The Use of the Talmudic Format for the Presentation of Qualitative Research

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In this article, I propose to adapt the Talmud, a Jewish religious text, for the written representation of qualitative research. The form and the style of argumentation in and engendered by the Talmud can be adapted to present qualitative methods in a way that transcends the limitations of conventional formats. In addition, this format requires even greater participation in the act of reading. Because the Talmudic format uniquely addresses the difficulties involved in representing everyday life, I argue that adapting the format of the Talmud is ideal for giving voice, for presenting multiple and competing narratives alongside documents, and for further problematizing any simple notion of truth and authority.
Keywords: methodology, nonlinearity, multivocality, Talmudic format, interpretation, everyday life, representation

What has been termed experimental writing in qualitative research has become more commonly accepted since the “crisis in representation” was first introduced (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Qualitative researchers, ethnographers in particular, have successfully explored various ways to present material that transgresses normative expected boundaries. As noted by Richardson (1997:92), the engagement with experimental writing has led to a multiplicity of new forms—from self-narrative, literary and visual forms to performance art and computer-assisted texts. Many researchers have decided to experiment with the text and format as an alternative way to express the dynamic quality of interaction with their readers, informants, and texts (Bochner and Ellis 2002; Denzin 2006; Ellis 1995; Krieger 1979; Richardson 1997; Tyler 1986). Authors choose a nonlinear form to better incorporate the “polyphony of voices” (Humphreys, Brown, and Hatch 2003; Norum 1998; Picart and Gergen 2004; Van Maanen 1988) or experiment with autoethnography to be more forthcoming.

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about the researcher’s own voice (Ellis 2004; Holman Jones 2005; Rambo 2007; Richardson 2007).

Some of these researchers believe that the limitations of conventional representation arise from relying on written texts alone and have therefore encouraged qualitative researchers to incorporate visual forms (Becker 1974; Chaplin 1994; Pink 2001). Mason and Dicks (1999) believe that they can address the crisis of representation through digital ethnography because it is not tied exclusively to the written form. Digital ethnography offers the advantage of multimedia methods, combining the visual of video, still photos, figures, or drawings with the conventional academic written material. This innovation affords readers access to texts that may otherwise be unavailable to them. By providing a hypermedia environment, “the hope is to allow readers the chance to interact with ethnographic materials in creative ways as well as challenge the ethnographers who would need to reconceptualize the whole process of constructing an ethnography” (Mason and Dicks 2002).

All of these experiments with writing and form have not only challenged the restriction of the linear form but also addressed methodological issues surrounding authorship, interaction with audience/reader, and interpretation. These issues have been addressed by both symbolic interactionists and postmodernists as well as at their intersection. For some time symbolic interactionists have wrestled with and often advocated incorporating postmodern and post-structuralist theory and methodologies into interactionist accounts (Clough 1992; Denzin 1990; Gottschalk 1993, 1995; Shalin 1993). As Fine (1990) claims, symbolic interactionists may have even transitioned into a “Post-Blumerian Age” with the hybridization of theories and experiments in representation. Within symbolic interaction and qualitative research in general, experimental writing is often considered a postmodern approach. I propose a method for presenting qualitative work that appears to be postmodern experimental writing but is most certainly premodern, and can address the same methodological concerns.

ADAPTING THE TALMUDIC FORMAT

My own methodological experiment involves a form borrowed and modified from Jewish religious tradition. Certain Jewish religious expressions present narrative in a contextual and dynamic way. For instance, feminist scholars have used the Midrash to reclaim the stories of women in Jewish life and history (Gottlieb 1995; Kates and Reimer 1994; Sandak 2003; Schneider 2001). In this article, I use the traditional form of the Talmud to better frame qualitative work with multiple narratives in organizational settings.

The Talmud is a Jewish religious text that contains the Mishna, which is a codification and collection of Torah’s Oral Law, and the Gemara, an interpretation of the Mishna, completed in approximately 500 CE. The Mishna and the Gemara are set in the middle of the page surrounded by the later commentaries of various rabbis. These commentaries vary as to the date and the completeness of their interpretation.
of the Talmud, with the rabbi known as Rashi presenting the first, most complete commentary. The entire Talmud is also sometimes referred to as the Mishna or the Gemara. The Talmud is divided into six general categories known as Orders, and then further broken down into sixty-three themes, known as tractates. The appearance of each page is unique and depends on the length of both the Mishna portion and the commentary of each of the rabbis. The written text sometimes includes accompanying figures, and some editions of the Talmud also contain illustrations (Abrams 1995b; Goldenberg 1994; Steinsaltz 1976).

The Talmud features an interpretative frame in both its construction and its comprehension. The format allows multiple meanings and interpretations to coexist, creating a sense of dialogue between rabbis of many generations and the reader. The Talmud is a living text that continues to be open to interpretation. This quality arises not only from the type of argumentation but also from the format used to present the written arguments. An example of this format is shown below (Figure 1).3

The layout of the Talmud presents an immediate visual impression that combines with its literary aspect, especially for those readers who do not read Hebrew. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001:5) point out, design is significant and serves a unique purpose; it “stands midway between content and expression.” The Talmud’s blocked-off sections, irregular spacing, and varying fonts all mark it as visually different than a linear, modern design. The design of the text mediates the interaction between the author and the reader and “changes socially constructed knowledge into social (inter-) action” (p. 5). In the case of the Talmud the interaction implied by the multimodal design disrupts the expectations of a traditional linear format and appears experimental.

