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HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS - A QUALITATIVE APPROACH FOR RESEARCH IN
EDUCATION

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Man, is of his very nature an interpretive being, a being possessed of an understanding of meanings

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) creates new understandings by exploring and interpreting complex data from:

- interviews
- group discussions
- observation
- journals
- archival documents, etc.

without the aid of quantification. (O'Leary,2010)

In QDA, there is a reliance on words and images to draw out rich meaning. Analysis should be approached as a critical, reflexive, and iterative process that cycle between data and an overarching research framework.

FUNNELING TOWARDS MEANING

In qualitative data analysis, documents, transcripts, images and texts make up raw data. There has to be a lot of reading and re reading that needs to start right from the point of data collection and continue through processes of data management. The process involves 1) identifying and noting overall impressions, 2) reducing organizing and coding the data 3) searching for patterns

and interconnections 4) mapping and building themes and 5) verifying theories and 6) drawing conclusions. It is represented by the following figure

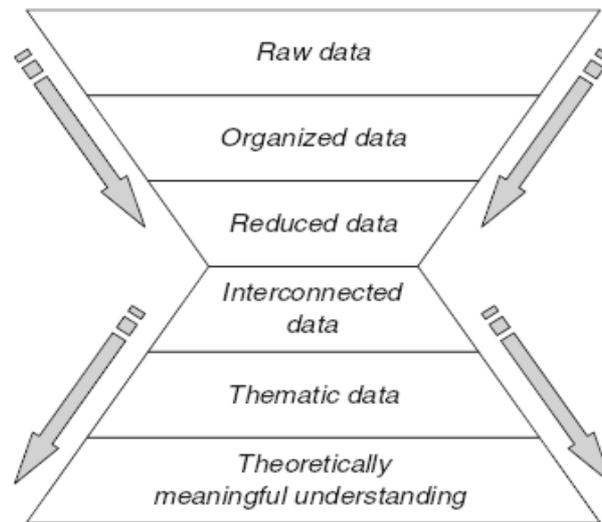


Figure: the transformation of raw data into meaningful data.

Adapted from O'Leary (2010)

CYCLES OF REASONING

Qualitative data analysis often involves:

- moving through cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning
- thematic exploration (based on word, concepts, literary devices, and nonverbal cues)
- and exploration of the interconnections among themes.

PARADIGMS OR APPROACHES FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

There are a number of paradigms/ discipline based strategies for QDA including:

- overarching methodologies
- content, discourse, narrative, and conversation analysis
- semiotics
- **hermeneutics**
- grounded theory.

- Visual analysis intersects with all of these and reminds researchers of the importance of images.

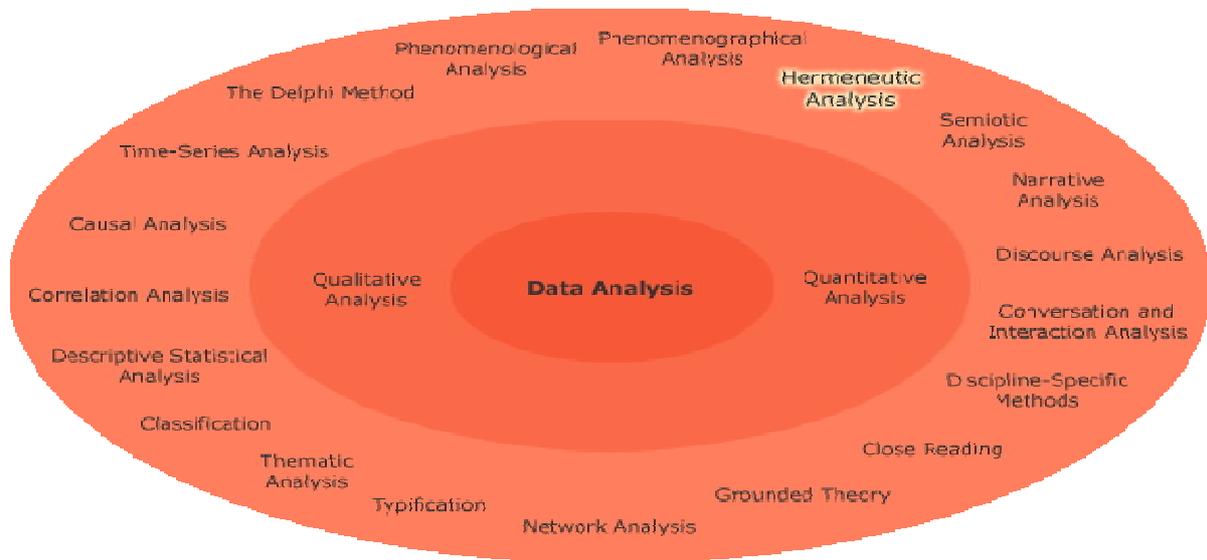


Figure: the various approaches of qualitative data analysis

<https://koppa.jyu.fi/avoimet/hum/menetelmapolkuja/en/methodmap/data-analysis/hermeneutic-analysis>

