Learning to Find Meaning

6 Articles on the Importance of & Techniques to Finding Meaning in Qualitative Research

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Research of any kind that is interested in the human subject is interested in finding meaning. It is typically not enough to know that a behavior has occurred without knowing the significance of that behavior for the individual. Even survey research, with its reliance on mostly preconceived closed-ended questions, is designed with some hope that sense (i.e., meaning) can be derived by cross tabbing data from one question with another, factor analyzing, t-testing, z-testing, regressing, correlating, and any number of statistical techniques.

Yet, it is qualitative research that is usually in charge of finding meaning. It is not good enough to know who does what, for how long, or in what manner. Qualitative researchers are not so much interested in what an online participant tacked to a Pinterest board, or which treatment option a cancer patient chooses to discuss in an in-depth interview, or how much focus group participants might be willing to spend for tickets to a sold-out Mets game, or the observed reactions of 4th graders as they are bullied in recess. All of this serves as a backdrop to what is most important – which is, what does it all mean for the people we study? And, because life is complicated, what are the multiple meanings? Without an effort to get at that, then why bother with qualitative research in the first place.

There are many factors that conspire to keep qualitative researchers from finding meaning. Here are just four:

1. **Researchers rely too heavily on self-reports.** This is another way of saying that researchers are not conducting *research* so much as they are *reporting* what they see or hear from participants. As reporters, the outcome of their research may be factual yet fail to produce the meaning – the *thinking* – that supports and makes useful the research effort. Unless the researcher has diligently followed up participants' input with individualized inquiry and sought to find meaning, the researcher must concede that the value of the research is lost.

2. **Researchers fail to consider the response medium.** If a mobile research participant elects to send a video of the in-the-moment dining scene at McDonald's, how is the meaning associated with that video the same or different than the meaning of a photograph or a text message? Is the participant actually conveying separate thoughts and meanings by the media chosen, or not? How do the media – the type and format – of the response convey different intended meanings? What is the researcher to assume when one participant responds with all visual images and another with only text? What does that say about each participant *and* what does that say about the variations (or sameness) in the meanings they associate with their responses.
3. **Researchers do not take into account the ways they bias the data.** When is the last time you read a qualitative research report* that included the researcher's reflexive journal, or at least commentary from the researcher concerning how they may have impacted research outcomes? There are numerous ways the researcher may affect the data: weak interviewing/observation skills; unwittingly imposing personal values or beliefs; not recognizing participant bias, such as socially desirable responses; or simply being mismatched with the participants in terms of, for example, age and race. These and other causes of researcher effects mask participants' meanings and hence the usefulness of the research.
4. **Researchers are unwilling or unable to spend sufficient time with any one participant.** Unless the researcher has built in the requisite time needed with each participant to honestly hear and become knowledgeable about the person and the meanings of their experiences, then what is the point? Why not conduct survey research and go back to trying to read behind the numbers if qualitative researchers are not committed to the unwavering reality that qualitative research takes time. Because, if qualitative researchers have any hope of finding meaning, they must commit the time with their participants that give meaning a chance to emerge.

* I am excluding journal articles.

Beyond the Behavior-plus-"why" Approach: Personal Meaning as Insight

Researchers are desperate to understand behavior. Health researchers want to know what leads to a lifetime of smoking and how the daily smoking routine affects the quality of life. Education researchers examine the behavior of model teaching environments and contemplate best practices. Psychologists look for signs of social exclusion among victims of brain injuries. Marketing researchers chase an elusive explanation for consumer behavior, wanting to know product and service preferences in every conceivable category. And, if that were not enough, researchers of all ilk, to a lesser or greater extent, grapple with an often ill-fated attempt to predict (and shape) behaviors to come.

But researchers have come to appreciate that behavior is not enough. It is not enough to simply ask about past behavior, observe current behavior, or capture in-the-moment experiences via mobile. Behavior only tells part of a person's story and, so, researchers passionately beef-up their research designs to include "why" – focusing on not just *what* people do but *why* they do it. "Why," of course, is often phrased as "what," "how," or "when" questions – "What was going on at the time you picked up your first cigarette?" – but, whatever the format, the goal is the same, i.e., to get beyond behavior and understand the motivations, the thinking (conscious or not) that ultimately lead to certain actions.

All of this would be fine and good except that the behavior-plus-"why" approach often fails. Many researchers have been pursuing the explanation and prediction of behavior because the bubbles of the "ah ha!" moments burst upon subsequent new revelations in human behavior.

The behavior-plus-"why" approach fails because it is a transactional approach to understanding the human experience. It reduces what people do – smoke cigarettes, teach in a certain way, show signs of social exclusion, purchase Coke over Pepsi – and their motivations to a stimulus-response arrangement – My parents smoked, so I became a smoker; I experimented with teaching methods until I found something that worked; as a brain-injury victim, I feel socially isolated because people treat me differently; I buy Coke products because I grew up in Atlanta.

