettably, despite their visually attractive creation, their interesting research topic, and the credibility of the grounded theory they had discovered, they had included a very noticeable grammatical error on almost all of their display panels, confusing “there” with “their.” This error became a major distraction to an otherwise fine study.

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Research conducted in the naturalistic/interpretive paradigm (often called “qualitative research”) has earned respect in the scientific community for its potential to illuminate personal meanings, explain human experience, present richly detailed “stories,” achieve understanding, generate theory about processes that are shifting over time, explain variation as well as patterns and themes, and preserve historical, cultural, and contextual conditions (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Sandelowski (1994) has added to this list the notion that

qualitative research reports are aesthetically and intellectually satisfying “stories” that appeal to your mind’s eye—your sense of style and craftsmanship—teach you something important, and also touch your heart.

We qualitative investigators have traditionally preferred the research monograph over the page-limited, refereed, scientific journal article for portraying the richness and the density of our interpretive and insight-generating discoveries. We have come to believe that capturing the rigor of our method as well as the complexities of our findings within a 17-page journal manuscript in the interest of parsimony often sacrifices too much of the detail of what we have learned. Consequently, searching the literature for reports of qualitative studies reveals both classic and contemporary monographs such as Whyte’s *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (1914), Glaser and Strauss’s *Awareness of Dying* (1965), Wilson’s *Deinstitutionalized Residential Care for Schizophrenics: The Soteria House Approach* (1982), Hutchinson’s *Hidden Dimensions of Watchful Readiness: Survival Practices of Rescue Workers* (1986), Kayser-Jones’s *Old, Alone, and Neglected: Care of the Aged in Scotland and the United States* (1981), Benner’s *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing Practice* (1984), and Morse and Johnson’s *The Illness Experience: Dimensions of Suffering* (1991), to name but a few.

If the constraints of a page-limited article pose barriers to reporting qualitative work through the scientific journal medium, the research poster looms as an even greater challenge for the qualitative researcher because posters are by definition concise and visual rather than richly detailed and dependent on language. Yet the potential value of presenting an effective poster session is sufficiently promising that qualitative researchers must engage this challenge and craft an appropriate rendition of poster pragmatics befitting studies conducted in the naturalistic/interpretive paradigm.

Sandelowski (1994) set the standard for reporting and disseminating qualitative research, naming it a *poetic*. We must be able to make science out of biography, make theory from life stories, reveal secrets of the heart, claim rigor as well as imagination, resound with the experience of others, be faithful to the subject, be true to our participants, and tell an aesthetically and intellectually satisfying story. This chapter takes up the gauntlet to achieve a poetic in poster presen-

tations. We will examine strategies to avoid errors exemplified by the beginning vignettes and explore the pragmatics of how to bring visual literacy to poster sessions that effectively present qualitative inquiry.

### **The Value of Presenting Qualitative Research Up Close**

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Knowledge and insights discovered through qualitative research can make a difference only if investigators report them to others through publication of research monographs, scientific journal articles, talks at professional meetings, and poster presentations (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). A poster is a means of summarizing and communicating research in a primarily visual format (Kleinbeck, 1988; Ryan, 1989; Sexton, 1984; Sherbinski & Stroup, 1992). Although visual elements predominate in posters, language complements and expands on the visual message. As Sharf (1995) aptly points out, "Visual art with its elements of aesthetics, economy of statement and individualized expression, conveys information and points of view in emphatic and convincing ways" (p. 72). In so doing, posters are characterized as possessing dynamics that constitute a unique rhetorical type. The rhetorical dynamics include word and image, the literal and the symbolic, personal experience and political agenda, and distance and proximity (Sharf, 1995). Stylistically, posters can range from literal to symbolic, realistic to fantastic, with juxtapositions that assist the viewer in comprehending the researched problem and yet transcend it as well (Sharf, 1995). Sharf, for example, comments on a set of posters created by breast cancer survivors to convey varying reactions to the experience. She characterizes the posters as "the inward gaze and the outreach to others . . . blended in seamless and clever ways, so that the impact of both dimensions are experienced simultaneously by the viewer . . . the visual tension between proximity and distance echoes the interplay between the personal and the political" (p. 73). Sharf emphasizes that certain meanings in the posters she explicates are intended to be understood when viewing the poster from afar, for example, the messages portrayed in the "Spread the Word" poster, which was designed as a joint effort of the Office of Cancer Communications and the National Black Leadership Initia-