ORIGIN OF THE WORD

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means to say or interpret; "hermeneutics" means the theory of interpretation, i.e. the theory of achieving an understanding of texts, utterances, and so on. In hermeneutics, analysis becomes synonymous with interpretation. Interpretation begins with reflection (Gadamer, 1989, in Moules 2002). The central principle of hermeneutics is that it is only possible to grasp the meaning of an action or statement within the context of the discourse or world-view from which it originates.

‘HERMES’ –THE GREEK GOD

‘Hermes’ is the name of a Greek God. He was instrumental in bringing the messages of the gods to humans and interpreting the message for them. Hermes has the character of complication, multiplicity, lies, jokes, irreverence, indirection, and disdain for rules; however, he is the master

of creativity and invention. He has the capacity to see things anew and his power is change, prediction, and the solving of puzzles.

HISTORY OF ITS PRACTICE

Medieval practices of biblical interpretation were transformed by the Reformation, a period sometimes referred to as the beginning of hermeneutics (Grondin, 1994 in Moules,2002) Schleiermacher was very influential in the development of hermeneutics throughout the 19th and early 20th century. More recent thought is dependent on the work of Gadamer, Herder, Hegel, Derrida, Ricoeur, Austin, and Quentin Skinner.

FIELDS OF STUDY USING HERMENEUTICS

Psychology

Psychologists have recently become interested in hermeneutic approaches to meaning and interpretation .Hermeneutics is also influential in Humanistic Psychology. Hermeneutic analysis of narrative has become especially influential in the fields of psychotherapy, family therapy and psychoanalysis.

Sociology

In sociology, hermeneutics means the interpretation and understanding of social events by analyzing their meanings to the human participants and their culture

For instance, putting a piece of paper in a box might be considered a meaningless action unless put in the context of democratic elections, and the action of putting a ballot paper in a box.

Marketing

The field of marketing has adopted this term from sociology, using the term to refer to qualitative studies in which interviews with (or other forms of text from) one or a small number of people are closely read, analyzed, and interpreted.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutics)

CENTRAL PRINCIPLE IN HERMENEUTICS

One fundamental view which supporters of hermeneutics all share is that:

‘All meaning and thought are essentially dependent on language’.

And that

‘An inseparable interrelationship (circle) between speaker/writer, hearer/reader and meaning is assumed’.

And that

‘Misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point”;

And that

‘Interpretation needs to complement a linguistic (or "grammatical") focus with a psychological (or "technical") focus

And that

‘A "comparative" (i.e. plain inductive) method should predominate on the linguistic side, a "divinatory" (i.e. hypothetical) method should predominate on the psychological side;

And that

‘An interpreter ought to understand an author better than the author understood himself’.

LANGUAGE -WRITTEN TEXT AND ORAL DISCOURSE

Written text and oral discourse are significantly different, with implications for interpretation.

In writing, one deals with a product which now has autonomy of its own, independent of the original speaker. The problem of texts is that interpretation is based in part on the context in which the text appears and who speaks. This immerses one in a circle of text—context—author—interpreter, none of which can be understood apart from the other. (Forster, 2009)

In this situation hermeneutic interpretation occurs when one is carried beyond the internal organization of the text (its sense) to its reference, “the sort of world opened up by it”. Perhaps a different understanding of the structure of appearance. In this way we understand something of the meaning of an event or series of events.

Discourse and texts often make *explicit* use of semantic terms: we talk or write about the specific meanings of words, about words being meaningful rather than meaningless, about words sharing the same meaning (being synonyms) rather than having different meanings, and so on.

Discourse has as qualities of

- (1) temporality,
- (2) self-referentiality,
- (3) external referentiality and
- (4) the presence of an interlocutor

Text is characterized by

- (1) fixation of meaning,
- (2) dissociation from intentionality
- (3) loss of ostensive reference; reference now points to a world that appears “before the text” rather than a situation
- (4) universal range of addressees

HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

Hermeneutic interpretation comprehends the recognition that occurs when something rings “true” of what is said; there is a familiarity, a kinship, a resonance, and a likeness.

