



Full Length Review Article

AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DATA ANALYSIS ARTISTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

In qualitative research the researcher can, to some limit, govern the nature of data he works with. This is done by the way he conducts the interview and analyses data. In another word, he will be the painter as well as the critic at the same time. This article, which represents a continuation to the previous article, will deal with qualitative data collection and analysis using fine art critic eye and fine art work as examples.

INTRODUCTION

You may have seen in the previous article (Alhamdani 2016) that the nature of the painting governs the methodological approach for its interpretation. Here you may spot a difference between painting interpretation and the methodology of qualitative research. In qualitative research you can, to some extent, govern the nature of data you work with. This is done by the way you conduct the interview and analyse data. In another word, you will be the painter as well as the critic at the same time.

Qualitative data collection and analysis

When an art critic finds an interesting painting for an unknown artist, at least to him, he starts gathering information about artist trying to know as much as he can about his paintings to reach an understanding to his artistic style, favourite colours, common themes and the way his creative career developed over the years. Qualitative research works the same way using this “inductive” approach with data, because the researcher does not know much about the phenomenon he is studying (Pope, Ziebland et al. 2000).

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This “inductive approach” mostly used in qualitative research is the opposite to “deductive approach used in quantitative research. In quantitative studies we test our assumptions (hypotheses) rather than exploring to build up our knowledge as in qualitative studies. Sometimes it is mentioned by textbooks as “generating a hypothesis ” appose to “testing a hypothesis” (Hancock, K. et al. 2007). In order to achieve this, the researcher generates textual data from recorded interviews, documents or observations, starting with a few number of open ended questions asked to the participants with different experiences.

In qualitative research we used open ended questions. Open ended questions are questions not to be answered by “yes” or “no”. They are answered by explanation, starting by “what”, “how” and “why”. This enables the interviewees (patients) to speak and elaborate about the nature of their experiences. The researcher may formulate a set of “topic guide” questions in attempt to cover various aspects of the interviewees’ experiences and insights (Arthur and Nazroo 2003). Topic guide questions might be complemented by “probes” questions during the interview. Probes are the questions aim to investigate further about some issues raised in the interview process (Legard, Keegan et al. 2003). Examples of “Probe” question; would you tell more about this; this is interesting can you explain what do you mean exactly?

“Prompt” is another tactic used by the interviewer to change the direction of the conversation and control the path of the interview. When the interviewee start to talk about aspects of experience seem to be irrelevant to the research subject, the interviewer may respond in the following way; “it is interesting what you have said, but we may talk about it later; this is useful information indeed. However, let’s go back to what you have said earlier...etc. Prompts are not always useful tactic, because the interviewees might touch upon important or relevant aspects of their experience, which have not been previously considered by the researcher.

Number of participants

Sample size is an important difference between qualitative and quantitative research. In quantitative research the sample size is governed by statistical rules, whereas in qualitative research the sample size is governed by reaching data saturation level (Pope, Ziebland et al. 2000). This means we interview more patients until there are no new ideas to be added to the data. This might explain the small sample size in qualitative research. The researcher might reach the level of data saturation after 5 interviews.

This aspect of experience exploration can be exemplified by modern practice in fine art. Artists, as they make their exhibitions, tend to dedicate the exhibition to a particular theme or aspect of human experience. The artist might exhibit 7, 10 or 12 paintings. This is governed by the painter’s feeling that the theme has been covered. It does not matter if this might take few weeks or several years from the artist’s work. What really matters is the theme or idea behind doing the exhibition will reach the audience in the best possible way. There is another aspect of similarity between art and qualitative research. During the painting process and as the picture is getting clearer in artist mind he/ she might change the colours, may add, remove or change the posture of the figures. Let us take “Napoleon’s Coronation” by David as an example. I have taken two sketches for one painting’s detail, which is Napoleon gesture. If you see the final painting you may find how Napoleon’s gesture differs in sketches and the final painting (Figure 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1. Napoleon Coronation Sketch 1

This is similar to what is called “iterative approach” in qualitative data analysis. In qualitative research we start analysing data alongside data gathering (Pope, Ziebland et al. 2000).



Figure 2. Napoleon Coronation Sketch 2



Figure 3. Napoleon Coronation by David/ Detail

It is not like quantitative research, where we start analysing data after we finish collecting it. In qualitative research we may add new questions for the interview, or we may rephrase the question for the hope to reach a richer answer. We may, also, tend to look at the already provided data in different way as we collect new data. Data may not be generated from interviews only. In ethnographic studies the researchers engages themselves within the environment under study. They report their experience and feelings and discuss these findings as they share the participants' experience to have better insight about it. This means studying the experience of group of people in specific cultural or environmental context (Nicholls 2009). The researcher may record participants' conversations, interactions toward different situation within this environment. An example of ethnographic approach is studying a complex artistic phenomenon, as Picasso's artistic career for example. Picasso is a revolutionary artist with a versatile artistic career. Studying his art itself might not provide the in depth understanding to his art. We might need to visit his home town; meet members of his family, live their environment and have a sense of it to understand the role of environment in shaping Picasso's way of thinking.