Yet it may not be entirely accurate to identify the methodological technique of presenting qualitative research I propose here as a form of the new “experimental writing.” Although adapting the Talmudic format and principles to represent qualitative research is experimental, the tradition of the Talmud and the particular dialectical literary method is well established (Kraemer 1990; Neusner 1998; Steinsaltz 1976). Although the adaptation is new, the methodological issues that the Talmud addresses and the way it uniquely resolves them are old. The Talmud is rooted in multiple discourse, interpretation, and everyday life. It offers not only an alternative format for creative expressive purposes but also practical ways to approach some of the aforementioned methodological problems of authorship, interaction with audience/reader, and interpretation.

A METHOD FOR EVERYDAY INTERACTION

Symbolic interaction’s exploration of everyday life is consistent with the concerns of the Talmud, as all the topics it addresses revolve around matters of everyday life. Whatever larger precepts may emerge through discussing these matters, they are reached through thoroughly examining ordinary, seemingly trivial topics:
Figure 1. Page from the Talmud (Steinsaltz 2004)
[For] the Talmudic rabbi, the most interesting aspect of reality is the human and the societal: the village, the home, the individual. Talmudic Judaism, because of its stress on what and how one eats and drinks, has been called a religion of pots and pans. And so it is, if not that alone, for its raw materials are the irreducible atoms of concrete life. (Neusner 1973:228)

Not only does this engagement with the micro level parallel the subject matter of interactionists, the Talmud also addresses some of the difficulties in presenting qualitative data about the action of everyday life in a written format. The actual physical format of text and the conventions of linear narrative can constrain the portrayal of everyday stories. Because people’s lives twist and turn, going over bumps and smooth places, telling their stories can be challenging for them as well as for the person trying to “re-present” them for research purposes. Some instruction guides for writing up qualitative research bemoan what they see as the inevitability of a limiting linear structure to express everyday interactions. Atkinson (1994:6), for example, claims:

We all have to struggle to turn the dense complexity of everyday life into a linear structure—an argument that starts on page one, and progresses through a logical sequence, and ends on the final page. The transformation of cultural life into 80,000 words (or whatever) and a series of more or less uniform chapters is achieved through the imposition of some major—more or less arbitrary—frameworks and constraints.

As those using experimental writing know, one problem with this process is that linear forms tend to box in people’s lives. Naples (1998:10) recounts her struggles to reconcile real life with the conventional written format: “The written form required creating a more linear and less complicated construction of spoken experience than was evident in the interviews that gave rise to the individual life histories.”

Although everyday life is recognized as anything but linear, its written presentation is still usually expected to fit the linear structure that conforms to the conventions of social science. In contrast, we can adapt the Talmudic form and the style of argumentation to present qualitative methods in a way that transcends the limitations of conventional formats and understandings. The Talmudic format uniquely addresses the difficulty of representing everyday analysis, as the Talmud itself accords analytic significance to everyday life. Concerning other methodological issues germane to qualitative research, I argue that adapting the format of the Talmud is ideal for giving voice to those who might not otherwise be heard, for presenting multiple and competing narratives alongside documents, for exposing embedded authority, and for problematizing any simple notion of truth. In addition, the text is not only open to the readers’ interpretations but requires greater participation in the act of reading.

“THE PEOPLE SAY”: GIVING VOICE

Rieser (2001) notes that the term “amre inshe,” translated as “the people say,” appears frequently in the Babylonian Talmud. He claims that the positioning and frequency of this term suggest its authoritative weight in the text. The rabbis give voice to people’s
folk wisdom by incorporating everyday sayings. “The authority for these passages derives from the people and the creative understanding of life they have developed through the reality of everyday life” (p. 29). Yassif (1999) explains that folk wisdom was preserved in the Talmud, albeit at times with revisions, through the contact that rabbis had with people in the marketplace. Quite often these were “things told to him [the rabbi] by a prime example of folk culture—a woman expert in folk medicine and the folkloric traditions then current in Jewish society” (p. 74). Though not a book of folklore, the Talmud preserved the sayings of the people. These were collected not simply to preserve popular wisdom but because “the sages viewed the folktale as having an important role in the examination or solution of weighty problems” (p. 76).

One frequently mentioned aspect of qualitative work is its intent to “give voice,” particularly to groups that have been suppressed. Feminist researchers in particular have prioritized giving voice to women’s everyday experience in the criteria for feminist methodologies (Hill Collins 1990; Reinhartz 1992; Smith 1987). Although the original Talmud offers mainly male rabbinic voices, the format itself is not exclusive. It includes information from many sources and is open to the inclusion of additional voices, as contemporary commentary is encouraged.4 In collaboration with Hillel’s Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning, the Jewish Women’s Archive has recently created the feminist Talmud page “Women of Chayil,” which they refer to as a postmodern Talmud page (Jewish Women’s Archive n.d.). There are many studies on the commentaries that discuss women in the Talmud, and contemporary women—including female rabbis—have written new commentaries (Antonelli 1995; Frankel 1997; Goldstein 2000) that attempt to redress the patriarchal interpretations that male rabbis proposed of the Mishna. As some authors also point out, a careful reading shows that, thanks to the flexibility of interpretation, the rabbis in some instances used commentary to free women from the constraints of the Mishna’s more formal laws (Abrams 1995a; Bronner 1994; Hauptman 1998; Neusner 1998).

Because the Talmud is a living text open to current interpretations, it offers the opportunity to update commentary, especially through interpretation. As such, it provides a space for those who may not be heard otherwise. The Talmud’s format of multiple voices speaking from varying positions also supports this possibility in a more complex way.

