VIETNAM JOURNAL OF EDUCATION, 2025
Volume 9, Special Issue, 156-167
https://doi.org/10.52296/vje.2025.487

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

From Numbers to Narratives: Becoming a Qualitative Researcher in the Global South

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Article history
Received: 10 October, 2024
Accepted: 03 March, 2025
Published: 20 April, 2025

Keywords
Autoethnography, qualitative research, research methodology, research methods, Global South, Vietnam

ABSTRACT
In this paper, I narrate my journey of becoming a qualitative researcher from the Global South. My transformation has been facilitated by five conditions: learning from fieldwork masters to value rapport and context; learning from diverse communities to embrace multiple interpretations and give voice to the marginalized; learning from key methodology literature to gain theoretical foundations; learning to navigate academic writing and publishing to develop resilience and persuasive skills; and learning to be authentic to transform myself as a researcher and human being.

1. INTRODUCTION

When I was invited to contribute to the topic of the *Qualitative Journeys*, I was immediately interested. The reason was simple: I see myself as a qualitative researcher, practitioner, and mentor.

This article is an autoethnography of my transition into a qualitative researcher. It began during my undergraduate years, when I first developed an interest in and learned qualitative research, and continues to the present day, where I apply qualitative research in my work and teach this approach to students. Shaped by the context of Vietnam, a Global South country[1], this journey represents the struggles I have faced as my attempts to adopt and promote qualitative research are often marginalized in the (post)positivist approach dominant in education, academics, consultancy, and workplace settings. The stories told document many ups and downs, and moments of being in isolation and feeling lost. More importantly, I want to narrate my self-transformation, resulting from learning from my mentors, research participants, literature, writing, and publication. Focused on bachelor's, master's and doctoral students in social sciences and humanities including education, this paper highlights lessons on how I have navigated through the hurdles and followed my passion for qualitative research. I hope that this paper will help them pay more attention to, fall in love with, and build a career around qualitative research as I have done and continue to do so.

My paper includes two parts, the first part describes the context of my education before becoming a qualitative researcher, and the second part discusses the five conditions that facilitated this transformation.

2. IN THE LANGUAGE OF NUMBERS: EARLY ACADEMIC TRAINING IN VIETNAM

In 2005, I started my bachelor's degree in sociology at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vietnam National University in Hanoi. The training in research methodology at our faculty was largely dominated by

[1]This term refers to an 'intellectual, ideological and political' project that originated in the 1970s following the death of the antecedent term 'Third World' and became popular in the1980s (see an excellent review of the term's origin by Dirlik (2007). Global South refers 'broadly as 'the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania,… that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized" (Dados & Connell, 2012).

quantitative research. Three of the four subjects in the four-year curriculum focused on quantitative methods, including questionnaire design, random sampling strategies, and statistics in social sciences. Only one second-year subject, *Methodology and Methods in Sociological Research* (Phạm Văn Quyết & Nguyễn Quý Thanh, 2007) touched lightly upon qualitative methods, including observations and interviews. However, there was no mention of the link between research methods and the underlying philosophical worldviews such as (post)positivism or social constructivism, completely ignoring the matters of ontology, epistemology, or axiology, and how they shape our methodological choices and practices.

Consequently, in my novice mind, sociological research was equivalent to quantitative research. This equivalence was emphasized in the way most of our lecturers delivered their subjects and assignments. The spirit of quantitative research was then extended naturally to our approach to small research projects for compulsory subjects like internships, our bachelor's theses, and especially annual social research competitions organized for students. It was very rare, if not non-existent, to see a sociology project that utilized qualitative research.

We naively believed that if we were going to do a sociological study, we had to first develop our research hypotheses (e.g., H0 and H1 hypotheses) and then design our research to test them. We had to ensure our sample was random so that later we could generalize the results from the chosen sample to the population. We would strive to measure the phenomenon under study at different scales, ranging from nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio scales. We would try to brainstorm close-ended questions with an exhaustive list of options for each question so that respondents' responses would fall into the pre-determined options. The data, hence, were *numbers*, and so was the data analysis. It also became a taken-for-granted practice for all of us to analyse our surveys with SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*) although not everyone was good at statistics. SPSS became the gold standard for good research. It became normal that we would present our research in numbers, frequencies, *chi square, gamma, r,* and most importantly, the magic *p*. We all tried to obtain results where $p<=0.05$ so that we would have our research results at the accepted "statistically significant" level. Achieving $p<=0.05$ was largely what we thought was needed to make our research reliable and valid.[2]