The behavior-plus-"why" transactional approach falls short of true insight because it doesn't account for personal meaning. It doesn't account for the fact that each individual associates their own personal meaning to any given behavior or thought. Yet personal meaning is what researchers strive for to honestly understand what lies beneath behavior or a construct of interest.

- What does the experience of smoking cigarettes mean to you? How does it make you feel? Who do you smoke with? How does it define your sense of being?
- How do you know that a teaching method is "working"? What does it make you think about? What does it mean to you when you feel "success"?
- What does "social exclusion" mean to your personally? How does it manifest itself? What are the ramifications you experience from "social exclusion"? What would you change, if you could, and how would that make things "better"?
- What part of you is satisfied by purchasing Coke products? What role does it play in your life, and how does this role relate to other aspects of your life?

Going beyond the behavior-plus-"why" approach is something I teach in focus group training. In a recent workshop with corporate employees, I tried to instill the idea that there is personal meaning behind every participant comment. At the conclusion of moderator role playing, a trainee expressed her frustration when she asked someone in her group of employees to suggest improvements to the office environment. To the trainee's horror, the participant suggested adding a water slide to the workplace to provide an element of "fun." A water slide? Rather than exploring the personal meaning of a water slide for this particular person, the trainee just ended the group discussion wondering to herself why anyone would want a water slide at the office. What she didn't know – but then learned – is that it was not a water slide that this person necessarily wanted at the workplace as much as the positive feelings associated with a water slide. It was these positive associations and dimensions that the participant wanted in the work environment that just happened to be articulated as "water slide."

Finding personal meaning takes time. It requires concentrated time with research participants to explore and understand their behavior and motivations through their words; exploring what those words mean to them and how those words capture the personal meaning of the thoughts conveyed. Finding personal meaning also takes time (and creativity) during analysis and interpretation of outcomes, particularly when many participants are involved.

Such an effort expends valuable time, energy, and resources. But it is certainly better than coming away from the research only to recommend that the client add water slides to the workplace.

Image captured at: http://www.healthychild.net/health-articles/choosing-the-right-water-slide-rentals/

Building Rapport & Engagement in the Focus Group Method

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 150-152).

The ability to quickly build rapport with focus group participants and then maintain it throughout the discussion session is a necessary skill of all moderators. Regardless of mode (in-person, telephone, or online), focus group moderators must learn how to effectively engage participants to generate accurate and complete information. Rapport building for the moderator begins even before the start of a group discussion, when they welcome the participants as they arrive at the facility (for an in-person discussion), on the teleconference line (for a telephone focus group), or in the virtual focus group room (for an online discussion), and it continues beyond the introductory remarks during which the moderator acknowledges aspects of the discussion environment that may not be readily apparent (e.g., the presence of observers, the microphone or other device being used to audio record the discussion), states a few ground rules for the session, and allows participants to ask any questions or make comments before the start of the discussion. In the in-person mode, the moderator's rapport building goes beyond what it is said to participants to make them feel at ease to also include the physical environment. For example, business executives might feel comfortable and willing to talk sitting around a standard conference table; however, in order to build rapport and stimulate engagement among a group of teenagers, the moderator needs to select a site where teens will feel that they can relax and freely discuss the issues. This might be a standard focus group facility with a living or recreation room setup (i.e., a room with couches, comfortable chairs, and rugs on the floor for sitting) or an unconventional location such as someone's home or the city park.

Another aspect of the physical environment in in-person discussions that impacts rapport and consequently the quality of the data gathered is the seating arrangement. For instance, Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend that the moderator position a shy participant directly across from their seat in order to "maximize eye contact." Other moderators prefer to keep particularly talkative and potentially domineering participants in seats close to them so that they can use their proximity to better manage these participants as needed. The "ideal" seating arrangement will vary depending on the physical environment; the number, type, and homogeneity of participants; and topic of discussion (e.g., for a potentially "explosive" topic such as women's rights, individuals who are particularly active and opinionated on the issues should not sit together where they may form a subgroup or coalition that could end up dominating and skewing the discussion).

A few of the more critical considerations in building rapport to maximize the **credibility** of group discussion data include the following:

- Group participants should be **contacted** on behalf of the researcher(s) at least twice after they have agreed to participate in a focus group—once immediately after recruitment to confirm the date and location, and again via telephone the day before the discussion.

- Not unlike the **in-depth interview method**, a necessary ingredient to building rapport with group participants is the moderator's ability to show **genuine interest** in the discussion as a whole and with each participant's contribution to the discussion. Demonstrating this interest involves frequent and relevant follow-up probing questions as well as helping participants engage with each other.

