The Less Said, the Better: Interpreting Silence in Qualitative Research

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Abstract
Silence has not been fully appreciated in qualitative research, despite an increased awareness of its significance in communication. Cultural indifference toward silence not only inhibits researchers’ abilities to construct meaningful accounts but also negatively influences research outcomes. Drawing on the findings from our study, this article illustrates ways in which silence can be used in data analysis and how our reflexive approach reveals the underlying meanings of silence. We discuss cultural and historical contexts that have shaped the meanings of silence in a collectivist society and contrast them with the values of individualistic cultures. We also provide recommendations for researchers to treat silence as relevant and for reviewers to be culturally sensitive in evaluating it in research conducted in non-Western settings. Finally, we propose that qualitative research assessment criteria should be considered as a manifestation of Anglo-American academic culture in a globalized era of knowledge production in qualitative research.

Keywords
silence, qualitative research, collectivist–individualist cultures, marginalized populations, globalization of qualitative research, peer review, publication

Silence is often considered as a problem in qualitative research and is viewed as representative of failure on part of the interviewers. In an era of evidence-based research, qualitative researchers are expected to demonstrate the validity of their findings based on what study participants actually said (Jack, 2006; Polit & Beck, 2013). Historically in Western culture, “speaking or speaking out continues to signal power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself” (p. 3), while silence can mean powerlessness and emptiness (Glenn, 2004). In the West, for example, people think that communication is essentially a verbal activity and tend to feel somewhat uncomfortable when others are silent (Newman, 1982). In this cultural context, silence in interviews is viewed as resulting from the interviewees’ lack of knowledge or interviewers’ insufficient skills to elicit interviewees’ responses (Poland & Pederson, 1998).

In contrast, in Japan, silence is valued and considered a significant part of communication. Rather than indicating a lack of information, it is a culturally grounded part of communication (Nakai, 2002). In Japanese culture, silence is not necessarily considered a problem because people are expected to be less assertive, and ambiguity is a common strategy in communication (Nakai, 2002). Anthropological studies suggest that these features developed from the collectivist imperative because, in a collectivist society, people need to develop communication strategies to preserve group cohesion and solidarity rather than prioritizing individual interests (Hofstede, 1991). Nakane (1972) also argues that Japanese people would “prefer to be silent than utter words such as ‘no’ or ‘I disagree’” (p. 35). She also suggests that “the avoidance of such open and bold negative expressions is rooted in the fear that it might disrupt the harmony . . . of the group” (Nakane, 1972, p. 35). Even feelings of defiance or anger can be expressed through silence (Lebra, 1987). Given this communication style, qualitative researchers studying Japanese and other non-Western cultures may face challenges interpreting data and publishing their results in the West because they are expected to provide clear evidence in a culture where silence is viewed as an absence of evidence.

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This became clear for us when we submitted an article to a health science journal based in the United Kingdom. The article described the social determinants of health of day laborers living in an urban district in Japan, focusing on persistent precarious living and employment conditions. The first author of the article (M.K.) viewed participants’ silences as perfectly normal, since she is Japanese and has internalized silence as a form of response and as a cultural norm. Thus, the author was able to draw conclusions from silent moments, incomplete remarks, and gaps in communication during interviews. However, a reviewer raised questions about quotations of participants in our study because we did not bring enough quotes to support our interpretations. In our article, we interpreted the reasons why they became day laborers. The reviewer insisted that we did not have enough evidence and indicated that the interpretations were not convincing because the quotes were not adequate.

Many of the conclusions or interpretations of the data on the reasons why the interviewees became day laborers appear to me to be tenuous at best and speculative at worst . . . Here the authors appear to be speculating that this is the reason without any evidence. Did he say that he had ruined his reputation as a hard worker? If so it needs to be shown in full. This is a key point and, along with many others, needs to be totally transparent.

