# Social Science or Social Control: Qualitative Researchers' Dilemma in Contrastive Rhetoric

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*As many critics have pointed out, social science is not and has never been a neutral enquiry into human behaviors and institutions. It is strongly implicated in the project of social control, whether by the state or by other agencies, which ultimately serve the interests of a dominant group. In this paper, I will focus on contrastive rhetoric—an area of study in second language writing—as an example of social science research. I will first discuss how, in the field of contrastive rhetoric, a particular "social problem" is first identified and then contained through the collective pronouncements of expert discourse. I will then speculate on the epistemological assumptions of contrastive rhetoric that determine the research focus and influence research findings, which, in turn, can affect the representations as well as experiential realities of the researched groups. Finally, I will discuss how alternative ways of approaching the "problem" could challenge existing paradigms that disadvantage the researched groups.*

According to Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, a "qualitative revolution" has overtaken the social sciences in the past few decades, illuminating many otherwise obscured situations (ix). Through qualitative research, researchers can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the compositions and operations of human society, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings they generate. As qualitative research grows out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions, and these different traditions, schools and disciplines operate with distinctive views about how qualitative research can explain the social world, there is no consensus on a unified set of methodological techniques and principles (see Mason 6-8; Denzin and Lincoln xv). In recent years, debates on qualitative research have received particular attention from postmodern, poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives. As many critics in these intellectual domains have pointed out, social science is not and has never been a neutral enquiry into human behaviours and institutions, but rather, it is strongly implicated in the project of social control, whether by the state or by other agencies, that ultimately serve the interests of a dominant group.

As a very obvious illustration of how social science is implicated in the project of social control, we may notice what an enormous proportion of all social research is conducted on populations of relatively powerless people. It is factory workers, criminals, immigrants, refugees, as opposed to company executives or government officials, who fill the pages of social science texts. Doubtless this is partly because members of the powerful elites often refuse to submit to the probing of researchers. However, as Deborah Cameron and others suggest, it is also because a lot of social science research is directly inspired by "the need to understand and sometimes even to contain 'social problems' - the

'threats'… that powerless groups are felt to pose to powerful ones" (2). Perhaps the fullest and most insistent statement along this line can be found in the various works of Michel Foucault. Foucault observes that the citizens of modern democracies are controlled less by naked violence or the economic power of the boss or the landlord than by the pronouncements of expert discourse, organized in what he calls "regimes of truth" (*Power/Knowledge* 133), that is, sets of understandings that legitimate particular social attitudes and practices. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault conducts extensive studies of the development of the prison system and disciplinary surveillance, as well as the history of sexuality. Foucault suggests that programmes of social scientific research on such subjects as "criminality" or "sexual deviance" have contributed to "regimes of truth." According to Foucault, studying and presenting the "facts" about these phenomena, in essence, both constructs particular people as targets for social control and influences the form the control itself will take.

In this paper, I will focus on contrastive rhetoric—an area of study in second language writing—as an example of social science research. I will first discuss how, in the field of contrastive rhetoric, a particular "social problem" is first identified and then contained through the collective pronouncements of expert discourse. I will then speculate on the epistemological assumptions of contrastive rhetoric that determine the research focus and influence research findings, which, in turn, can affect the representations as well as experiential realities of the researched groups. Finally, I will discuss how alternative ways of approaching the problem could challenge existing paradigms that disadvantage the researched groups.

In the past four decades or so, with the increasing number of non-native English speakers in North American institutions of higher learning, diversity has become a popular topic in North American academia. At the same time, the "language problems" brought by non-native-speaking students are perceived to have created contradictions, tensions, anxieties, and problematics in the institutional landscape (see Spack, "Initiating ESL Students" 29-30; Fox 1-11; Zamel 506-10; Elbow 357). As Vivian Zamel comments:

> One clear indication that faculty across the disciplines are concerned about the extent to which diverse student populations, particularly students whose native language is not English, constrain their work is the number of workshops and seminars that have been organized . . . in order to address what these faculty view as the 'ESL Problem'. (506-7)

While scholars and educators in various fields have expressed interest in this "ESL problem," it is *contrastive rhetoric* that has taken as its territory the study of non-native-speaking students' "language problems," producing much reasoning about them. Maintaining that language and writing are cultural phenomena, contrastive rhetoric seeks to understand the different ways that cultures arrange information and express ideas in writing (see Kaplan; Leki; Connor). Contrastive rhetoric implies that the "language problems" encountered and presented by non-native-speaking students can be understood as the result of linguistic and rhetorical conventions inherent in students' home cultures that prevent them from achieving academic fluency in the Western context.