tive on Cancer as part of “the art series of cancer prevention posters.” Sharf describes this poster as employing form over content by depicting ageless, featureless women in a stylized image of African women dressed in sumptuous colors of turquoise, gold, green, and red telling each other about regular mammograms starting at 50. They are indeed “spreading the word.”

Polly Strand, whom Sharf (1995) describes as a breast cancer survivor with three daughters, who is herself the daughter of a woman whom she describes as “dying a horrible death from treatment of breast cancer” (p. 75), created a poster image of a red scar with black stitches standing out on her chest and “up close” printing of insistent political messages urging today’s mothers to take a strong political stand in support of financial support for breast cancer prevention.

The work of artist/model Matuschka in her bare-chested self-photograph titled “Beauty out of Damage” (August 15, 1993), which appeared on the front cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, brought the taboo image of mastectomy to the general public and raised funds for breast cancer advocacy. In another more introspective and personal poster, writer/poet Deena Metzger was photographed with a tree tattooed on her own mastectomy scar in the hope of challenging viewers to look beyond the wound as stigma, to resee it as a symbol of healing, regeneration, and vitality. It is this notion of reframing poster presentations as artistic rhetoric that qualitative researchers must embrace if we are to use the poster session as a medium for presenting qualitative research up close and as a poetic for qualitative inquiry.

However, as indicated in the vignettes that began this chapter, “A good poster display cannot rescue a bad idea, but a poor one can easily sink the best idea—as well as the viewers’ impression of the author” (Bushy, 1991, p. 11). In short, a poster, as well as the presenter’s execution of it, informs the viewer as much about the researcher as about the information presented (Bushy, 1991). Careful design, visual literacy, and meticulous proofreading and editing can help avoid the unfortunate scenario described in this chapter’s first vignette. Bushy (1991) reminds us that posters are often the only opportunity some researchers have to make a first and lasting impression. Based on principles drawn from photography, art, education, computer science, and even marketing, most authorities concur that effective posters

should be concise, eye-catching, appealing, informative, unified, and interactive with the viewers. These qualities are relatively easily achieved when one can report quantitative research findings in colorful pie charts and bar graphs. They are more challenging to achieve when findings consist of stories, concepts, description, explanation, and grounded theories. In her chapter "Meaning Through Form: Alternative Modes of Knowledge Representation," Norris (this volume) points out that "it is important to distinguish between nondiscursive forms that *express* meaning and discursive forms that *state it*." She views this distinction as the difference between *showing* and *telling*. Most qualitative research posters must accomplish both.

### Purposes for Posters

Posters are often used as an early phase in the research dissemination process prior to presenting a completed study in a formal paper or published article or book. Such a purpose is particularly relevant to theory-generating qualitative research that is viewed as ever becoming, ever extending, and ever densifying. In-progress presentations can provide immediate, face-to-face feedback to investigators by stimulating detailed discussions with audiences who are pursuing similar lines of research or who are struggling with comparable methodological concerns. At one such session during the American Psychiatric Association's annual scientific session in 1995, Wilson presented preliminary findings from the qualitative phase of an instrument development study that identified conceptual domains for the meaning of Quality of Life (QOL) among ethnically diverse advanced AIDS patients (PLWAs). In his interactions with the investigators, a psychiatrist audience member made a cogent argument for attempting to collect some indicators of personality traits to address the question of how to explain how some PLWAs sustain their QOL while others are unable to do so. His suggestion influenced additional data collection and another analytic direction.

Audiences for posters can seek clarification as well as offer criticism and ideas to investigators. Like an art "installation," poster presentations are not complete until viewers experience and interact with them. Viewers move at their own pace as they examine poster displays.