Some Western researchers, however, have raised the issue of silence in qualitative research and advocated for its significance. Poland and Pederson (1998) stated that silence is more than a problem of participants or interviewers who failed to provide adequate information to elicit verbal responses. They stress that silence is a legitimate focus of investigation in qualitative research. Mazzei (2007) emphasizes that silences can be an integral part of the fullness of expression rather than secondary to spoken words. She further argues that researchers should fully examine silence as an element of the total phenomenon. Mazzei and Jackson (2012) also argue that “simplistic and mechanistic treatment of voice were insufficient” (p. 750) in knowledge production. Charmaz (2002, 2004) also claims that researchers must acknowledge silence as well as spoken words to look for the implicit meanings of responses. To this end, Charmaz also suggests that focusing on what people say is not enough. Researchers are encouraged to use other sources of information including silence and observational data, and, more importantly, to take context into account.

As stated earlier, communication systems differ across cultures. In order to illustrate such differences in the case of interviews conducted in Japan, we examined transcripts in which participants used silence in various ways. In this article, we explain how silence was used and how we established interpretations of the meaning of such silences. We also discuss challenges that researchers from non-Western cultures face when they interpret and present silence in qualitative research published in so-called international journals (Mancia & Gastaldo, 2004). Finally, we provide recommendations for both authors and reviewers of qualitative research in dealing with silence as relevant information.

**Ethnography on Day Laborers in Japan**

Day laborers are one of the most excluded groups in Japanese society and are casually employed as unskilled workers at construction sites. Most of them come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and had unstable employment, working for small companies, prior to becoming day laborers (Omatsu, 2001; Ushikusa, 1993). The experiences that led them into marginalization are usually characterized by being ostracized from their work places and families/communities when they failed to meet societal expectations. Some engage in antisocial behaviors, while others could not tolerate their work places due to mainly poor working conditions (Kawabata, 2009). Some day laborers do not agree with collectivist norms, such as closed social ties, and need to escape in order to maintain their individuality and autonomy (Kawabata, 2009).

After becoming day laborers, they face further exclusion and struggle to survive, as poor working conditions, low and insecure income, and dismal living circumstances shape their everyday experiences. They are frequently assigned to physically harder tasks than regular employees at construction sites and are often exploited. Precarious employment is more likely to trigger work-related injuries (Inoue, Nishikatani, Tsurugano, & Yano, 2011); day laborers are often assigned difficult and dangerous tasks for which they were not previously trained. As a consequence, they are more likely to contract and die of several diseases if compared to the general population (Kuroda, Osaka, Sakai, & Matoba, 2002; Matsumoto, 2000). For example, The incidence of tuberculosis (per 100,000 people) among day laborers in a day laborer district was over 1,000 in the early 2000s, which was the highest in Japan and similar to that in low-income countries (Nakata et al., 2007; Tabuchi et al., 2011).

Social exclusion impacts day laborers’ physical, mental, and social health. Their living arrangements are precarious and the district is socially stigmatized, which affects their self-respect and identity (Kawabata, 2009). They are unlikely to socialize with people outside the district, including their families and former neighbors who were previously members of their social networks, and they hardly talk about their experiences to outsiders (Kawabata, 2009).

It was in this challenging context that we undertook our ethnographic study. The first author (M.K.) conducted participant observations in the district for several months and interviewed 19-day laborers. Research ethics approval was granted through appropriate institutional review boards (Kawabata, 2009). Interview participants were recruited from a local hospital serving the day laborer district. They had time to consider the invitation, a detailed document explaining the study, the opportunity to ask questions to the interviewer, who was present at the hospital facility for most of the week. In addition, in preparation to the fieldwork, the interviewer had volunteered in agencies serving these workers. Both the preparation and availability helped to build a trust relationship with participants.

We critically considered the potential effects of the positionality of the female, middle-class, highly educated researcher...
conducting the interviews at several moments of the study (Finlay, 2002; Lovell, 2007). A fieldwork journal and discussions with the other researcher were used as reflexive strategies to guide methodological decisions. Being mindful of her positionality, during the interviews, the first author waited to raise sensitive questions (e.g., how participants became day laborers) until she felt there was a good flow in the conversation. In addition, to give participants control over the interview process, she respected their use of silence and did not further probe, despite the need to generate data.

Silence in Interviews With Day Laborers

As mentioned previously, the Japanese silence is a cultural norm and it is often used unconsciously in communication. Given the challenges we faced for publication, we decided to further explore the uses of silence by the participants to illustrate to English-speaking Western audiences the implicit meanings embedded in day laborers’ quotes. In this section, we explore how day laborers used silence during interviews and how it played out in response to our questions.