In his landmark article "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," Robert Kaplan claims that much of the rhetorical difference in texts composed by "ESL" students from various cultures can be attributed to culture-specific rhetorical styles or to differences in thought patterns or logic. To substantiate his claim, Kaplan examined approximately 600 student essays, focusing on patterns of paragraph organization. He found that students from different linguistic backgrounds composed English paragraphs according to "thought patterns" that were characteristic of their home cultures. Kaplan devised graphic depictions of these thought patterns in a famous set of diagrams. For example, the "thought patterns" of "Oriental" students were depicted as pursuing a spiral that gradually closed in on a point but never reached it, as opposed to the linear logic of English. Kaplan was convinced that Asian students approached writing in a way that was not "normally regarded as desirable in English" (256):

> In this kind of writing, the development of the paragraph may be said to be 'turning in a widening gyre.' The circles or gyres turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly. (253)

In the past forty years or so, contrastive rhetoric has "enjoyed an increasing reception within composition studies, particularly among ESL teachers and researchers" (Cai 54). Kaplan's diagrams have been widely published in books for both teachers of English as a second language and for non-native-speaking students, and they are often found in the syllabi of ESL writing courses. As Ilona Leki notes:

> It is in L2 [second language] writing classes that contrastive rhetoric work has the greatest potential for practical application. The diagrams, with their implications in regard to patterns of written discourse, readily place contrastive rhetoric into the current traditional approach to teaching ESL writing. (123)

Similarly, many researchers in contrastive rhetoric, spurred by the notion of culture-dependent rhetoric, have attempted to confirm or refute Kaplan's original hypothesis, filling in the details, either teasing out more differences or proclaiming that there are actually similarities between English rhetoric and rhetorics of other cultures (see Bloom; Choi; Carson; Connor; Li).[i] Thus, for both teachers and researchers, contrastive rhetoric seems to have offered an attractive and welcoming way out of the "chaos" of ESL writing. For teachers, contrastive rhetoric seems to have provided a key into the texts of cross-cultural students, a simple way to clarify issues of rhetorical structure, and a very concrete formula to teach students; for researchers, it seems to have opened the door to a new, vast, and potentially productive area of study based on Kaplan's assumption that rhetorical structures are culturally different.

The brief history of contrastive rhetoric discussed above demonstrates how the "ESL problem" was first defined and then contained through the collective pronouncement of expert discourse by contrastive rhetoric researchers. Although the increasing body of research in the field may have provided easy solutions to the "ESL problem," for the critical researcher, however, an important goal is to generate or elaborate alternative perspectives, to look at old questions in new ways, and not just produce new data. To quote Edward Said, the role of the intellectual is:

> to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who [is] unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. (*Representations* 11-23)

Thus, for example, if powerful speakers or groups enact or otherwise exhibit their authority in discourse, critical researchers will seek to know exactly how this is done, by investigating the discursive structures and strategies involved in that process. To understand the discursive reproduction of power, the researcher will be engaged with both the production and reception of dominance. That is, she will examine the enactment, expression or legitimation of dominance in the production of discourses, on the one hand, and the functions, implications, consequences or results of such discourses, on the other.

If we look at contrastive rhetoric through critical lenses, contrastive rhetorical assumptions about "cultural thought patterns" could raise a host of questions about constructions of cultures and cultural differences, as well as constructions of cross-cultural students, students on the peripheries of Euro-American life. As a number of scholars have observed, although researchers in contrastive rhetoric are motivated by the well-intentioned notion that taking into account students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds gives educators insights into students' struggles with language and writing, the dominance of contrastive rhetoric in the study of second language writing might be rooted in colonial desire for self-definition and social control (see Pennycook; Kubota and Lehner). As Edward Said

illustrates in his *Orientalism*, colonialists construct the "Orient," or the rest of the world, as the "Other" as a way of defining themselves. That is, "Otherness" is defined by those in the centre and is defined against those doing the defining (Said 1-28). When read from a critical lens, it seems that it is precisely this constant stress in contrastive rhetoric on the Otherness of the non-native speaker that may discursively colonize the heterogeneities of the writing contexts of non-native speakers from various cultures—thereby producing/representing composite, singular categories of "Asian students," "Arab students," "African students," and so on—and forming images that appear arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carry with them the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. For example, Kaplan's depiction of Asian rhetoric discussed above seems to ignore the big waves of historical changes that have swept through the Asian landscape, including encounters with Western imperialism, political revolutions, and the Asian diaspora in the modern era, which have produced immense fluidity, ambiguity, and complexity in the definition of Asianness and Asian ways of constructing and presenting knowledge, not to mention the already heterogeneous context of cultures, histories, and rhetorics within Asia.