**NONLINEARITY, MULTIVOCALE, AND AUTHORITY**

The Talmudic format has been described as a nonlinear dialectic method of laying out interpretation of biblical text (Jacobs 1984; Neusner [1973] 1984). Neusner ([1973] 1984:xiv) characterizes the Talmud’s unique dialectical style as “meandering” and based on a type of dialectics not found in the modern Western style. The methodological device provided by the Talmudic format is less restrictive than linear forms and at the same time does provide a framework for analysis. “We find the source of continuity in the author’s capacity to show connections through the momentum of rigorous analysis, on the one side, and free-ranging curiosity, on the other” (p. xiv).
The dialectical arguments are constructed by multiple authors and therefore infused with a collaborative tension also seen in qualitative research. The concept of give-and-take that describes the conversational aspect of data collection in qualitative work appears explicitly in the methodology of the Talmudic format. Indeed, one term for the debates found in the Talmud is “no-sseh ve-noten,” which is translated as “give-and-take” (Jacobs 1984:10). This dynamic that also occurs in qualitative interviews is seldom fully developed or represented in the final written account. Using the Talmudic format that is designed for such interactional dynamics preserves this tension in the written form. This design becomes also important to avoid the overlapping problem of authority.

While the give-and-take of relations in the field continues to shape the ethnographer’s understanding, the finished ethnography is the ethnographer’s version of those happenings and events. Most ethnographic conventions allow the writer to represent others (and her experience with them) as she sees best. In this sense the ethnographer openly assumes and exercises authorial privilege. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:209)

The conventional written format betrays the dynamics formed in a qualitative research relationship. However, the Talmud’s polyphonic format embodies a particular style that accommodates alternative notions of authority: “The talmudic way of thinking and discourse may be regarded as a unique framework that can be understood from different standpoints but cannot be studied by other means” (Steinsaltz 1976:228). The Talmud’s peculiar relation to authority is helpful to present qualitative work and to address the issues of voice and authority. The process of interaction between speakers is more important than the authority of individual speakers (Neusner [1973] 1984:230). This idea is similar to Kristeva’s ([1966] 1986:55) concept of intertextuality and the polyphonic novel, where the relation of texts to each other represents a “plurality of linguistic elements in dialogical relationships.” Kristeva views these texts as “social activity” and not as the construct of any one author (p. 52). Derrida’s ([1967] 1991:50) deconstruction also interrogates the authoring of texts; he considers linearity “the repression of pluri-dimensional symbolic thought.” Derrida’s work, in particular _Glas_, can be viewed as influenced by the Talmudic style of presentation and its emphasis on interpretation (Derrida 1971; Handelman 1982).

TRUTH

Abandoning the certainty of one authoritative voice and introducing a polyphony of voices prevents the emergence of a grand narrative of truth. Postmodernism and interactionism both reject this concept of truth and offer a more complex interpretation of how truth is negotiated and constructed in everyday interactions and texts. Because there is a certain contentiousness present in multiple-authored texts, incorporating multiple narratives requires an openness to unresolved discussion of varying viewpoints. Jacobs (1984:12) notes a frequent and particular type of Talmudic argument that acknowledges this factor within the Talmud: “Where no solution is
forthcoming the term used is teyku, ‘it remains standing,’ i.e. the two possibilities are 
so equally balanced and, in the absence of proof from authority, there is no solution 
to the problem; it is by nature insoluble.” This standoff is a frequent occurrence in 
the Talmud and is not seen as a weakness.

Neither is this type of evidence a weakness for qualitative research. Frank 
(2004:439) encourages qualitative researchers to avoid becoming immobilized by 
the complexity that a “postmodern truth” presents, noting that “the postmodern 
sense of truth does not require an explanation that counts as a solution; postmodern 
truth sees too many perspectives to accept the closure of explanation.” This post-
modern approach of truth sounds quite similar to the more premodern Talmudic 
one. As Kraemer (1990:188–89) writes of the Babylonian Talmud (Bavli):

Almost any source can—and is—made to yield multiple meanings. In one sense, 
each of these alternatives is a truth in a community of truths. But no statement 
can claim that it speaks the truth. Being dependent on interpretation, the revela-
tion, by definition, always remains partly hidden; thus those who teach the revel-
ation (written and later oral) are not able to speak in the name of a pure and 
uncompromised truth.

One ends up with a truth of the interpretation of experiences, and these experiences 
may differ, leading to more than one truth. The Personal Narratives Group (1989:261), 
a feminist life histories collective, reflects on the stories women share of their experi-
ences, recognizing the different faces of truth that emerge from the telling:

These truths don’t reveal the past “as it actually was,” aspiring to a standard of 
objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. They aren’t a result 
of empirical research or the logic of mathematical deductions. Unlike the reas-
suring Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither 
open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through inter-
pretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and 
to the world views that inform them.

The reader also participates in the interpretation of truth. While qualitative re-
searchers may try to persuade the readers of the validity of their claims, the readers, 
however, will always approach and interpret the work from their unique perspec-
tives. Despite authoritative textual formats and persuasive rhetorical devices, the 
understanding of “truth” is multilayered. Some qualitative researchers embrace this 
complexity and attempt to actively include the reader through “performance texts,” 
layered texts, autoethnography, and other means (Denzin 2001, 2006; Ellis 2004; Hol-
man Jones 1999; Ronai 1995). The Talmudic format anticipates the role of the reader 
in the interpretation of truth.

THE ROLE OF THE READER

Because interpretation is central to the Talmud, the text is open to the reader. The 
reader joins in what Plaskow (1990) calls a “community of interpreters,” subverting 
authority issues in the process. “To locate authority in particular communities of 
interpreters is admittedly to make a circular appeal. Yet it is also to acknowledge
what has always been the case: that in deciding what is authoritative in sacred texts, deciding communities take authority to themselves” (p. 21).

As mentioned earlier, contemporary commentary allows for “interactive” reader engagement with the text. Rather than rely on the format alone to evoke participation, the entire premise of the Talmud insists on participation. Both the style of argumentation and the accommodating structure of the Talmud allows for reader participation. Because of the emphasis on process and debate rather than authority or literalness, a reader is able to participate in the dialogue. The particular nonlinear dialectics of the argumentation also supply an entry into the text for the reader. Neusner ([1973] 1984:xv) stresses that it is precisely the openness of the “moving argument” that encourages interaction with the text. As Steinsaltz (1976:268) also notes, “There is no real possibility of studying the Talmud in externalized and alienated fashion, since the sincere student becomes part of the essence of the Talmud, and thus an active participant in Jewish creative life.”