The Less Said, the Better

Although our questions were designed to elicit narrative responses, some day laborers provided only short answers. Initially, we thought that it reflected their inability to fully understand and respond to the questions. However, on further examination, we found that their silences reflected social expectations in Japanese society, one of which is “the less said, the better.”

Ogata was a 61-year-old man and worked as a woodcutter for years before becoming a day laborer. Most of the time, he responded with short answers, spoke in a detached tone, and showed little facial expression, although he did not look uncomfortable or defensive.

Researcher (R): Have you seen your family recently?
Ogata (O): Not at all. I haven’t gone back home since I was 20 years old.
R: You haven’t gone back, have you? Even once?
O: No, I haven’t.
R: I see. Are there any reasons?
O: Well, I was there until I was about 20. I left my house after we had a fight and have never gone back [he pauses and smiles, implying it was not his fault].
R: Was it a fight with your Dad?
O: Yes [a detached tone and pause].
R: Did he say that you should leave?
O: Yes [a detached tone and pause].
R: How about your brothers or sisters?
O: I don’t know their whereabouts because I haven’t gone back.
R: Have you never contacted them at all?
O: No [with neutral expression and pause].

R: If you are going to apply to livelihood assistance, where do you want to go?
O: It’d be Osaka.
R: You don’t plan to go back to your hometown, do you?
O: No [with neutral expression and pause].
R: It’d be difficult for you to go back there, I guess.
O: People here feel the same. They gave up on their lives [self-deprecating tone].
R: Did they?
O: Well, most of them, I guess.
R: If you weren’t a woodcutter, do you think that you wouldn’t have come here (to the district)?
O: Maybe.

Ogata barely talked about himself and answered to questions with minimal information. To gather some additional information, the interviewer asked some very concrete (yes/no) questions. His attitude is not exceptional in the Japanese cultural context, rather it is a common communication style for male adult Japanese when they feel they hold a prominent position in conversations regardless of their class. Facing a younger female researcher who was assumed to have little knowledge about the male world of day laborers, his responses reveal he gained control over the conversation.

Having only short answers, it was difficult for the researcher to understand whether the participant understood the intent of the questions. In the beginning of the interview, the researcher thought that Ogata might not have the ability to look back and describe his experience, given his previous and current occupations, because neither required him to cultivate thinking and communication skills. However, Ogata suddenly replied to the researcher’s question about his reasons for not going back to his hometown with a disheartened tone: “They (day laborers) gave up on their lives.” He implied that most day laborers in the district have no hope of returning to their previous, socially acceptable lives. This short sentence indicated that he was not naive or uncritical about his situation and had the ability to elaborate on his and others’ experiences.

Moreover, his resigned attitude suggests that he had a deep awareness of his life as a day laborer. Considering that he was past 60 and had worked for more than four decades as a woodcutter in remote areas and then as a day laborer at construction sites, it is not unreasonable to think that he had been through difficult times. We also understand that his awareness and acceptance of his life helped him control his feelings and, therefore, he was able to be silent about his experiences. Most likely, he did not expect a female researcher to understand the hardship of the underclass life. Maintaining silence, he was able to successfully construct his identity as a day laborer and control the conversation during our interview.

Japanese people tend to be silent because they think they should be less assertive and more modest to be acceptable in society. Speaking about personal problems is considered self-
centered and immature (Henshall, 1999) or even brash (Lebra, 1987). In this cultural context, silence is not necessarily a sign of interviewees’ inability to express their thoughts but could be used purposefully to make their stories authentic. Ogata expressed his feelings or thoughts only a few times, which gave his opinions great weight.

In fact, we think Ogata used silence to build a particular account of his day laborer experience. When research participants narrate their stories, they affirm a particular protagonist identity (Chase, 2005). In Japanese communication, his remarks highlighted his long-term perseverance as a worker, despite harsh conditions. Ogata described his strength by accepting his fate. Talking about his experiences in detail would have been embarrassing and would have created and reinforced negative images of day laborers, rather his laconic style revealed control and determination when facing adversity. Analyzing the meanings of silence and how it plays out allowed us to understand the nature of his experiences more effectively than if we had focused only on his actual words.