While contrastive rhetoric made valuable contributions to the study of second language writing by introducing the notion of culture to the field, which had previously been limited to examination of ESL writing at the sentence level, the initial insight of contrastive rhetoric—that differences exist among rhetorical styles of different cultures—seems no longer sufficient at a time when scholars in many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities are beginning to question received notions about language and culture in the new global condition of diaspora and cross-cultural experience. As Ruth Spack notes, when contrastive rhetoric scholars perpetuate cultural myths by depending on "an archaic view that defines culture as 'a set of patterns and rules shared by a particular community'" (Spack, "Rhetorical Constructions" 768), they ignore the "blurred" spaces or "contact zones" in which cultural identities are formed, as students literally and figuratively cross borders.

Furthermore, the overemphasis on cultural difference in contrastive rhetoric can lead to regressive, limiting, and even blinding stereotypes and unwarranted categorical distinctions among groups. For example, the categorical distinctions to which contrastive rhetoric seems to be prone may have a distancing and exoticizing effect, leading to native English speakers to experiencing themselves as the norm, as straight-line, direct writers, and constructing cross-cultural students as the exotic Other and as irrelevant, though perhaps also quaint and thus appealing. Instead of helping researchers and educators understand themselves and their students within a global context, contrastive rhetoric may make the Other utterly dismissible, by affirming and even exaggerating differences, and then colonizing the Other: "this is the correct way of writing in English; those who want to write well in English must follow this pattern."

The dominance of contrastive rhetoric in second language instruction and its reluctance to adopt a critical lens may also intersect with larger schemes of knowledge and power. On the one hand, having the keys to the intricacies of cross-cultural student writing has provided ESL teachers with a kind of pseudo expertise; on the other hand, cross-cultural students' cultural differences or deviance from conventional discourse holds great currency/capital within the institutional setting and provides researchers with a rich and bottomless reservoir of resources. As Giltrow and Calhoun remind us, in such research on cross-cultural students' linguistic performance, non-native speakers may become "vulnerable objects not only of instruction but also of knowledge, and thus, of social control" (51).

Therefore, although researchers in contrastive rhetoric may be well intentioned in their attempts "to foster a growing awareness of and positive attitude toward the fact that people write differently in different languages and cultures" (Cai 55), they also need to consider that, in the process of constructing cross-cultural students' writing as different, they are participating in the contradiction of a system that universalizes the standard ways of writing but that preserves, at the same time, cultural differences and ensures that cross-cultural students are "different" writers. Thus, rather than continuing in the construction and presentation of "facts" about cultural differences, which, as Eva Lam points out, has served "only to produce the tourist-and-holiday-maker type of knowledge, and [has] had little

effect on helping [researchers and their] students develop cross-cultural sensitivities" (376), the discipline of contrastive rhetoric needs to develop new approaches that reflect upon the political and ideological implications of its work and that acknowledge and articulate the politics of the (re)production of given discourses. There is a need for the discipline to treat any articulation of cultural difference with caution, to be more self-reflexive, and to go beyond cultural facts or the simple comparison of facts to engage themselves and their students in developing the knowledge, skills, and sensitivities needed for cross-cultural understanding and interaction that involve critical self-reflection. Instead of, or in addition to, asking what are the different ways in which students from different cultures acquire and construct knowledge or how rhetorical conventions in Chinese are different from writing practices in English, perhaps researchers should also investigate how and why these students have been constructed differently.

Rethinking long-held assumptions about cultural difference is a difficult task, one requiring researchers to question received notions about language and culture, and to reflect critically on their own beliefs and practices in writing and writing instruction and to speculate on their roles in the institutional systems which both invite and silence cross-cultural students. Revisioning of the discipline of contrastive rhetoric also requires researchers to focus on the perspectives of cross-cultural students, which have been virtually absent from most institutional conversations designed to support diversity and multiculturalism. Instead of reiterating expert discourse, which may serve the interests of dominant groups, researchers could consider their work as "research on, for and with" the researched (Cameron et al. 22).

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[i] Although research in contrastive rhetoric subsequent to Kaplan's original study has paid more attention to social and cultural factors informing cross-cultural students' writing, the essential insight of contrastive rhetoric, that differences exist among writing styles of different cultures, still seems to guide teaching in the second language classroom. Most studies in contrastive rhetoric seem to be designed in such a way that researchers focus on rhetorical structures and patterns of different cultures without critical attention to the questions and meanings woven into and created by the very construction of cultural difference. In more recent works, William Grabe and Kaplan make some minor revisions to earlier contrastive rhetoric, stating a number of "difficulties" with the earlier theory (*Theory and Practice* 197-98). Nevertheless, they are convinced that studies in contrastive rhetoric have validity and can be relied upon in terms of its pedagogical application: "there is considerable evidence that different cultures have different rhetorical preferences for the organization of written text" (197). Although they try to reconcile earlier findings with more recent development in composition studies, by suggesting that contrastive rhetoric does not necessarily ignore the composing process, their bulleted list of techniques for teachers to use in the classroom as a way to help students develop a thesis statement is still based on the earlier argument that English is characterized by a linear way of writing (see "Writing" 277).