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The Hook: Getting your grounded theory research published¹

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I learned about the hook as a fledgling writer back in the late 70's, and early 80s. I wrote about stepfamilies when almost nobody else did (Stern, 1978, 1982a, 1982b). My big break came when I published an English-language version on how to do grounded theory. In my field, nursing, grounded theory was the buzz word of the day, but few nurses had a sociological background, and thus the vocabulary to be able to understand the Glaser and Straus description (Stern, 1980). That article kick started my career as a writer and researcher. There was a time when it was required reading for graduate students in nursing around the world. Twenty-nine years after its publication, I got a request for a reprint from a doctoral student in New Zealand. What the hook consists of then is timing, a subject that has impact, and a title that sparks the interest of a potential reader. A classic example of all three is *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Straus, 1967), a then new approach to sociological research. Sociologists were interested, but as the authors were based at the University of California, San Francisco School of Nursing, they had an eager audience in the nursing community who were looking for a research method to formalize what they did as nurses.

From the point of view of a writer of articles and an editor, (19 years as Editor in Chief of the interdisciplinary journal, *Health Care for Women International*), I have a seasoned eye for what editors and reviewers are looking for: good science, of course, fluid writing, no doubt about it, a fresh look at a familiar problem, you bet, but there's something else they want—the hook. They want articles that make their journals the go-to for the new black. What follows pertains to articles in refereed journals.

¹This article in an expanded and modified form will appear in the forthcoming book, *Accessible grounded theory: A beginner's handbook*. Authors, Phyllis Stern and Caroline Porr

Selecting the Right Journal

Most scientific journals have an on-line version which you can access through a university library. Get familiar with a variety of journals, and see where your work might fit. If the editors have just published a special issue on Asian dating patterns, likely they're full up with that subject. Some editors like to work with new authors to get them up to speed. As an editor I was fond of helping the next generation launch their careers. Other editors have other goals, but being an editor allows one to form intimate relationships with authors.

The Title

The title needs to be worded in a way that other researchers doing a computer search will relate to, but that's no reason it can't be catchy too. As an example, "Discovery of nursing gestalt in critical care nursing: The importance of the gray gorilla syndrome", (Pyles and Stern, 1983) got a fair amount of attention, as did "The troubleshooter's guide to media" (Harris, Stern & Paris, 1986). "Method slurring: the grounded theory/phenomenology example" crossed discipline lines, (Baker, Wuest and Stern, 1992) as did the book chapter, "Eroding Grounded Theory" (Stern, 1994). In 1972, at the suggestion of the professor, June Abby, I submitted a physiology term paper to The American Journal of Nursing, and it was accepted. I consider the title I chose, "APA: Insidious foe of an aging Swede." to be clever, but unclear (Stern, 1972). It was a case study of my father who developed Addison's pernicious anemia, the symptoms of which, loss of appetite, loss of energy, depression, his physician attributed to the aging process. I figured Dad was anemic, and finally got him appropriate treatment. The trouble with that title was that a potential reader would have to know that APA stood for a type of anemia rather than The American Psychological Association. But Freda Reblsky, a professor of Psychology at Boston University did know, and used a portion of the article to illustrate how often treatable chronic illnesses in the elderly go undetected (Reblsky, 1975). How she found the article in a nursing journal in a time prior to the World Wide Web is beyond my kin.

The Abstract

It's fairly common in computer searches for a student or

author to limit the search to abstract only; for this reason it's important to describe the essence of your grounded theory in the abstract. When you're limited to 100 words, say, this is no easy task, but a necessary one—it may mean deleting that perfect phrase you started with, but following the rules is one path to getting published. Ignoring the journal's publication guidelines makes editors and reviewers irritated, to the point that manuscripts can be rejected out-of-hand. Over the years researchers have put their own spin on the original grounded theory method (Morse, Stern, Corbin, Bowers, Charmaz, & Clarke, 2009), while I've stuck with classical grounded theory—which I call Glaserian after Barney Glaser, as opposed to Strausian, after Anselm Straus (Stern, 1994, Artinian, Giske, & Cone, 2009)—it's important to make this clear at the outset, so the reader gets the in the appropriate frame of mind.

Body of the Paper

Introductory paragraph. I'm a staunch supporter of the well-phrased introductory paragraph, a hook to catch the reader's attention. This overture sets the tone of the paper, and gives the reader some guidance as to where you're going with this work. Avoid a repeat of the abstract; you already said that.

Writing style. I learned to polish my writing style by reading articles in The New Yorker magazine. I admire the way science writers can explain a complicated subject so that even I can understand, and that's what I've tried to do—if the reader fails to understand your theory, she or he fails to pass it along, or to use it. Reading poetry has helped me develop rhythm in my writing. Editors tell me I have a recognizable voice, a pattern that readers can identify as mine. I think this is true; some of my work has become public domain, and when I read it (sans citation) I know, "Hey, I wrote that!"

Everything is a draft. Barney Glaser's advice to his students was, "Consider everything a draft," and, "The best writing is in the re-writing." (Glaser, personal communication, 1974). This recommendation is particularly useful when your submission comes back with myriad suggestions from reviewers. It's helpful to remember that reviewers are school teachers, and they think they're not doing their job if they don't make corrections. Not that I take their advice calmly; my reaction tends to bring forth a string of four-letter words followed by the epithet, "stupid jerks!"

My advice is to put the paper aside, pour a stiff drink, put your feet up, and watch television. By the time you get back to the task of writing up the theory so that even they can understand, you may be less emotionally involved (Stern, 1997). Often in a calmer state, the advice of reviewers makes sense. Maybe you have a longer fuse than I, and can get right on with the re-writing. In any case, don't take no for an answer! Some of my best stuff took three rewrites before I got an acceptance (Stern & Kerry, 1996).

Conclusion. Some authors confuse the conclusion with a summary. A summary is a summary, a conclusion is something else. As an editor, I often asked an author of an otherwise publishable paper, "How will your work save the world?" An article is a selling job and the conclusion tells the reader how it can be useful; it sells your work. This is no time to be timid; this is a time for the crescendo, the closing act, the big kahuna!

Getting Hooked

"I coulda' been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am." Marlin Brando in *On the Waterfront*. (Spiegel, 1954). Seeing your work in print makes you feel like a somebody. American published articles are catalogued in The United States Library of Congress, and other countries have similar depositaries. Being published is a way of gaining eternity. It's a way of getting hooked. People remember where they were when a major historical event occurs. I remember where I was when my first article was accepted (Stern, 1972). My husband and I went to see the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof* (Prince, 1971). I was too excited to follow the plot line, and to this day, I have only a vague idea of what the film was about. In 1980, I was supervising a group of student nurses at Saint Luke hospital in San Francisco when I got a call from Nell Watts, then Chief Executive Officer of Sigma Theta Tau, the honor society of nursing which publishes *Image: The Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, a respected research journal. Nell wanted to know if I could turn around a few changes to an article I had submitted by overnight mail (this was before fax and electronic mail). Of course I could—I was thrilled. This was the big time, this was Broadway! After the clinical tour was finished, I drove home along the coast, and stopped off at Fort Point. I needed to walk off my drugless high. The Point has updrafts skydivers like, and they were out in force: all bright colors and waving to me. It's the closest I expect to get to Nirvana. I was hooked. I have celebrated my 84th birthday, I

have one arthritic hand, and the other partially paralyzed due to a dislocated shoulder making keyboarding awkward, but the thrill is still there.

Writing is hard, lonely, work, but your research is complete only when it is published. Come get high with me. Get hooked.

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