**Leave It to the Imagination**

Some participants were evasive when they responded to questions. This could be considered as a sign of reluctance to engage in the interview. In conversation, Japanese people commonly use expressions like “several things” or “complicated reasons” to manifest reluctance to speak frankly. Next, we explore some quotes to explain how those expressions, accompanied by silence, convey meaning.

Murakami was 47 years old and had lived in the district for 15 years at the time of the interview. Previously he had worked as a plasterer in his hometown for more than 10 years. He spoke passionately about how he was a good man in his village before becoming a day laborer. But, he became quiet and spoke just a few words when he was asked about his reasons for moving to the district and becoming a day laborer.

**Murakami (M):** After graduating from my junior high school, I went to (a place to work as) an apprentice. Got up early and went there everyday! You know, I was working as a plasterer! Everybody in my village knew it [he spoke passionately and proudly]. I was working (as a plasterer) before coming here (the day labor district) at the age of 30.

**Researcher (R):** Why did you come here at the age of 30?

M: There are several reasons [with a wry smile].

Although we had little concrete information about his reasons for leaving his home and job to become a day laborer, analyzing his remarks and linking them to the cultural and social context in Japan helped the authors make inferences as to his reasons. He passionately and proudly stated that he used to be a good plasterer in his village but suddenly spoke in a small voice when asked why he had left his job and community. His summary statement that “there are several reasons” accompanied by his body language, indicated that he felt too embarrassed to disclose details. In Japan, when people use such expression, they are implicitly asking people (in this case, the researcher) not to probe further. This is a polite way to refuse to answer without actually stating, “I won’t answer the question.” A wry smile is also a typical facial expression when people feel embarrassed. Taken together, it is reasonable for the authors to conclude that, while in his hometown, he was considered a good citizen by people in the community. However, he made a mistake, whatever it was, sufficiently serious that he was too ashamed to remain in his community. This also reflects the social reality of collectivism in Japan, where it is accepted that men leave their community to preserve their dignity even knowing that they risk losing their jobs, families, and economic security (Kawabata, 2013).

Another participant, Iga, a 38-year-old day laborers said that he had complicated reasons not to go back, implying that he had made a mistake which was too embarrassing to speak about.

**Iga (I):** I caused my parents troubles and it became difficult for me to stay in my house.

**Researcher (R):** What made you decide to come here?

I: Anyway, I will leave it up to your imagination [laugh].

R: I see.

I: I was working for part-time jobs. I did not have normal jobs which means I was thrown out easily [in a low voice].

R: I heard a variety of reasons [lapse into silence].

I: Well, I couldn’t stay in my hometown for complicated reasons [laugh].

R: I see. Did it happen in your family or in your job?

I: It was my family, in my case [lapse into silence].

R: If it were about jobs, I guess, you would’ve had some bad working conditions. But, was your case not work related?

I: It’s not like that [silent for a moment].

R: But, you quit your job, didn’t you?

I: I was working for part-time jobs. I did not have normal jobs which means I was thrown out easily [in a low voice].

R: I guess that’s the main reason why people come here. There are many jobs which are discouraging, having no promotion. People often drift from one job to the next and end up as day laborers. Isn’t that your case?

I: No. It’s not such a good reason. It was worse. I have little to tell you about it [hesitantly].

R: It may be all in your mind.

I: I caused my parents troubles and it became difficult for me to stay in my house (hometown).

R: I see.

I: I couldn’t stay in my house [laugh].

With the expression “complicated reasons”, the interviewer understood that it was difficult and embarrassing for Iga to answer the question. Showing empathy for his situation, the interviewer brought up the job situation to encourage him to elicit a response. He, however, seemed to struggle to find
appropriate words. His was a reasonable response because changing jobs is not considered proper behavior in Japan. He barely saved face, stating it was easy for the companies to fire him. Finally, however, he brought the family issue back and left it uncertain with the expression “I leave it up to your imagination.” The author knew that this was a sign of denial and stopped asking.