I believe the aforementioned research atmosphere can be related to the context of the golden age (1950-1970), when postpositivism dominated research in the United States (Denzin et al., 2023).[3] This was the context before Egon Guba – the pioneer in qualitative research inquiry – championed a constructivist philosophy. In the context of systematic inquiry in the United States in the 1950s-1960s, where statistics and experimentation, with tests and assessments, dominated the field, Guba first used his training in statistics to evaluate educational change, the topic he was assigned to study. However, he gradually realized the ineffectiveness of quantitative research in measuring educational change. He found that non-experimental methods such as focus groups could capture the change well through nuanced stories, which led to his question about the validity of this experimental approach in the mid to late 1960s and prompted him, in his collaboration with Lincoln to adopt a non-experimental approach. They later named their approach "*Naturalistic Inquiry*" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which proposed the concepts of constructed reality and naturalistic paradigm that signalled the end of the paradigm war.[4] This paradigm was then relabelled as a "constructivist paradigm" in Guba and Lincoln's (1989) subsequent book (see Schwandt, 2013). Opposing the postpositivist paradigm, naturalism champions the practice of research that occurs in natural settings where "no manipulation on the part of the inquirer is implied, and second, the inquirer imposes no a priori units on the outcome.

[2]Reliability ensures research can be replicable, while validity ensures that the research reflects "truths" (Krippendorff, 2018). Qualitative research, however, uses terms to judge the research quality such as consistency, trustworthiness, transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

[3]In their Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (2023), Denzin and colleagues proposed that the history of qualitative research as a research field has gone through eleven moments including: the traditional (1900-1950), the modernist or golden age (1950-1970), the blurred genres (1970-1980), the paradigm wars (1980-1985), the crisis of representation (1986-1990), the postmodern (1990-1995), the post-experimental inquiry (1995-2000), the methodologically contested present (2000-2004), paradigm proliferation (2005-2010), the fractured, posthumanist turn (2010-2015), and the uncertain, utopian future-present (2016-present).

[4]The paradigm concept was made known in Thomas Kuhn's book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" (1962). This concept is defined differently by scholars. Morgan (2007, p. 50) defines it as "*shared belief systems that influence the kinds of knowledge researchers seek and how they interpret the evidence they collect*".

Naturalistic investigation is what the naturalistic investigator does and these two tenets are the prime directives." (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.8).

Obviously, in those early days of my bachelor's years, I had no idea of what "naturalistic research" meant. However, some of the ideas associated with this approach were sown in my mind when I had chances to work in "naturalistic' settings.

3. FIVE CONDITIONS FOR BECOMING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

3.1. From field masters: The art of building rapport

This first seed came when I went on a social survey field trip for our major research project in my third year. Professor Nguyễn Quý Thanh, who was our lecturer, guided us in conducting our major research project. In that project, we were required to design a large social survey in Hai Phong city, to collect quantitative data that accommodated the research questions of the whole K50 Sociology class (the 50th class) (about 80 students' small projects). We co-designed the questionnaire together, formulated our research questions, identified variables, and collected the data. While this project was purely quantitative, the field trip provided an opportunity to expand my intellectual boundaries beyond quantitative research by listening to informal talks between my professor and his teaching assistant at tea shops located in the commune we visited for our fieldwork. Those small talks often occurred at the end of the day after our formal planning or survey sessions. Silently observing their exchanges of 'tricks of the trade'[5] in sociological research was far more exciting than learning from my formal subjects. I was amazed by their suggestion that if we wanted to have good data for our questionnaire, we sociologists should first learn to build good rapport with our research respondents.

Later, I had the opportunity to experience what they shared. Our class was divided to carry out our surveys with the pre-developed questionnaire. With the paper-based questionnaires in my bag, I followed the small routes within a small town in Hai Phong city, trying to persuade householders to join our survey. It was not an easy process. I realized that research went beyond predetermined questions. It was about approaching strangers, gaining trust, and building relationships that could enrich their responses and stories. Cold approaches to respondents often resulted in their refusal to join our survey, or their provision of vague information. I began to understand that social research transcended *numbers*. Building *trust* between the researchers and the researched was also key to quality data.

By the end of my third year, I had the chance to immerse myself in the field by working for a consulting firm. The company worked in the development sector, providing consultancy for social and environmental safeguard evaluation projects. This opportunity allowed me to engage in real projects and begin to cultivate my qualitative research skills.