- The moderator should be attuned to any **verbal and nonverbal cues** that signal participants' level of engagement and, hence, the extent of rapport among the participants. Indeed, "one of the most difficult skills to teach in focus group training is how to ignite an interactive environment where participants engage with the moderator as well as with each other" (see **"Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method"**).

- Rapport building is especially difficult in the asynchronous **online mode** because the moderator does not have direct visual or verbal contact with the participants and therefore has less control over the rapport-building process. The online moderator can, however, identify participants who are not logging into the discussion very often or are leaving only short, non-descriptive responses to the moderator's questions. In these cases, the moderator can send each of these participants a private email to inquire why they have not been more active in the discussion and offer to assist with any difficulties the participant may be having with logging in or otherwise accessing the discussion. The moderator may also choose to call this participant on the telephone in an attempt to establish a more personal connection that may encourage the participant to become more active in the session.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Image captured from: https://www.centropsicologicocpc.es/sabes-lo-que-es-el-rapport/

Towards a Credible In-depth Interview: Building Rapport

The following is a modified excerpt from Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 88-89).

Not unlike the discussion in **"Building Rapport & Engagement in the Focus Group Method,"** a necessary skill of the in-depth interviewer is the ability to build rapport with the interviewee. Rapport building begins early in the study design and continues through completion of the in-depth interview (IDI). The following are just a few guidelines that IDI interviewers should consider using in order to establish a trusting relationship with their interviewees and maximize the **credibility** of their outcomes:

- Regardless of the mode by which the IDIs will be conducted, the interviewer should contact each recruited interviewee on the telephone at least once prior to the scheduled interview to begin establishing rapport. This **preliminary conversation** helps the interviewer and the interviewee make a personal connection, manage their respective expectations, and facilitate an open dialogue at the interview stage. In addition to building rapport, an early personal exchange with the interviewee also instills legitimacy in the research, which further aids in the interview process and makes the interviewee comfortable in providing detailed, thoughtful, and credible data.
- The interviewer's preliminary communication with the interviewee should make clear (a) the purpose of the study and the interviewer's association with the research; (b) the anticipated length of the study (i.e., a date when the research is expected to be completed); (c) the breadth of the interview (i.e., the range of topics that will be covered); (d) the depth of the interview (i.e., the level of detail that may be requested, either directly or indirectly); (e) the time commitment required of the interviewee (e.g., length of a telephone IDI, the frequency participants are expected to check email messages in **an email IDI study**); and (f) the material incentive (e.g., cash, a gift card).

- The interviewer should make a conscious effort to interject a sign of **sincere interest** in the interviewee's remarks, but do so in a nonevaluative fashion, without displaying either approval or disapproval with the sentiment being expressed by the interviewee (e.g., "Your comments interest me, please go on").
- Particularly in the telephone and online modes, the interviewer must be able to **identify and respond to cues** in the conversation—for example, the interviewee's audible hesitations or the background noise in a telephone IDI, or nonresponse from an email participant. The email interviewer also needs to be sensitive to the idea that they may have misjudged the participant's intent. For instance, Bowker and Tuffin (2004) report on the potential difficulty in judging whether an email IDI participant has more to say on a topic or whether certain questions would be deemed redundant. In either case, these potential miscalculations on the part of the interviewer can interfere with the interviewer–participant relationship, with interview participants providing short retorts, such as, "Yes, that was the end [of my comments]!" (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004, p. 237).
- With telephone IDIs, the interviewer–interviewee relationship can be enhanced by **adding a webcam and/or an online component**. The ability to see the interviewee and/or present stimuli to them (e.g., new program service features, promotional concepts, audio and video clips) during the interview takes advantage of the benefits of face-to-face contact.

Bowker, N., & Tuffin, K. (2004). Using the online medium for discursive research about people with disabilities. *Social Science Computer Review*, *22*(2), 228–241. https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439303262561

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach. New York: Guilford Press.

Image captured from: https://chiefexecutive.net/why-power-saps-empathy-and-what-you-can-do-to-keep-yours/

Qualitative Research: Using Empathy to Reveal "More Real" & Less Biased Data

The fourth edition of Michael Quinn Patton's book *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* is a big book — over 800 pages — with updated and new content from earlier editions, including something he calls "ruminations" which are highlighted sections in each chapter that present Patton's commentary and reflections on issues that have "persistently engaged, sometimes annoyed" him throughout his long career in qualitative research. Patton has made some of these ruminations available online via his posts on the betterevaluation.org blog.

In his November 14, 2014 post, Patton shares his "Rumination #2: Confusing empathy with bias." In it, he raises an important issue — having to do with the personal nature of qualitative research and how that impacts data collection — that, on some level, runs through the qualitative-quantitative debates waged by researchers who argue for one form of research over another. Such a debate might involve a survey researcher who, entrenched in statistical analysis, wonders, 'What is the legitimate value of qualitative methods given its focus on the convoluted intricacies of feelings and behavior which are often conveyed by way of others' nebulous stories?' All of this convoluted interconnectedness is enough to stymie some quantitative researchers, and yet it is the stuff — it is the *juice* — that fuels the qualitative approach.