The Talmud is not simply read but rather studied or learned and most often collectively in a yeshiva or Beit Midrash (house of study). Because the format does not include punctuation marks (and for other unknown reasons), the Talmud is “sung” rather than spoken (Jacobs 1984). “In the traditional yeshivah, the Talmud is not ‘learned’ in a monotone. The Talmud is the music for a choir of voices; it is sung, and the music conveys thrust and parry, the give and take of argument, which is what is truly Talmudic about the Talmud” (Neusner [1973] 1984:xi). The collective “singing” of the Talmud evokes an embodied participation with the text and points to greater possibilities for performance of qualitative work. Vannini and Waskul (2006:5) have introduced the metaphoric possibility of “symbolic interaction as music.” Listing the qualities of music as “melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, color, and form,” they claim that “these same qualities structure a musical metaphor for understanding the nuances of interactions in everyday life” (p. 6). By collectively singing the Talmud, this connection is made viscerally, and not just metaphorically.

Overall, the Talmudic format addresses methodological issues in an innovative manner that is steeped in a long tradition. I would like to provide an abbreviated example of how the Talmud format could be adapted to represent the data from particular types of qualitative research projects. I focus here on several sample pages of one of my qualitative research projects that initially sparked the idea for experimenting with the Talmud. The project itself was a pilot study, and my intention is not to present it in its entirety or as a definitive application. It is simply a device to explain how methodological issues emerged or were resolved using the Talmudic format for presenting qualitative work.

APPLYING THE TALMUDIC FORMAT

The Woman’s Place was a women’s bookstore and resource center in the Midwest that existed from 1970 to 1975. An organization that shared a story unique to a local Midwest community and the larger women’s movement, the Woman’s Place was
both a feminist organization and part of the social movement activity of second-wave feminism. The women involved had specific memories of this organization within its larger context of the women’s movement. After years of hearing about the organization through secondhand sources, I made contact with a few of the members. I was also able to look over the few remaining documents from the organization before interviewing the women. The story of the bookstore that had become mythical to me also had a shared collective history that had powerful symbolic meaning for the members. The Woman’s Place clearly had an “official story,” and I wanted to honor that story for the collective meaning it had for the participants. This part of the story was represented best by the documents and the first general descriptions the women gave me before I interviewed them.

Members view the collective official story as an important symbol for the group or organization, not only in relation to individual interpretations but also as a signifier of the collective. It is not an object to get past or beyond, but exists out of the interaction of the participants. As Plaskow (1990:16–17) explains about Exodus as a story:

But while religious texts can be broken down literarily and historically, as received tradition, they come to us whole. One may divide and analyze for purposes of criticism or historical reconstruction. The religious meaning of a work, however, may lie in its historical impossibilities, the tensions of the final editing, or the rhythm of the narrative heard as a totality. Scholars may debate, for instance, whether there was an Exodus from Egypt, what proportion of the future Israelite community dwelt in Egypt, and how the Exodus narrative became part of the Jewish experience. Whatever they decide, however, the Exodus story, as a story, is constitutive for Jewish self-understanding. As such, it has a claim on contemporary Jews, who must wrestle with its meaning.

I wanted a way to represent both the official account as shown in the organizational documents as well as the participants’ interpretations of that official story. I wanted to preserve the tension between this official story and the participants’ “unofficial” stories. The history of the organization as reflected in the documents was not less “true” than the later interpretations that were based on the participants’ memories. Each depended on the other to re-create the memory. Spillman and Conway (2007:91) insist that “‘formal’ history is bound in multistranded reciprocal relations with ‘social memory.’”

The formal history in this case consisted not only of the documents of the organization but also of the documents that concerned its place in the larger history of the women’s movement. The organization needed to be placed within this larger context because this context also influenced the dynamic of the official story and its interpretation. Participants’ interpretations and memories of the Woman’s Place were clearly informed by the larger story of the women’s movement, and the secondary literature that analyzed this movement provided a necessary perspective framing the official story of the organization and the participants’ interpretations. Spillman and Conway (2007:98) contend that embodied experiences should be linked to discourse in discussions of collective memory because “embodied experience is always shaped within preexisting discursive fields.”
Because I wanted to highlight the tension in this interaction and represent it visually, I experimented with arranging the story of the Woman’s Place by using a Talmudic format. I placed the “official story” in the center of the page and the interpretations around the margins. When possible, I typed the documents in a different font than the one I used to reproduce members’ interpretations, or reduced a copy and placed it in the center of the page. This follows a Talmudic style of using font to distinguish types of text (Fishman 2001). I included my interpretations as researcher and the outside literature review alongside the participants’ interpretations, representing a shared dialogue about the official story. I arranged the pages to represent themes, such as the origins of the organization, the physical space, the mission, funding, and events. These themes were suggested by my analysis of the documents and the women’s interviews and roughly follow the Talmud’s layout in its use of tractates for organizing materials.

Visually it became clear (or clearer) that interpretation and dialogue were the most important aspects in the process of understanding collective meanings. However, achieving just a visual, nonlinear form was not my main motivation for using the format of the Talmud. The underlying logic for the Talmudic style of argumentation drives the visual layout. And this particular style of reasoning is most helpful for presenting qualitative research. The adapted Talmudic format laid bare many methodological issues in the written presentation of my project and resolved several of them.