Japanese people tend to become evasive when they are reluctant to answer questions. There are several ways to avoid saying “no” in Japan (Nakai, 2002). Indirect and polite ways of rejection are often used because, in a collectivist society, expressing direct refusal to answer can cause conflicts and diminish harmony (Hofstede, 1991). “I leave it to your imagination” is an expression usually used by educated, middle-class people. It was reasonable to assume that he tried to be polite. Hearing these indirect and ambiguous expressions, listeners in Japan are expected to understand that speakers do not wish to give direct answers and are expected to stop probing, so the speaker is able to save face and preserve dignity. By accommodating the speaker, the interviewer is showing sensitivity and recognition that the question is inappropriate. This form of rejection by participants does not provide an opportunity for interviewers to further explore details. In these situations, researchers need to examine nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, to be able to draw reasonable conclusions.

Hiding Feelings

Some participants responded vehemently and created tense and awkward moments, which is a way for people to mask their true feelings. In Japan, expressing personal feelings in formal conversation is discouraged because emotions are a sign of weakness and men, in particular, are taught to be strong (Sugihara & Katsurada, 1999). In this cultural context, it is not desirable for men to express inner feelings. This is reflected in the higher suicide rate in Japan than in other high-income countries (Odagiri, Uchida, & Nakano, 2011). In our study, day laborers became silent or assumed a tense and uncooperative tone of voice when they were in disagreement or discomfort, instead of becoming silent or assumed a tense and uncooperative tone of voice when they were in disagreement or discomfort, instead of saying, “I don’t agree with you” or “I don’t feel comfortable talking about this issue.”

Researcher (R): Are there good things about living in the district?
Inoue (I): Good things? Hmm [pause], there are few.
R: How many?
I: Few?
R: Are there any difficult events that come to your mind?
I: No.

Inoue, a 55-year-old day laborer, was talking about day laborers’ experiences. During the interview, he often suggested that it was futile to challenge their living circumstances and that it is better to accept them as fate given that workers are stuck in the system. This skeptical attitude indicated that he was not comfortable talking about his past and his use of humor seemed like an attempt to conceal his feelings. When the author asked him if he agreed with some other day laborers who described their lives as easy, however, he firmly said no. This implied that he not only disagreed with the idea but also that he was resentful toward the interviewer for raising this issue. Using silence, he indirectly refused to talk further about the issue rather than overtly disagreeing. Perhaps, his feelings of resentment were also directed toward the researcher given her privileged social position, being considered a member of the dominant class.

In conversations in Japan, silence can be used to hide negative feeling. People tend to be silent when they disagree. This reflects the collectivist culture where people try to avoid expressing excessive emotions to avoid disharmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To this end, people try to control negative feelings. In the case of Inoue, when he answered, he did it firmly and it created tension; his tone created a negative atmosphere which was his way to convey his emotions. This moment provided clues to how he perceived day laborers’ lives. Further, his decisive tone helped the interviewer understand that his remarks, which described the lives of day laborers in a humorous way, were also the flip side of his resentment. In summary, silence provided several clues for the interpretation of the transcripts.

Discussion

Our interviews with day laborers in Japan illustrate how silence is not an absence of communication but rather a communication strategy. Silence, like tone of voice and body language, plays a significant role in conveying
feelings and meanings, sometimes more effectively than words. In this section, we will argue that without considering participants’ silence in interviews, researchers may not only have problems understanding and interpreting meaning but could also create ethical problems when conducting interviews with marginalized populations.

Western Conceptualizations of Silence and Qualitative Evidence

The ways individuals communicate vary across cultures (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1996; Gudykunst et al., 1996). Gudykunst et al. (1992) suggest that individualistic cultures, such as the United States and Canada, use direct and explicit messages to convey meaning, while collectivist cultures such as Japan use indirect and implicit expressions. People in Western cultures focus on explicit communication while viewing silence as merely background (Kim, 2002). In this context, silences are viewed negatively as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, a sign of hostility, or expression of interpersonal incompatibilities, among others (Newman, 1982; Kim, 2002). Thus, talk is constructed as the vehicle for discovery and expression.