During that time, I worked closely with local communities in Hai Duong province, 30 kilometres from Hanoi, in a project funded by the World Bank. This project aimed to develop and implement a community-based behaviour change communication project that helped change local people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding water supply and personal hygiene. This work allowed me to travel, by motorbike, once every two weeks to villages in 30 communes across 11 districts and one city in Hai Duong province. I had opportunities to interview local people – the beneficiaries, trying to understand *how* and *why* people used toilets or safe water as they did. This was the first 'social laboratory' – an intensive social research site for me to learn and apply qualitative research, and where I fell in love with its nature.

I was fortunate to work under the guidance of Professors Phạm Văn Quyết and Lê Thái Thị Băng Tâm. I remember walking through the village with Professor Quyết. Suddenly, he stopped to photograph a toilet, located near a pond. He explained to me that the toilet's proximity to the water source was concerning because human waste could contaminate the water, potentially spreading harmful bacteria to people or animals, who might swim in or drink from the pond. He then concluded that a good photo was worth more than a thousand words, and that we could use this photo to demonstrate how an unhygienic toilet could cause problems for local well-being. Observing closely the phenomena in the field trains the capacity to link events to their causes, seeing phenomena beyond their surfaces. I later learned this is the *interpretative* capacity in understanding and unveiling social events. The

[5]The terms is borrowed from the title of the famous book '*Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It'* (1998) by Howard S. Becker, the American Sociologist (1928-2023).

observation lesson and the image of that toilet remain in my mind after those 15 years. My involvement with qualitative research, however, had only just begun.

My next opportunity came when working with Professor Tâm on *participatory* community-based planning. As an experienced qualitative researcher, she was known for her approachable manner and meticulous attention to detail. Following her, we would travel around Hai Duong province, organizing focus groups using participatory tools such as village maps, seasonal calendars, and Venn diagrams. She often started by asking participants warming-up questions that seemed out of scope and irrelevant but were easy for participants to answer. She then naturally led them to our project's topic with *open-ended* questions about the key locations in their village (e.g., waste dumping locations) and the challenges of accessing those areas. She would flexibly ask probing questions based on the initial information given by the participants which often, to my surprise, resulted in a story full of interesting details. Her ability to ask spontaneous, unscripted questions challenged my rigid 'quantitative' mindset that had been fixed on a predetermined protocol.

The more I engaged in working with communities, the more I came to understand qualitative research principles. For instance, it is important to maintain a curious mindset and stay largely open to emerging insights. When you are humble and eager to learn, participants are more willing to share information. That is why Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) guidelines on participant observation teach us to stay "naïve" when we are in the field. Later I learned that we, qualitative researchers, often do not follow *a linear, fixed research design*, but rather an *emergent design* (Creswell, 2007) in a non-linear, iterative, flexible fashion. In short, letting surprises surprise you.

3.2. From communities: Embracing diversity

After several months of following Professor Tâm, I was given a chance to facilitate focus groups with her assistance. After a year, I was able to lead the focus group discussions. These experiences proved invaluable during my next one-and-a-half years working in Hai Duong province. I frequently visited the project sites at the commune level. This involved building good rapport not only with key leaders at the commune and village levels but also with different groups within local communities. After three years working on the project, I had the opportunity to diversify my experience with another consulting firm, which placed me in a more active role to lead qualitative research.

Through this process, I learned firsthand the difference between *focus group* and *individual interviews*. The former operates on a different level than the latter since it allows the moderators to facilitate discussions among a group of 6-8 participants who have many different opinions on the same topics. I came to learn that it was not possible to have just one single interpretation of reality (*one single truth*) like naïve positivists would believe in existence. There were always *multiple interpretations* of the same phenomenon and participants had reasons for this since they had different gender identities, occupations, knowledge, experience, traditions, political status, social memberships, and so forth that shaped their worldviews. As Denzin et al. (2023) say, we must move beyond *naïve realism* to see that our texts *construct* the world instead of *mirroring* it. The richness and naturalness are what make qualitative data "sexy" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My job as a focus group moderator was not to stop or ignore these conflicts but to guide participants toward achieving a *mutual understanding* of the topic being discussed. Obtaining this was key to building a collective actionable plan that could create change. I later learned that translating a social problem into a feasible plan focused not on either maintaining *objectivity* often seen in postpositivism and quantitative research, or obtaining pure *subjectivity* in constructivism and qualitative research, but on agreeing on *intersubjectivity*,[6] that is, a shared understanding.

However, achieving that outcome in development projects was never easy. Acting as a moderator taught me not only how to effectively ask the suitable, culturally sensitive questions but, more importantly, to pay attention to what lay behind the surface presentation. Broadly speaking, this interviewing skill is an *art* of asking, hearing, and sharing put together (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).[7] Group dynamics, social status, access to resources, and power relations are some of the factors that shape the way people interact with each other in real-life circumstances and in researchers'

[6]Achieving an intersubjectivity is often associated with *pragmatism*, an alternative to post-positivism and constructivism (Morgan, 2014).