The layout included documents, participants, researchers, and secondary sources all on the same page in an obvious way. The nonlinear format portrayed multiple voices that spanned different time periods and viewpoints, as does a page of the Talmud. Depending on various participants, the official collective story is surrounded by interpretation that may affirm, explain, or contradict it, becoming a living text like the Talmud. The participants and I shared analytic authority about the materials of the group. The first sample page illustrates where the participants and I are located in our relation to the document being shown and to the Woman’s Place (Figure 2).

The official document that describes the beginning of the Woman’s Place resonates more with some participants than with others. The participants and I all have a different experience of what the Woman’s Place means and how it began. These differing interpretations are explained by many factors: personal background in the women’s movement, level of involvement in the Woman’s Place, and time of entry into or knowledge of the organization. The official version of the beginning of the Woman’s Place is not the only source of understanding how the Woman’s Place was born.

The bookstore operated as the first women’s center in this town. Figure 3 depicts guidelines for consciousness-raising (CR) groups organized through the Woman’s Place, although they were held off-site because of lack of a large enough space. As participants remember, these guidelines reflect a more formal procedure than was used to organize the groups. What they remember more readily was the experience of being a part of the CR groups.
I became involved in the Columbia women’s community in 1980. I was involved in many of the organizations including KOPN-FM's Crystal Set Feminists, Abuse, Assault and Rape Crisis Center (AARCC), UMC Women’s Center, and I also served as a board member and environmental feminist liaison for the Association of Women Students (AWS) and the campus environmental group, the Environmental Education Organization (EEO). All this self-reflection on my organizational involvement is by way of introducing an organization that I was not a part of; an organization that was almost a feminist myth for me during my involvement during the 1980s. I kept hearing accounts from women who had visited a women’s bookstore that had existed in Columbia in the ’70s. Until last year I had not even met any of the women who owned it. I embarked on a project to gather information on various Columbia women’s organizations of the 1970s and 1980s, I finally began to come in contact with the women and some of the stories behind the “bookstore” in Columbia that had achieved mythic proportions in my mind.

Mary Lou
In the early seventies, Share had a little bookshop, some feminist stuff, she asked me to be Director, Norma then took over the library/bookstore. We had lesbian books. Books on yoga and alternative medicine. Women were discovering feminism after Betty Friedan’s book. We had support groups, self defense, we were like a women’s center. It was very exciting, we felt like pioneers. The first grant was from the Department of Mental Health. Later we closed down because we didn’t get the grant again. Young women were let out of Mid-Mo and had nowhere to go, we began to need to have services that we couldn’t provide. A “Women’s Place” people thought it provided services so then it opened our eyes to the need for white middle class women to understand the needs of other women. It was not an official women’s center but very active at the time.

Smith
When I came to Columbia in 1972 I had been involved in the women’s movement in K.C. (Kansas City). I was enrolled in the University. There was an obvious lack of attention on women’s issues. We gravitated together and opened that place on Ninth Street. Our primary purpose, because of common interests and beliefs about women’s issues, we opened the library to disseminate women’s literature as a way to generate public awareness. As we matured we started support groups and a drop-in center. We had a good time together, relaxed atmosphere with volunteers from the community and campus.

Diane

Key
Well, I don’t know, I mean I used to go in there when Share owned it as a bookstore you know and then it just kind of drifted in and my friend Norma started the bookstore and we were very good friends so I just was kind of there again I don’t know that The Woman’s Place like had a board of directors, I mean I really don’t know what it was. It was a bookstore and then out of that bookstore press activity, you know it became a meeting place where you know people that wanted to get together and yeah do the same thing together on the same day or something and at some point when I don’t know how pervasive it’s influence was you know I really don’t know how many, what their customer base was, Norma would know but stuff if she remembers it.

Norma

...it was kind of a focal point to some extent to other interested people, other people in the community interested in feminist thought, they would all kind of wander in there sooner or later. Also other kinds of people would kind of wander in there sometimes people wandered in with problems you know like they didn’t have a place to sleep that night or... they were told that The Woman’s Place was kind of like a social service agency... to a certain extent they wanted to be, they wanted to be like a place where they could refer people. But we didn’t, we weren’t really set up to do that, not in a bookstore, we had, there was always... there was this division... and it was a problem financially and legally, to have a bookstore, how can we have a non-profit bookstore? Along with a social service agency? So we were, we were two different things. We were a bookstore and we were a social service agency.

Diane

Figure 2. Relation to the Woman’s Place

Diane

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Key

Figure 2. Relation to the Woman’s Place
CR groups became widely identified as a way for women to examine issues in their own lives in terms of social conditioning. Discussing role-related problems as women were seen as meaningful ways to redefine problems (1978:170). It appears that discussion of common experiences as women is considered the primary task as well as the primary process in these groups (177).

Kravetz makes a distinction between the early CR groups of the late 60’s and early 70’s which she considers to be more overtly political and formed by radical feminists with the express purpose of creating the ideology of the feminist movement and for a growing concern about particular women’s issues. The later CR groups were more personal in their orientation with a less overt political emphasis. This seems to be the type of groups held through The Woman’s Place. Is this because the groups happen later in the timeline of the Women’s Movement? Did the characteristics of the early groups not even show up in the Midwest or at least the smaller cities and towns of the Midwest?

It is important to realize at the outset that the essentially grassroots phenomenon of consciousness-raising (or ‘CR’ as it came to be called) and the Women’s Movement, an amalgam of both radical and mainstream organizations, ideas and advocates, were not synonymous. While both shared a common goal of liberating women in a sexist culture, one was a political movement, while the other (CR) was a process. Although most members of the Women’s Movement did at one time or another try CR (and although many CR groups were composed of committed feminists), some women who joined CR groups never considered themselves part of the Women’s at all...Yet though the two were not synonymous, CR’s impact on the movement was extraordinary (1989: 5-6).