Qualitative research conducted in North America demonstrates this cultural aspect. Classic works about homelessness in the United States (Kozol, 1988; Liebow, 1993; Snow & Anderson, 1993; Wagner, 1993), for instance, contain rich descriptions of people’s experiences along with quotes which show homeless people’s ability and willingness to describe situations and express their feelings. Such accounts are used to illustrate the interpretation of the researchers and they are the evidence of the quality of the studies.

Examining ethnographic fieldwork relations, Lovell (2007) relates silence to secrecy which is commonly perceived as an obstacle to the achievement of a successful, comprehensive understanding of a group culture. Many times, the “climax of the narrative” and the proof that the researcher is competent are precisely the notion of discovery of the truth, overcoming silence (Lovell, 2007, p. 56). Such way of thinking about data generation has important consequences for how qualitative work is evaluated and ethical relationships in the field are enacted. Lovell (2007, p. 57) mentions that “the treatment of secrets both analytically and textually ( . . . ), brings to light the power relations between anthropologist and interlocutors in the field.” In our case, we have conceptualized participants’ silence as resistance and as culturally and ethically appropriate strategies.

Cultural Construct of Silence in Japan

In Japan, a different communication style has evolved. Like in other collectivist societies in East Asia, people value preserving harmony within the social group more than expressing strong individual inner thoughts and feelings (Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998; Kim, 2002). Gudykunst, & Ting-Toomey(1988) also suggest that people in a collectivistic society “camouflage and conceal speakers’ true intentions” (p. 75) to maintain unity. In this context, meaning is embedded in the interpretation of silence (Yum, 1988) and, therefore, people are expected to be sensitive to what is implied rather than what is expressed (Lebra, 1976). People who are talkative are often considered to be insincere and conceited (Kim, 2002).

In certain societies, silence has been cultivated historically and politically. Nakane (1972) discussed the structural influences on the development of Japanese values, particularly in relation to the country’s industrialization and its need for efficiency. Chiavacci (2007) also suggested that the shared values of hard work and self-discipline became a norm and contributed to enhanced efficiency and productivity to achieve the national goal of economic success in the 1960s and 1970s. To this end, people adopted a communication style which was conducive to maintaining harmony and solidarity, that is, indirect and ambiguous ways of expressing opinions and rejection. This fostered interdependence and modesty has become a virtue. In this context, individuals who express too many strong opinions are not viewed as authentic but are considered selfish or immature (Henshall, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Emphasizing and Politicizing Silence

Mazzei argues that speech does not exist without silence (Mazzei, 2007). Paying attention to silence allows researchers to have better understandings of interview data. In the particular case of Japanese researchers, if they consider only what people actually say as valid data, they may overlook important information, as the aforementioned examples show. In the case of Ogata, discussed earlier, his answers conveyed the severity of his experiences as a day laborer. In Japanese culture, “truthfulness, sincerity, straightforwardness, or reliability are allied to reticence” (Lebra, 1987, p. 345). Ogata emphasized the importance of his ideas and avoided being considered frivolous by adopting such a concise style. In the case of Inoue, his silence implied a determination to come to terms with his fate as a day laborer. The authors might have failed to recognize his suppressed resentment against circumstances surrounding his life, if he had verbalized those experiences.

In addition, by underestimating silence, researchers may contribute to create or maintain social inequalities for marginalized groups. The dominant discourse of national development in Japan stresses individual responsibilities for life situations, and people who failed to contribute to a particular notion of economic success, such as day laborers, are blamed for their lack of personal responsibility. By normalizing silence in daily communication and suppressing people’s voices, the government and industry successfully reinforced the dominant value of hardwork without considering the physical and mental burdens associated with socioeconomic disadvantages. This indicates that the silence of the marginalized should be understood not only as a communication strategy but also as a cultural apparatus of social control. Thus, uncritical examination of silence limits researchers’ ability to locate it in historical and
social contexts and leads to simplistic analyses that further reinforce the stigmatization of certain groups.

