

The Power of the Anecdote

Dr. Richard Nisbett calls the Hawthorne effect “a glorified anecdote.” “Once you’ve got the anecdote,” he said, “you can throw away the data.” A dismissive comment which back-handedly tells you something about the power of anecdote and narrative.

—David Carter-Tod, cited in Stephen W. Draper (2006)

“It’s only anecdotal.” My work had been dismissed with this comment so many times that I had stopped using the word. In my vocabulary, *anecdotal* has become a derogatory term. “Quotation,” slightly more dignified, was substituted—or “participant perspective,” which appeared to have more authority.

But why does Nisbett consider that an anecdote can replace the data set? When working with text, we cannot show, demonstrate, or provide hard evidence for the link between the anecdote and the text, as one can with numerical data and the representative statistics—using the mean, median, mode, and range. We deal with representations of emotion and meaning, and are stuck with charges of subjectively selecting the “best” description, not the typical or average story, and of being subject to bias and misrepresentation.

What do anecdotes *do*?

Anecdotes reveal. Anecdotes communicate the emotion and the meaning of an event. A good anecdote will have all of the characteristics of the category it represents and must be the best representation of the entire data set. Qualitative analysis of the category would have identified all of those characteristics, and all characteristics must be evident in the anecdote. Supporting text should discuss these characteristics. Of course, one cannot take a shortcut and skim on data collection—one must have an entire data set to know whether the anecdote is adequate and a fair representation. This means that you cannot truncate data collection as soon as you get a good interview—saturation is important. An anecdote does not initially stand on its own. However, the fact that an anecdote must represent the entire data set (or some dimension of the entire data set) means there must be some evaluative process for its selection. This area is ready for development for those who believe in standards. (Note: Real indicators should be developed—“grab” is too subjective.)

But do anecdotes also conceal? An anecdote will conceal if it does not adequately represent the data. This is the risk of invalidity that researchers take every time they select a quotation to represent data. Is the Hawthorne effect always present?

Anecdotes make facts memorable. Anecdotes make research comprehensible; they communicate meaning and emotion, and they bring a message home. Even

physicians who specialize in new therapies and surgery use the anecdote—maybe not in their research articles but for news releases and fund-raising. For instance, they invite former patients to face the media and explain how the treatment has altered their lives.

Good anecdotes enable generalization. “You can throw away the data.” Good anecdotes are really an exercise in generalization: We have generalized *from* the data to the anecdote; we can generalize from the anecdote *about* the data and generalize *to other* contexts and populations. (Note: Not transfer, *generalize*.)

But can we throw away the data? Can an anecdote be significant without the theoretical explanation/context? Can an anecdote selected from qualitative inquiry stand alone? The Hawthorne effect does. It has achieved that status of a scientific term and an essential criterion of validity. Not bad for an anecdote . . .

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REFERENCES

- Draper, Stephen W. (2006). *Wikipedia entry: The Hawthorne effect*. Retrieved May 26, 2006, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawthorne_effect