They were very well organized and did a lot. I used the bookstore, was excited and took part in a CR group. My CR group was extremely unusual in that it lasted as long as it did. My consciousness was already raised before going in but I saw how things were still the same and traditional for other women. It was so long ago but, it meant a lot to me...one thing...long lasting friendships and an increased awareness of what other women went through and the differences between us in terms of attitudes.

**CR SUPPORT GROUPS**

I. Purpose: to enable a group of women to share experiences, lend support, and facilitate in solving problems encountered in the process of transition and growth. The goals of this group experience are a more positive feeling of self, some resolution of day-to-day problems and a feeling of support by a peer group when trying new and often difficult directions.

II. Form:

A. The group should be composed of a maximum of 10 women.

B. Any age woman is welcome.

C. Groups may be structured in various ways depending on the needs of the women involved:

1. Homogeneous groups—women who would like to be in groups with other women of similar age, background, education, etc.

2. Heterogeneous groups—women who would like to be in groups made of different women who differ in age, background, education, etc.

D. At the time a woman expresses interest in joining a CR Support group she will be asked to fill out a card giving pertinent information as to her age, education, work status, profession, marital status, hours available and any other information necessary to placing her in an appropriate group.

E. Each group will be brought together for its first meeting by a facilitator:

1. A woman of any age who has participated in a CR group she thought was successful.

2. Who reflects an attitude in accordance with our goals as outlined here.

3. Demonstrates some ability in facilitating group process. All interested women should be considered.

4. Who is nondiscriminatory of other women’s life styles, attitudes, etc. It is important that the facilitator not make value judgments as to what is and is not “true feminism.”

5. At least one interview would be necessary to determine if a potential facilitator views the CR Support process in a similar manner to that outlined above.

**Key**

*Note: The key terms are used throughout the text to indicate important concepts and ideas.*

**Figure 3. CR Group Guidelines**
By using the Talmud’s layout, I confronted a methodological issue I have left unresolved for viewing in Figure 3. The Talmud attributes each commentary to its author, using the last name of the rabbi (although some writing is anonymous). Qualitative interview passages generally use first names for their participants, the authorial “I” for the author, and the standard last name and year for secondary literature. Following the convention for presenting qualitative research, I used first names for the participants, but I also added my own first name and used these first names to title each interpretation. The Talmudic format slightly changed the naming dynamic between researcher and participants. Within the interpretations themselves, I used the authorial “I,” except when in direct debate with another participant. Although there was a slight shift in the presentation of naming conventions, the layout also illuminated the difficulties in any further leveling of naming distinctions.

In qualitative research, authority struggles typically revolve around the author of the text and the participants. However, conventional social science writing includes secondary literature as well, which becomes a voice in the text whose authority is assumed. Although I used first names for the participants and myself, I discovered that I could not bring myself to do the same with the authors of the secondary literature I had included. I attributed this to several possible authority dilemmas. First, because these authors were not a part of the organization or in dialogue with the participants, they were in a more formal dialogical relationship with the text. Second, and more telling, the authority attached to expert status reflects the privilege I accorded them over the participants and my lived experience. Third, the social science citation convention itself accentuated differences between the voices: it magnified the authority of the published over the nonpublished word. I believe that had the standard format been used for providing the requisite literature review, this issue would not have arisen at all and would have therefore simply remained a hidden dynamic embedded in the text. Perhaps a technical solution is to take up the challenge posed by Gergen and Gergen (2001:31): “There is much to be said for discarding our style manuals at this point, along with the strangulating writing requirements of our major academic journals. As we enrich the range of representation so do we soften the rules of tradition and enrich the possibilities of relationships.”

Another stylistic opening provided by the Talmudic format changes the dynamics of dialogue. Although all the commentaries are essentially in dialogue with each other, more direct exchange can be presented as well by using this format. I found this particularly important as a way to illustrate the direct interpretive tension that developed over one seemingly small point between myself and a participant. The intact portion of the dialogue shown below in the partial page of Figure 4 helped explain the importance of this tension. I have included my reflections on this dialogue as well.

Taking a cue from Stoller (1998), I had decided to pursue the question of wording on the organizational letterhead. The interpretative tension that ensued between Marylou and I concerned one word. As pointed out earlier, this is not at all uncommon in Talmudic debates. The significance of exploring the contentious meanings of
Figure 4. Dialogue on the Word “Woman” in Stationery

just one word is privileged in the logic of Talmudic reasoning and discussion. Also
acknowledging the need not to underestimate the “trivial,” symbolic interactionists
often cite Goffman (1967:91): “The gestures which we sometimes call empty are
perhaps the fullest things of all.” One word on letterhead turns out to have worlds
of meaning attached to it. Taking up discussion of this one word from different vantage
points is similar to the methods embraced in the Talmud.

The sample pages show that the reader is presented with a visual layout that al-

ows for multiple entries into the text. But the viewpoints expressed are not hidden
in a link, as might be the case in digital ethnography. Instead, the reader is con-
fronted with the complexity of the official text and interpretations on the face of
each page. Qualitative researchers tend to assume that they share authority with the
reader and that the reader’s interpretation will depend on his or her social location
to the content in the text. Because of the logic of the Talmudic format, readers have