[7]Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 15) term their interviewing as 'responsive interviewing', whereby "*researchers respond to and then ask further questions about what they hear from the interviewees, rather than rely exclusively on predetermined questions. Responsive interviewing emphasizes the importance of working with interview partners rather than treating them as objects*".

focus groups. I learned how to identify silent and 'muted' participants, who were in more vulnerable or powerless positions and were not able to make their voices heard (Nguyen, 2012). My job was to empower them and give them a chance to raise their concerns. I understood that our research was a chance for them to be able to speak aloud the thoughts they often had to hold back in real-life situations. As a qualitative researcher, listening to their stories is a privilege and in return, I have a *representational responsibility* (Saldaña, 2018) to make sure their voices are heard, their cases considered, and their lessons learned.

The research approach that seeks to challenge existing power structures and make positive social changes represents the *transformative worldview* (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Its methodologies such as *Participatory Rural Appraisal*[8] (PRA) (Narayanasamy, 2009) has been widely used in development projects to engage with local participants/beneficiaries in rural settings. These methods encourage the participation and ownership of local people, especially the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups such as women, the elderly, and ethnic minority groups. This group of methods addresses the unequal power relations, the existence of inequalities that lead to social vulnerabilities (see, for instance, Wisner et al. (1994, 2004)). The participatory methods challenge this *status quo*, encouraging vulnerable groups to raise their voices and integrate their concerns into local socio-economic or disaster management planning. It is natural that qualitative research, with its strengths in establishing social rapport, conducting participant observation, and producing *thick description* (Geertz, 1973), resonates with the nature and the need of the participatory worldview. Qualitative research taught me that I should look deeply into these unequal power relations, be critical of the current *structural inequalities*, conduct research to challenge established order so as to create positive social impacts and make life better. That is, to me, the power of qualitative research.

Most importantly, what I really valued was being able to learn firsthand from communities. For me, this is where qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers often *differ*. As quantitative researchers, one could start their career as an enumerator, carrying a questionnaire to collect data from people. Yet as they become more senior, their roles (be they supervisors, or analysts) may take them further away from *direct* data collection. For qualitative researchers, firsthand data collection is usually a must. When they interact with and interview their participants, they do not just gather data, but also *influence* and *are influenced* by their participants' bodily presence and interpretations, and therefore, *co-construct* the realities that they later report in their research reports. As a result, even as I became more senior, I have always wanted to contribute to the primary data collection process that involves working directly with research participants.

People I interviewed have left their life imprints on me. During our meetings, they brought their rich life stories, constructed in different social circumstances, be it a mountainous village in Dong Van, Ha Giang province, in a rice field on a mountain in Ba To, Quang Ngai province, in a 12-square-meter room in a rundown row of boarding houses for factory workers at a shoe factory in Quang Ninh province, or in a community hall in the Goulburn Broken region in Victoria, Australia. They could be a farmer, a school teacher, a person with a visual disability, or a water corporation manager. To borrow C. Wright Mills' famous phrase,[9] these groups enriched my 'sociological imagination' through their personal meaning-making and narratives. The stories they told me unveiled the ways they constructed their meanings, the *why* of their interpretations of *what* was meaningful and what was not, and the *how* and *why* they did the things the way they did. Their stories have expanded my qualitative imagination, enabling me to see and interpret things from different angles and become more open to diversity.

In sum, my experience as a social consultant working with different communities has largely shaped my career as a qualitative researcher who pursues making positive social changes.

3.3. From literature: Building methodological foundations

In parallel with my community work, I kept maintaining my academic research. Early in my career, since the end of my third bachelor's year, I had the opportunity to work as a research assistant, mainly doing statistical analysis using SPSS for research projects. The opportunity for my first systematic reading of social research methodology books came when I was assigned to read the classic book *Research Design* by Creswell (2003). Although my English was at a beginner's level, I found his book very easy to understand. It provided me with a comprehensive introduction to social research methodologies. It demonstrated, in a very logical and systematic way, the connection between

[8]Chambers, R. (1994, p. 953) defines PRA as: "*a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act*".
[9]Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.

research *methods* – the specific ways of doing research tasks; research *methodologies* – the theories behind our choices of methods; and research *paradigms* – the theories explaining what reality is (*ontology*), how we produce knowledge about it (*epistemology*), and what values drive our research (*axiology*). The book introduced me to four *worldviews*[10] including *constructivist*, *post-positivist*, *pragmatist*, and *advocacy/participatory.*[11] The book also provided a clear map of the differences between the designs of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method research. This clarity illuminated my understanding of research and provided a solid foundation for how I think about social research as I am doing it.