Participant selection also poses the risk of eliminating people who speak little, because researchers are inclined to select participants who are more verbal due to personality, gender, or educational level. In Japan, the traditional value of silence in communication has been inculcated, especially into male workers (Nakane, 1972). In the day laborer district where the fieldwork was conducted, there was a tacit rule to not speak about the past. Those willing to talk to researchers might not reflect the experiences of the majority of day laborers. Indeed, we found differences between our participants and day laborers described in other studies (Deai-no-ie, 1996; Miyashita, 1995). Those authors’ interviewees expressed their experiences in detail, contrary to the participants of our study. In their descriptions, the authors of these publications emphasized day laborer’s weaknesses, hence contributing to the stereotypical image of day laborers in Japan. Through our analysis, we found that day laborers did not describe themselves as weak victims of Japanese society but used narratives and silence to show us their positive identity as working men. Although possessing limited oral skills, they portrayed themselves as survivors of a difficult life. By focusing on the narratives only, a different image may emerge suggesting that researchers may misrepresent marginalized populations in their efforts to select only participants who are verbally expressive.

**Dominance of Anglo-American Culture in Qualitative Health Research**

Cultural differences require researchers to employ different models to explain silence. The imposition of a Western perspective on silence is inappropriate for the assessment of research conducted in non-Western cultures. After examining Chinese qualitative studies on curriculum reform, Hsiung (2015) questions the impact of imposing qualitative methodology developed in the West on other cultures, finding negative effects on the research process and outcomes.

Cultural differences have not been sufficiently acknowledged in qualitative research. Uncritical use of a cross-cultural approach could be hazardous, as it possibly imports cultural bias from one setting to another (Bower, 2011). Much of the research published in health and social sciences journals published in English has been conducted by Anglo-Americans. In fact, the United States and the United Kingdom alone have an 80% share of the qualitative research market (Gobo, 2011). Most verificatory strategies for qualitative research, therefore, have been established by researchers from the West and reflect Western communication patterns. These strategies emphasize the importance of sufficiently detailed accounts from participants to demonstrate the validity of the interpretations. One of the verification strategies to meet this criterion is to select participants who best represent or have knowledge of the topic to obtain sufficient data to account for all aspects of the phenomenon (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Researchers are also encouraged to demonstrate sufficient information to establish the credibility of findings (Roulston, 2010) or provide enough details, so that readers may draw their own conclusions (Tracy, 2010). Employing these strategies, reviewers tend to focus only on what participants say to judge the accuracy and completeness of their interpretation, without considering the role of interpretation in nonverbal communications as evidence.

**Recommendations for Authors and Reviewers**

According to Alasuutari (2004), the globalization of qualitative research means that English has become the lingua franca of science and researchers who want to communicate their findings ought to comply with American and British publishers who dominate the editorial market and may not appreciate “too exotic examples” (p. 595). Paradoxically, many academics who write in English as a second language are pressured to publish in journals called international to comply with the metrics of research productivity from their home countries (Gastaldo & Bosi, 2010; Mancia & Gastaldo, 2004). Both processes will continue to bring together Anglo-Saxon reviewers and international authors, many from non-Western cultures.

It is acknowledged that traditionally in research articles, “the complexity and messiness of the research process is often concealed” (Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005, p. 236). However, we believe that in qualitative research, authors who analyze silence need a clear delineation of the process developed to do so. To this end, authors should make their reflexivity process explicit to help the reader to understand how they interpret and represent participants’ voices and silences, having in mind readers in other cultures. This may lead them to favor journals that accept lengthier papers, so that they can describe their analytical strategies in detail.

Some qualitative researchers have raised concerns about the very limited use of silence as qualitative data (Charmaz, 2002; Mazzie, 2007; Mazzie & Jackson, 2012; Nairn et al., 2005). Most of the time, however, these researchers are conducting studies in the West. Given the significance of silence in interviews in Japan, Western reviewers should reexamine current evaluation criteria for qualitative research. If data are reduced to words that become evidence to be “shown in full,” there will be discrimination against researchers working in non-Western cultures. Given that qualitative research is a methodology to produce contextualized information in naturalistic conditions, cultural contexts and communication styles should be considered in the evaluation of its quality.

In summary, authors and reviewers should explore the implications of the centrality of verbal expression for most qualitative inquiry, enhance strategies to analyze silence and describe such analytical processes, and politicize silence in qualitative research, having in mind that the criteria for the evaluation of studies are deeply rooted in Western cultural traditions.
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