Mary Lou & Diane

DR: Do you know who designed the logo?
ML: I don’t know, I had something to do with it but I don’t know. That, that
was a very common logo in those days as far as that went and we just designed
something around it.
DR: Do you have any reason, this is silly maybe, but why it was called the
Woman’s Place rather than the Women’s Place?
ML: Oh we debated about that, again we chose that very carefully because it
was a time when we didn’t want to be called ladies or girls and gals and chick
and that we were women uh yeah I remember a discussion about that we de-
cided that since we...to use the word women since it was more dignified and
empowering.
DR: Anything about the fact that instead of
a plural The “Women’s” Place it was singu-
lar? The “Women’s” Place? Just because
I’ve been tripping over that a few times…
ML: We wanted not to use women, and we
wanted to see it as woman and in a sense
empowered I don’t know how else to ex-
plain it, it’s kind of hard to explain but
y’know the word women it implies, it has a
zontation somehow and woman is a
strong term y’know it’s a dignified term.
DR: Okay?
ML: And we were not a women’s group
essentially we were, that’s why I keep say-
ing we were women but I mean in a way it
was just the way that we felt that woman
said what we felt we wanted to say. And it
was also at that time in the feminist move-
ment there was a lot of discussion about
what we wanted to be called and what we
didn’t want to be called and the dignity of
being a woman.
DR: Interesting, I mean I understood what
you meant about the difference between
being called a lady or something...but I
didn’t understand about this…
ML: Well the idea of a woman being a
woman was essentially calling herself a
woman, again in my mother’s generation
you were a lady.
DR: But the difference between woman and women...is interesting.
ML: Yeah, well there’s a difference!...and um y’know women’s group,
women’s hats, women’s clothes y’know, it was more trivial in that sense.
DR: Interesting.

Stoller

Nancy Stoller uses organization’s documents as expressing intended meanings as well as offering
her interpretation of the unintended meanings about
organizational structure, goals and audience. “The
Aids Foundation’s annual reports provide a means
to look at the agency’s changing self-presentation,
programmatic priorities, board composition, and
budget. These reports also document the agency’s
transitions from grass roots community organization
to multi-million dollar non-profit. To review the
history of the organization, I draw on the reports,
internal documents, materials used in public
education campaigns, field notes, interviews with
staff, public comments by current and
former members, and

press cover-

Diane

This dialogue between Mary Lou and I is influ-
enced by the “micro-
cohort” effect used by
Whittier (1995:56) to
describe different
“political generations”
of the women’s move-
ment. I did not see the
word women as trouble-
some; it would seem
that it actually got re-
claimed in the five year
span before I entered
the

Columbia

women’s community. Stoller’s
careful attention to the
stationary of organiza-
tions caused me to ask about this logo and organiza-
tional name, I assumed it would be a minor piece of
information. I was very surprised at how much
conscious meaning went into the title.
the potential to add their own commentary to the work. In this sample, I did not experiment with this aspect but was aware of how easily the format would allow for a more active reader’s interpretation by way of additional commentary.

**DISCUSSION**

This article only begins to address the possibilities unleashed by using the Talmudic format as a template for presenting qualitative data. Talmudic reasoning is much more complicated than I have presented in this overview. Great potential exists for further and deeper explorations of the nuances found in this traditional format and its interpretative approach, and for applying this method elsewhere. For example, the traditions pertaining to how the Talmud is read may suggest new ways to encourage reader participation and community. Studying qualitative work in groups or singing the words instead of reading silently may produce a more engaging and embodied interaction with the research, the self, the audience and the participants. As Vannini and Waskul (2006:6) maintain, “symbolic interaction is musical.” Following Midrashic tradition, research framed in the Talmudic format could also be combined with other experimental presentations for qualitative work such as drama, poetry, or hypermedia ethnography.

The similarity between the Talmud and the hypertext warrants a few words. The Talmud is very different from hypertext because although the Talmud still invites the reader in and is nonlinear, there is a center point of discussion and the argumentation creates a dialectical tension that may or may not be true of hypertext. In hypertext, data may become fragmented and therefore not necessarily held together by any visible interpretive tension. Although different points of view are represented, they do not appear fixed together on a page. Conversely, this fragmentation certainly may be the unique benefit of hypertext. The Talmud has been reproduced in digital form in a hypertextual format, but digital ethnography uses multimedia tools that go beyond this (see Mason and Dicks 1999 and Crane et al. 1991). Although these differences may seem petty, the more significant ones have consequences that may shape the future of nonlinear writing.

In moving away from print forms, one concern among archivists, librarians, and researchers revolves around the ephemeral nature of data on the Internet (Hughes 2002; Thibodeau 2002; Rosenzweig 2003). “Preserving hypertextually linked web pages poses the further problem that to save a single page in its full complexity could ultimately require you to preserve the entire web, because virtually every web page is linked to every other” (Rosenzweig 2003:17). Cost, even more than the available technology, may also be a factor in preservation.

Beyond problems of research preservation, relegating experimental writing to digital outlets does not challenge the traditional linear formats found in most printed journals. Accommodating the printing layout of experimental texts is sometimes viewed as problematic for print journals. The “problem” of putting such a format in print rather than digital medium was resolved as early as the year 1520 when the first
complete printing of the Talmud occurred (Heller 1992). The fact that the Talmud’s unconventional way of displaying text has already appeared in print is important for the conversation about experimental writing in social science print journals. Experimental writing, so named, and viewed as so innovative that it cannot be accommodated within the confines of printing technology, is an ahistorical account that naturalizes the linear form. Experimental writing is only experimental in relation to the construction of linearity. One way that both Derrida and Kristeva demystify the possibilities of textual representation is through a discussion of premodern forms of writing. Distinguishing between “general writing” and “narrow writing,” Derrida ([1967] 1991:48–49) relates the history of narrow writing as being “rooted in a past of nonlinear writing.” In “Tympan,” Derrida mentions the multilayered quality of the printing press that creates linear text. As if to point out the possibilities inherent in this, he transgresses the margins of the text, deconstructing the linear text with text itself (Derrida [1972] 1991). Kristeva’s ([1966] 1986) elaboration of Bakhtin’s insights on carnivalesque and Menippean discourse implies a long history of polyphonic forms of writing. The Talmud is a part of the viable tradition of printed non-linear texts.