In addition, I was given a chance to read Creswell's (2007) book *Qualitative Inquiry*, which was also a breakthrough in my approach to qualitative research. This book introduced five qualitative research approaches including *grounded theory*, *narrative research*, *case study*, *phenomenology*, and *ethnography*. The book introduced me to the initial ideas of meaning construction, building theory from data, and the data-driven approach. The more I read these books, the clearer qualitative research became for me. Qualitative research resonated with my personal preferences and values[12] in learning about people through their stories.

By the end of 2011, I received the Australian Development Scholarship to study for a Master of Arts degree at Flinders University in South Australia, marking the beginning of a new journey in the academic world: formally learning about qualitative research. In my Master's years, inspired by my lecturer, Dr. Eduardo de la Fuente, I delved into social theories, reading the theory of culture interpretation by Clifford Geertz (1973), the presentation of self in everyday life by Erving Goffman (1959), and social communication by Randall Collins (2004). For my Master's thesis, I read Strauss and Corbin's (1990) classic book *Basics in Qualitative Research* which introduced me to grounded theory methods, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist version of grounded theory, and I learned fieldwork methodologies from books such as Patton (2002), Lofland et al. (2006), and Taylor and Bogdan (1984).

Professor Sharyn Roach Anleu, my Master's thesis supervisor, taught me how to turn an everyday observation into a qualitative research project. In her office, she was present, patiently listened, and constructively provided feedback on my stories. I told her that my idea came from my observation that Australians in Adelaide, South Australia, had the habit of saying "How are you" and "Thank you" to their bus drivers every time they got off the bus. These small rituals, as we agreed with Collins's suggestion (2004), often operate at a surface level (i.e., asking "How are you" is not a real question but rather a ritual that functions to smooth our social interaction). These rituals are "little ceremonial gifts" (Manning 1989, p. 376) that people send to their fellow human beings.

In my Master's thesis (Nguyen, 2014), I used Goffman's (1956) theory of *deference rituals* to study the ways Vietnamese people in Hanoi interact and express respect in their everyday life. Using grounded theory methods and interviews, I came to understand that Vietnamese people had different rules for regulating their society and relationships. They did not have the habit of saying "Thank you" when getting off a bus because they would ascribe this phrase with a heavier meaning. When they said "Thank you", it often came from the situation that they owed somebody something valuable, and participants would consider that bus drivers were just doing their jobs and passengers had already paid them, thus, "Thank you" was not necessary (Nguyen, 2016). Similarly, Vietnamese people often avoided saying "Sorry" to protect their "sacred face" (Nguyen, 2015) and they only did so if they had done something bad to other people.

During my doctoral project at Monash University, I faced many ups and downs, particularly struggling with how to meaningfully present my research. Associate Professor Helen Forbes-Mewett helped me break free from a conventional, "postpositivist" formats in presenting qualitative research. Her talk at an international conference in Singapore inspired me through its storytelling approach – a fascinating story with *plots* and a *sequence of events* that captivated the audience. This experience taught me that qualitative researchers are *storytellers*, who shed light on research participants – the *characters*, and the *why* and *how* of their actions. Meanwhile, my associate supervisor often challenged me to think critically. His practical mindset pushed me to stay on the ground, making *pragmatic* decisions about methodological choices. Their encouragement prompted me to choose Yin's (2009) *case study research*, which urged me to frame my research questions in *how* and *why* forms, focusing processes rather than

[10]Creswell's term equivalent to paradigm.

[11]Note that different from the 2003 version, Creswell changed the *advocacy/participatory paradigm* to a *transformative worldview* in his 4th edition of the Research Design book (Creswell, 2013).

[12]That is, my values or axiology.

casual relationships. This approach emphasizes clear social, temporal, spatial boundaries between *case* and *context*, while distinguishing *units of analysis* – the level at which we often discuss our findings, from *unit of observation* – the level at which we collect our data.

More importantly, Yin taught me that case study and qualitative research do not use *statistical generalization* that relies on probability sampling, but instead, tend to focus on *analytic generalization*. Analytic generalization does not aim to generate findings from a sample to its population. Instead, it helps qualitative/case study researchers to extend their findings 'beyond their original case study, based on the relevance of similar theoretical concepts or principles" (Yin, 2018, p. 349). Additionally, Maxwell and Chimel (2014) taught me that qualitative research should aim for *transferability*, which centres on the transfer of knowledge from one case to another. It means that the knowledge we produce in a certain setting can be applied to other settings if we can establish *compatibility* between them.