Making sense of qualitative data

It might look as a daunting task dealing with textual data of dozens of pages long. No need, however, to be worried. Like painting, the qualitative data starts to make sense when the some corner stone aspects (themes) start to appear. In painting process the painter starts with an idea, simple might be, then as he put figures and colours on the canvas the idea transforms into composition. The composition has its elements (figures and colours). In qualitative research the themes start become clearer as the researcher collects more data. He, then, starts to make sense of what is all about. At this stage it is a useful practice to start building preliminary themes (interesting aspects of data) and identify the basic building blocks of themes (codes). It can be done in opposite way. The researcher identifies first the basic building blocks of data (codes) then finds what is common between certain codes to build up larger blocks (themes) (Creswell 2003).



Figure 4. Rembrandt Self Portrait/ Detail

Identification of themes is the essence of thematic analysis. This type of qualitative analysis shed light on experience aspects of a disease process. It can be considered as describing the topical geography of the tip of iceberg. It is rather descriptive than analytical. It is similar to criticizing a painting by describing the artistic school it belongs to and the interesting aspects of painting elements. When the research wants to digs deeper in the patient's experience targeting the essence of each aspect of the disease process, or tries to capture the real meaning of certain disability to the patient, the researcher uses phenomenological approach. In this approach the research might use probe questions more frequently to help the patient elaborate more about a particular area of experience. It has been mentioned in the previous article that some portrait paintings could represent useful examples of phenomenological studies. In these paintings, especially, self portrait paintings, the artist tries to reach to the depth of his feelings and vision. All the painting elements (composition, light and colours) are dedicated to enlighten a particular feeling or vision. See Rembrandt self portrait/detail (Figure 4).

All the composition elements, colours and brush strokes are about the way he looked at the spectator. Every detail in this master piece reflects the uneasy, deep and sad look of Rembrandt toward life, as he gazes toward us. It is the essence of this painting. In qualitative research, in general, the researcher may use other identified themes to understand more the aspect under investigation. In grounded theory approach the researcher uses Constant Comparison Method, in the attempt to link between themes and codes to identify the process that connect these themes and codes. By this way the researcher can formulate a theory or a theoretical construct about the phenomenon under study. The theory could be about a single concept, which drives all the elements to react in particular way. This is the creative part of this analysis technique. It is often described by data abstraction or moving from coding to abstraction. Constant Comparative Analysis aims to reach a universal understanding about the phenomenon in the sense of identifying a unifying construct that governs it. It is like telling the reader the moral behind a story. This is similar to criticizing paintings with theatrical scenes. Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" (Figure 5) might be a good example of comparative approach, although the term of interaction between painting elements would be more representative here. Each figure in the painting seems to play an important role in the composition, despite all their poses and gestures are linked to the act of freedom represented by the young lady at the heart of the scene. If we just look on the lady itself, we will not understand the whole idea of painting. The same if we took each figure alone. You cannot unveil the seductive and dangerous meaning of freedom without understanding the interaction between all painting's elements.

Writing a qualitative research paper

Another challenging aspect of qualitative research is writing a qualitative research study. Clinicians used to describe and discuss variables, numbers and statistical values. It does not require much or writing skills. In qualitative research the issue is different. Writing qualitative research could be exemplified as a BBC Science Documentary. It has the story engaging element, but full of scientific facts. In qualitative research we deal with human experiences and thoughts. This definitely influences the method of writing.

There are qualitative researchers of clinical background who write their qualitative research in dry materialistic way, as if they are talking about variables and numbers, not human feelings. This does not mean writing in biased compassionate way. It simply means trying to deal with patients' quote with respect.



Figure 5. Liberty Leading the People by Delacroix

For example, it is not justifiable to put participants' opinions and views in tables. In fine art articles the critics support their interpretation for art works using paintings and sculptures as examples. In results' section of a qualitative study we use participants/ patients' quotes, documents, photos or videos to support our interpretations to patients' experience. With each particular finding we may quote from one or more than one patient. It might not be suitable, in qualitative research, to use tables or figures to show the study findings.

Disease is a rich human experience. As many as disease we know, as many as aspects of human experience we may learn about. The more we learn about patient's experience the more we become able to help on both humanitarian and clinical level. This is the drama and beauty of qualitative research in medical field. It is very similar to the drama and beauty of human art.

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