One limitation with the Talmudic format is that it is neither appropriate nor desirable for presenting some types of qualitative research. However, in these cases laying out qualitative data and documents side by side could still be a useful tool to visually picture dialogic tension and complexity. Rozenberg et al. (2006) used a Talmud page as a metaphor to expose the construction of a scientific text, with varying researchers presenting their analysis of a single subject’s life story. This allowed them to examine how the varied researcher’s style based on the interest level in the life story, cognitive approach, and worldview created different interpretations of the subject’s life story.

NO CONCLUSION

Because the conventions of social science writing require a conclusion, I would like to use this section as a place to elaborate on the Talmudic approach to concluding thoughts. The Mishna and Gemara were completed in 500 CE, yet contemporary commentaries continue to this day. Just as specific debates within the Talmud remain unresolved, the Talmud itself does not command a definitive conclusion. The term “vedok” found at the end of some commentaries is a call to “continue to examine the matter” (Steinsaltz 1976:273). As Steinsaltz further explains, “To a certain extent the whole Talmud is rounded off by this vedok, the injunction to continue to search, to ask, to see new aspects of familiar problems” (p. 273). The format itself is open to additions, growing in size and complexity, but more than this, the term Talmud itself means “to study,” suggesting an ongoing process of interaction.

Neusner (1973:230) speaks of “the open-endedness of the Talmudic inquiry: nothing is ever left as a final answer, a completed solution. The fruit of insight is
inquiry; the result of inquiry is insight, in endless progression.” This open-endedness corresponds to the approach of qualitative research and especially the study of everyday life and interactions:

Symbolic interactionist research itself is open-ended, provisional and uncertain of its final outcome. By the end, all being well, that process, that dialectic of interrogation, that moving backwards and forwards in a work of encountering negations and transcending them, only to produce new negations, will yield some useful answers, but it would be foolish to try to foreclose on them too soon. Indeed, premature analysis may merely edit out possibly rewarding lines of enquiry. (Rock 2001:31)

In the spirit of this ongoing inquiry, I do not believe I should summarize that using the Talmudic format for qualitative research is a complete, packaged method. It is a way to understand the qualitative process of interaction and representation that complements the growing body of literature on experimental writing. My intentions in this article were to begin to open up the possibilities for using the Talmudic format for presenting qualitative work. Perhaps premodern representational forms and methodologies can also be incorporated into the Post-Blumerian Age of interactionism.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Carol Rambo for her editorial guidance as well as the anonymous reviewers for insightful suggestions on improving the manuscript. A draft of this article was presented at the 2003 SSSI conference, and I am grateful for the enthusiastic reception of the idea from organizers of the session, audience members, and Simon Gottschalk. Mary Jo Neitz has been a constant support throughout the long process of creating this article. The women of the Woman’s Place were and are inspirational. Althea Harris, Kerry Hollander, Cassandra Crawford, and Mary Jo Neitz read earlier drafts and gave invaluable feedback. Alexandra Chapman, Robert Banke of NIU media services, and Lisa Wilcox of Web Girl Web Designs helped me with the layout of the figures.

NOTES

1. Midrash is made up of written and oral stories, and allows for expansion on the biblical text by either adding to them or taking them in a different direction. Midrash is also a way to further incorporate everyday life into understandings of Jewish law and custom. Contemporary Midrash now takes the form of poetry, theatrical midrash, dance midrash, and storytelling. The Theatre Company Jerusalem performs Talmudic and Midrashic stories. There are books and journals devoted to the creation of contemporary Midrash. (For an excellent example, see Living Text: The Journal of Contemporary Midrash.)

2. The Babylonian Talmud (Bavli) originated in Babylon and provides more extensive translation and commentary than the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) originating in Palestine. Unless the Yerushalmi is specified, it is assumed that a general reference to the Talmud is to the Babylonian Talmud.

3. For a complete and interactive guide to the Talmud’s structure, see also the Web site by Eliezer Segal titled “A Page from the Babylonian Talmud” (http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Talmud-Page.html).
4. Further examples of informal contemporary commentary can be found on the Texas Talmud Web page that claims to be for “Jewish cowboys or cowgirls” (http://web.wt.net/~cbenton/TexasTalmud.htm). And Rabbi Noah Gradofsky has written a page of Talmud from an episode of The Simpsons (http://www.dovberger.com/noah/simpsons.html). More formal commentary can be exemplified by the Responsa literature, which is written by Mishna scholars who respond to questions on matters concerning the understanding of Jewish law in contemporary circumstances.

5. Although Orthodox and Conservative Jews are more likely to study Talmud in male-only yeshivas, Reform and Reconstructionist Jews also attend yeshivot. A Beit Midrash can encompass liberal agendas: Bat Kol sponsored the first feminist yeshiva in Israel for a few years (http://www.batkol.org); SVARA is a house of study that is queer-identified (http://www.svara.org); and the Anita Saltz International Education Center: World Union for Progressive Judaism offers a yeshiva. The difference in yeshivot is not based simply on the level of inclusion; it also reflects differing ways of studying the Talmud. For Orthodox Jews, the Mishna and Gemara are more literal, and certain types of analysis are not deemed appropriate.

6. Fishman discusses what appears to be the demise of the practice of using fonts to graphically distinguish the commentaries. Formerly, square block letters were used for the Mishna and Gemara, and a type of script known as “Rashi writing” for the remaining commentaries. This latter style was named after Rashi, the first rabbi to provide a full commentary on the Mishna. The proliferation of presses that offered affordable editions began to use the square letters exclusively by the end of the twentieth century.

7. The first complete printing of the Talmud by the printer Daniel Bomberg in the year 1520 set the standard layout style for successive printings.

8. Additional commentaries and responsa add to the Talmud, but they are not added physically to the Talmud in subsequent editions; instead, they appear in accompanying texts.

REFERENCES


The Use of the Talmudic Format for the Presentation of Qualitative Research