In those days, I was concerned with paradigms[13] or the philosophical worldviews (Creswell 2003). I asked on an academic forum if I could use pragmatism for my case study research design. Then I read Morgan's (2007) well-known paper, *Paradigm lost, pragmatism regained*, which also largely reshaped my viewpoint as a *pragmatist qualitative researcher*. Morgan (2007) argues for the need to escape from the extremes of either/or dichotomy, that often distances the stances between qualitative research and quantitative research: either induction or deduction, either subjectivity or objectivity, either context or generalizability. Morgan (2007) champions a model of pragmatism that aims to promote *abduction* (i.e., moving back and forth between induction and deduction), *intersubjectivity* (i.e., creating a mutual understanding between the researcher and the researched and relevant stakeholders to create an actionable plan), and *transferability* (i.e., applying knowledge gained from one case to other settings).

As a social consultant working on helping local authorities and communities to plan and implement effective projects, I have found pragmatism to be a great alternative to post-positivism and constructivism in that it centres on *problem-solving*. I like the sense that whenever I enter a new project, I often find conflicts arising among various groups: the researchers who are often experts and academics from different disciplines and methodologies, non-academics and local communities, and various groups with different interests, cultures, social positions, and capabilities to access resources and power, who would have different opinions on the same topic of interest. Their conflicts represent the nature of the so-called *wicked problems* (Rittel & Webber, 1973), which are often multifaceted, multi-level, interconnected, and intertwined. To address them, we might need to learn from different philosophical paradigms and traditions, follow multi- and trans-disciplinary approaches, use mixed and multiple methods, and work with multi-stakeholders and diverse communities. Thus, the emphasis is not on the scholarly or theoretical debates that satisfy only the curiosity and search for pure knowledge; instead, the priority is to find a shared, feasible solution to tackle problems (Nguyen-Trung et al., 2024).

3.4. From writing: Building academic resilience

To become a qualitative researcher, generally speaking, is to become a writer. However, becoming a writer has never been easy for me, both in the early days or present days of my career. Getting research published in peer-reviewed journals is often considered important for all researchers who want to stay in academia. I struggled significantly with my first English peer-reviewed papers although I started my Vietnamese publication in 2009. By the end of my Master's years, I already had the idea of publishing my thesis (Nguyen, 2014). The first paper focused on what made Vietnamese people say 'Thank you' and 'Apology' as they often did in their everyday life. At that time, I had limited knowledge of English academic writing, especially for qualitative research, let alone the journals' reputation or Scopus or the Web of Science's journal ranking.

Yet, one of the biggest challenges I faced was getting past editors or reviewers who might not be so friendly to qualitative research. I remember the first time I submitted my paper to an international peer-reviewed journal, my paper was desk rejected due to the editor's criticism of the small number of interviews (20) in my project sample. As I designed my Master project using grounded theory methods, I followed the concept of *saturation*, which is defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.61) as *"[t]he criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category's theoretical saturation. Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category*". Saturation, however, needs to be applied in the

[13]Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.15) define paradigm as "a systematic set of beliefs, together with their accompanying methods… Paradigms represent a distillation of what we *think* about the world (but cannot prove). Our actions in the world, including actions that we take as inquirers, cannot occur without reference to those paradigms'.

context of grounded theory where researchers use the 'constant comparative method' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method means that the development of grounded theory is achieved through continuous interplay between the acts of gathering and analysing data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These two research tasks are connected through *theoretical sampling*, whereby "*the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges*" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45).

In my case, while doing my fieldwork, I did preliminary data analysis (including *open coding*, and writing *operational, coding*, and *theoretical memos*) right after each interview and used the arising insights to determine what and who I needed in the next interview rounds. However, at the time of my first paper rejection, I did not have the chance to explain this and probably also did not have the confidence to defend my approach. After that rejection, I was depressed for quite some time before being able to get up to work on this paper again.

To my knowledge - and this might be biased - there seemed to be a smaller world for qualitative research to thrive at the time I first tried my luck. There could still be discrimination against qualitative research nowadays, especially in cases where editors and reviewers are not familiar with or have no expertise in qualitative research (see Clark & Thompson, 2016; Clarke et al., 2024). From my experience, this unfavourable attitude towards qualitative research will continue to exist in the publishing world. Numbers often bring about a fancier representation of reality. People love them because they are short, concise, and easily visualized. People, however, have less time for a detailed, albeit fruitful, story.