It involves careful and detailed reading and rereading of all the text, allowing for the bringing forth of general impressions, something that catches the regard of the reader and lingers, perturbing and distinctive resonances, familiarities, differences, newness, and echoes

This immerses one in a circle of text—context—author--interpreter, none of which can be understood apart from the other. An inseparable interrelationship (circle) between speaker/writer, hearer/reader and meaning is assumed.

Now if there were just a *single* concept of meaning, common to all historical periods and

cultures, then this situation would present only a modest challenge to an interpreter.

But such concepts in fact vary significantly from period to period, culture to culture, and perhaps even individual to individual (Forster,2009)

MAJOR PROPOUNDERS OF HERMENEUTICS

Schleiermacher grounds hermeneutics in a philosophy of language, in particular, a doctrine that meaning consists in "the unity of the word-sphere," that thought is identical with language (or inner language), and that meanings are constituted by empirical schemata, or rules for the production of images. While Schleiermacher was very influential in the development of hermeneutics throughout the 19th and early 20th century, more recent thought is dependent on the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur.

According to **Gadamer** (1989), the most crucial aspect of hermeneutics is openness on the part of the listener to hear what the text, speech or piece of art has to say to them given their particular set of "prejudices." Another of his central ideas is that 'All knowledge is historically relative, so interpretive knowledge is so in particular'. This means there should be openness to new ideas. To say that interpretations of a text change over time is presumably to say, roughly, that the author of the text meant such and such, that there then arose an interpretation A which meant something a bit different from that, that there then arose a further interpretation B which meant something a bit different again, and so on. In other words, the very notion of changing interpretations *presupposes* an original meaning (indeed, a whole *series* of original meanings, one belonging to the text, and then one belonging to each of its subsequent interpretations)

Herder grounded hermeneutics in the following three principles:

(1) Meanings are word-usages.

(2) Because of this, all thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by the thinker's capacity for linguistic expression – i.e. a person can only think if he has a language and can only think what he can express linguistically.

(3) Meanings are also essentially grounded in (perceptual and affective) sensations – either directly (as in the case of the "in" of "The dog is in the garden," for example) or via a sort of metaphorical extension (as in the case of the "in" of "Jones is in legal trouble," for example).

Hegel not only follows these two steps (as already mentioned), but he also identifies a range of *socio-political institutions* which he calls "Objective Spirit" as expressions of meanings and thoughts, and therefore as requiring interpretation, and he notes that human *actions*, since they essentially express human mental life (in particular, beliefs and desires), which is essentially imbued with meanings and thoughts, can only be properly understood with the aid of interpretation as well.

Derrida encapsulates his theory of meaning and interpretation in such concepts as that of an open-ended "iterability" (a word which he uses in the double sense of *other* and *again*) and "différance" (a word which he uses in the double sense of *differing* and *deferring*)

John Langshaw Austin and Quentin Skinner work in hermeneutics lies in their recognition of the central role that *illocutionary force* plays in texts and discourse, and in their interpretation. The following passage gives an idea about it.

‘If I encounter a stranger by a frozen lake who says to me "The ice is thin over there," I may understand the meaning of his words perfectly, and yet still not fully comprehend what he has said – for in order to do that I would in addition need to know whether he was simply informing me, warning me, joking (for example, by stating the obvious), threatening me (for example, by alluding to the expression "You're skating on thin ice"), or whatnot.

Ricoeur defines hermeneutics as “the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts”. Ricoeur is well known because of his work on the meaning of religious texts.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HERMENEUTIC THEORY.

- Interpretation is not independent of the beliefs and values of the interpreter, but though openness one can take away new ideas and ways of looking at the world, helping develop new theoretical models
- The life narratives themselves will likely not be straightforward.

- Multiple narratives with their own beginning and ending points are likely to be present which may not fit together into a harmonious whole.
- In constructing these narratives both oral and written material should be used, as different genres of communication have different interpretive advantages.
- In the beginning interviews should be as unstructured as possible, but later specific questions could be asked to explore themes of interest generated from the literature, the culture or individual.
- we should be aware that views of a situation are can be influenced by factors such as the acquisition, justification or maintenance of power.

In educational research investigations involve qualitative data in the form of statements or responses given by individuals in the research setting. Investigations of the narratives and material from these questions can then be interpreted according to the circular hermeneutic process, leading to detailed and sophisticated life narrative descriptions.

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