Is "getting close" to research participants by truly empathizing with their life situations — or sincerely trying to understand what they are saying in response to questions by "walking in their shoes" — interjecting bias that damages the final outcomes leading to false interpretations of the data? And if that is the case, what is the justification for qualitative research in the first place? After all, if its "juice" is the personal connections researchers make by way of empathizing with participants yet it is this empathy that makes the results suspect; well, it is no wonder that there are some who perpetuate the qualitative-quantitative debates.

All research with human beings is about the human experience. All research is designed to tap into what it means to have a certain experience – regardless if that experience is a fleeting thought, a sensation, a sharp attitude, an impulse, or deliberate behavior. *Qualitative* research celebrates the humanness of these experiences. By rooting out the personal connections that are the essence of these experiences, qualitative research methods animate the thought, the sensation, or the impulse behavior in order to expose the experience for what it truly is. In this way, the experience has been laid bare for all to see.

It is precisely because of their empathy – the ability to observe and listen from the participant's standpoint – that qualitative researchers routinely uncover how people think, revealing the interconnectivity that brings meaning to the experiences that lie at the center of their research. This level of meaning – this laying bare of the connections – gives the researcher an unfiltered view of the human experience which, some could argue, seems "truer" and "more real" – that is, less *biased* – than survey data based on forced responses to closed-ended questions.

So, empathy is good. Empathy enables the researcher to come to terms with how *other* people think by thinking like them; which may, at the same time, provide clarity and actually *reduce* a form of bias in the data. Indeed, empathy may be the essential ingredient lacking in survey research to release the pent-up bias inherent in data that stems from the failure to look for (and make) the connections that define the human experience.

Image captured from http://berkozturk.deviantart.com/art/empathy-211500476

Can You Hear Me Now? Listening in Qualitative Research

Somewhere back in school Carl Rogers' *On Becoming a Person* was required reading. Maybe because of the title – and my life-long goal to become "a person" – or maybe because there is something endearing about Carl Rogers himself, whatever the reason this is one of the few books I have held on to for these many years. The binding of my paperback edition has fallen apart and only a rubber band keeps the pages bound in some sense of order.

Anyone familiar with Rogers knows that he is considered the father of client-centered therapy. Rogers took a different approach to therapy from his colleagues of the day, one that was open, flexible, and empowered the client to determine their own therapeutic course. This was a fairly radical approach at the time and even now there are those who dispute Rogers' techniques. Admittedly a client-centered session can be difficult to watch, as his interview in 1965 with Gloria illustrates.

The Rogers-Gloria interview is an example of Rogers' method of using long silences pierced by a few quiet words of encouragement, highlighting a key component to client-centered therapy – listening. Rogers believed that a true understanding of an individual, and the ability to form a meaningful client-therapist relationship, is fostered when we use listening to "see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (pp. 331-332).

I have been thinking about Rogers the past couple of weeks* while working with groups of social scientists. It began with two face-to-face group discussions followed the next week by two online group discussions ("bulletin boards"). What struck me was the obvious difference in input from the two modes. In the traditional focus group format, both groups of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and the like were orderly and polite and contributed important information. Yet there was a noticeable reluctance to disagree or even argue the issues in this closed-room, eyeball-to-eyeball conversation. In sharp contrast, the bulletin board discussions were vibrant and engaged and filled with plenty of friendly disagreements that added to an already rich volume of insights on the issues.

I think the difference I experienced in these two modes has as much to do with listening as anything else. The social scientists in the traditional focus groups had just as much knowledge and insights to share as their counterparts in the bulletin boards, but was anyone listening? Did the focus group participants sitting around the conference table believe that anyone was truly listening to what they had to say (or wanted to say)? Did anyone else really care about what was on their minds? Those who were clearly stifling comments may have asked themselves these same questions and decided the answer was "no."

The bulletin boards, however, appeared to free social scientists from the confines of eyeball scrutiny and unleashed them to speak openly and in a fully articulated manner. As I read their very long responses to my (and others') questions I sensed their exuberance in the idea that someone was actually listening to what they had to say. Each one had their own personal platform from which to sermon, pontificate, or just express a point of view. And we were all listening.

Rogers states that, "a listening, empathic approach leads to improved communication, to greater acceptance of others and by others, and to attitudes which are more positive and more problem-solving in nature" (p. 334). Maybe those long dreaded silences are not so bad after all, and maybe it is just what we need more of in our face-to-face group discussions.

** This article was written in April 2011.*