If there is something we can do, it is that we can prepare our research in the best way possible to *convince* readers (be they editors or reviewers) of the worth of our research. At the end of the day, "research is an act of persuasion" (Saldaña, 2024, p. 4)[14]. In the context of publishing in journals, this means that we should have the capacity to *counter* editors' and reviewers' feedback on our methods. To do so, I think we need to have a solid background in social methodologies to defend our approach.

Therefore, the challenge of becoming a qualitative writer on the global stage is not limited to language capacity; rather, it is, for me, a matter of theoretical and methodological capability. During my bachelor's years in Vietnam, I did not have access to peer-reviewed journals because my university did not have journal subscriptions. It was also hard for me to access *micro* and *middle-range theories* that were more suitable for refereed journal articles. Instead, I was primarily taught macro theories such as structural functionalism by Talcott Parsons and Marxist-Leninist theories (Nguyen-Trung, 2024). While these theories have value in their own right, they were not particularly helpful when it came to using theory to guide our empirical research and conducting analytic generalization as Yin and Maxwell suggest. Hence, for those aspiring to become qualitative researchers from countries in the Global South like Vietnam, it is important to recognize our limited access to new social theories and methodologies compared to scholars from the Global North. Once we know our weaknesses, we can focus on addressing them.

3.5. From authenticity: The power of being real

The search for a writer's success for me is the search for our *unique style* of writing. We need to inscribe our identity in our written products. In other words, we need to have our personal touch in what we communicate. On this matter, I love what Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña state (2013, p. 284): "*One common misconception some scholars have is that you need to "write smart" to be taken seriously… [We should] [w]rite simply, write clearly, and write believably. Keep it real*".

Writing clearly and writing authentically seem relevant to me. For the first part, since I could not write things as smoothly as I would like, I often started my writing by brainstorming key ideas, then structuring them hierarchically. My arguments began with a claim, followed by reasons, based often on my theoretical framework, that provided explanations for that claim, and then evidence that supported my claim with empirical or secondary data or literature reviews. Later, I learned that the logic of *linearity*[15] underlines that thinking, often trying to structure and link points under a key theme.

[14]In addition to this, selecting the right journal that would welcome qualitative research, and then having a sufficient understanding of the chosen journal's aim and scope, submission guidelines, past publications, and their readership community (Clark & Thompson, 2016) would be key. A good starting point for those who are not familiar with qualitative research is the list of qualitative journals curated by Ronald Chenail, the Editor-in-Chef at The Qualitative Report (see in the references).

[15]A key publication on this topic is Kaplan's (1966) work on the differences in paragraphing logic between native speakers and students who use English as a second language.

However, writing in qualitative research is *not just* about linearity, which is often criticised for its association with (post)positivistic thinking and the 'ontology of determinacy' (Castoriadis, 1987). Qualitative writing requires a 'radical imagination' (Castoriadis, 1987), or a 'decolonising research imagination' (Nguyen & Chia, 2023), that facilitates researchers' non-linearity, creativity, and artistry beyond the universalization of 'reality, knowledge and truth' (Kenway & Fahey, 2009, p.7).

For authentic writing, it took me some time to understand this meaning. Most of my career up until 2021 was spent telling the stories constructed through the experiences of other people, be they female migrants, motorbike taxi drivers, or hair barbers. Being a qualitative researcher means siding with those who are marginalized, empowering them and those in authority to do good things together, and eventually bringing about positive impacts in their areas.

Like it or not, my writing about those groups is my interpretation of their *realities*. My interpretation reflects my identity as a Vietnamese, male, Kinh,[16] rural-area-raised and small-town-grown-up, lower middle-class, privileged scholar with a sociological and qualitative-pragmatist methodological orientation. While the influence of these *positionalities* on my writing is reflected in my scholarly outputs, largely in the methods section of theses or journal articles, this *reflexivity* practice is limited because it does not provide a sufficient space for making myself an object of study, exploring inward, and critically interrogating my identity, worldview, experiences and assumptions.

Writing "real" only became urgent in 2021 when I lost my grandfather. The most dramatic part of that story is that I was trapped in a lockdown in Australia and could not see my grandfather, who was in Vietnam, one last time. This event led me to *autoethnography*, where I had to write to myself to be able to understand the experience of grief that I had been through following my grandfather's passing. My first paper (Nguyen-Trung, 2022) focused on my grandfather's death, my grief, and the sense of impermanence. My second one (Nguyen-Trung, 2024) concentrated on how I grew from the crisis thanks to the generous support and sympathy from academic communities, who applauded my bravery in sharing my vulnerabilities. Through writing and sharing them, I have developed a new understanding of growing as a qualitative researcher. Qualitative research offers so much to researchers who experience traumatic events and personal crises and helps them grow not just as writers but also as human beings.

Before obtaining that outcome, the key to this transformation was that I had to make my writing real. By this, I mean to write my heart out, to be honest (Ellis, 1999) in sharing my stories full of depressing thoughts, personal crises, and weaknesses. To expose my vulnerabilities and share them via a publication, I risked my reputation and expected to have people make (bad) judgements about me. This type of writing cannot be fake or be easily recognized if fake. Thus, to be successful in this type of writing, the judgement of the readers is crucial. If they do not feel sympathy, do not relate to the writers' emotional struggles, the writing would be a failure. When I shared my publications, I was lucky to receive many sympathetic messages from my readers. One, who was the first reviewer of my first autoethnography, recognized me when I shared my second autoethnography, three years after she read my first autoethnography's first submission. What she shared with me was wonderful:

"It was my first peer-review I did – I spent a lot of time with your text, and really connected with your story…I really enjoyed reading your second paper, and it really touched my heart. It gives me the desire to continue peer-reviewing and editing with heart and care."

She empowered me and my writing somehow empowered her. That is, for me, the meaning of writing.

Another reader, a stranger from afar, sent me an email that reads:

"On a rainy day in A, the capital city of B, reading your article on the above subject brought warmth on a cold evening. The way you weaved feedback from reviewers into your story was wow. Your narrative about cold feedback with its attendant devastating effect on new researchers is brilliant."

The fruit of receiving these feedback messages, although they were not the goals I had aimed for before writing my autoethnographies, is the reason that I believe in the power of qualitative research in transforming both writers and readers.

Qualitative research allows us to study others, make sense of their life experiences, and also to reflect inward to converse with our own selves. If subjectivity and reflexivity are something we emphasize in qualitative research, then autoethnography represents one of the most powerful forms of these practices. It demonstrates how vulnerable

[16]Kinh is the major ethnic group in Vietnam.

we are as humans, how biased we become due to our position, identity, cultural assumptions, political orientation, and how much we struggle to overcome our challenges and make sense of the life around us just like every other human being whom we would study. Therefore, the great benefit is that we do not just thrive as qualitative researchers who create knowledge but also grow as individuals who come to a better understanding of the truth *within* us and *about* us. Writing autoethnography helps me keep it authentic. This may not be a form that every researcher has tried, but I believe that it is the one every qualitative researcher *should* try at least once.

4. CONCLUSION

I have a friend in South Australia. He is a Vietnamese Australian who moved to Australia when he was four years old. In his teenage years, he tried hard to deny his Vietnamese identity in an attempt to be included in Australian society. Yet, the more he grew up, the more he realized that what made him different from his Australian friends was his Vietnamese identity. He then tried to learn Vietnamese, make friends with Vietnamese people, and participate in Vietnamese cultural events.

Like my friend's journey, my development as a qualitative researcher involved learning to embrace rather than deny my background. As a qualitative researcher from Vietnam, part of the Global South, I faced early challenges, from limited access to theoretical and methodological resources to the dominance of Western academic publishing norms. However, these challenges could be wisely used to enrich my sociological imagination, make my voice more nuanced, and help me see things differently. Embracing this identity helped me stay grounded while working with communities, stand with marginalized voices, and strive for real-life impact.

Looking back on my journey, I cherish the role of mentors who nurtured my qualitative mindset, believing in me and giving me space to grow my skillset. I cherish the time of intensive fieldwork, talking with people in different communities, and learning through their nuanced stories. For those who are interested in qualitative research, one cannot truly learn this approach without immersing themselves in extensive firsthand data collection, struggling to navigate emotional ups and downs, remaining humble, and attempting to see things from different angles. The learning naturally leads to writing. Writing is about our responsibility to make the voices of the people we research heard. Writing is also about bravely and honestly sharing your vulnerabilities in hope of transforming yourself and helping others.

Finally, no journey of growth can exist without formal and self-directed learning of research methodology literature. Learning from books and articles provides us with a theoretical and methodological foundation and knowledge of the state of the art in the field. Once we have learned the rules, we can learn how to thoughtfully adapt them to our research needs and situated contexts. One of the good ways to learn is to give. Giving through mentoring, exchanging knowledge, and building a strong community of qualitative practitioners. This is the reason why I have engaged in teaching and mentoring qualitative research and research methodology, which resulted in the formation of *the* Vietnam Social Research Methodology *Forum* in March 2017, an online community that aims to promote the learning and application of social research methods among Vietnamese scholars.

That is my journey. *What is yours?*

Conflict of Interest: No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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