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Content

Preface by the editor 7

Introduction 8

Group I: Examples of Applications of Qualitative Methods, Part I

1. Discussion (summarized by Leo Gärtler) 17

2. Categorizing the Content of Everyday Family Communication
   Immastra Eitel 21

3. Emotions and Learning Strategies at School – Opportunities
   of Qualitative Content Analysis
   Michaela Gutzi-Zikuda 32

4. The Role of Subjective Theories on Love
   Leo Gärtler 51

5. Deciding which Kinds of Data to Collect in an Evaluative
   Study and Selecting a Setting for Data Collection and Analysis
   Inge M. Lute 66

6. Dynamics of a Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive
   Approach to Interactive Reception
   Thomas Irion 78

7. Cross-Cultural Youth Research as International and Inter-
   disciplinary Cooperation: The Project "International Learning,"
   Bice Plaude and Josef Held 90

Group 2: Examples of Applications of Qualitative Methods, Part II

8. Discussion (summarized by Mechthild Kiegelmann) 99

9. Ways of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Procedures
   Exemplified in a Study on the Gender-Specifics of Coping with
   Sexual Violence
   Silke-Birgitta Gableiner 102
10. Qualitative Research with a Genuine Psychological Approach: The Method of Voice Analysis
   Mechthild Kielhmann 117

11. Toward a Method of Ideological Becoming
    Tamara Beuveau-Lafontant 135

12. Methods which are Accommodated to their Research Object: On the Adequate Investigation of Historical Consciousness at Youth Age
    Carlos Kehl 143

13. Research Project "History and Memory"
    Stephan Marks 150

14. Research Organization and Word Analysis from Discussion Groups about In-practice Training
    Antonio Medina Rivilla, Mª Concepción Domínguez Garrido, Ramón Pérez Pérez, Tiberio Félix Murias 155

15. Coding, Inquiring, and Analysis of Data from Discussion Groups about In-practice Training
    Antonio Medina Rivilla, Mª Concepción Domínguez Garrido, Ramón Pérez Pérez, Tiberio Félix Murias 174

Group 3: Specific Issues in Qualitative Methodology

16. Discussion (summarized by Günther L. Huber) 201

17. The Analysis of Qualitative Data as Process of Classification
    Günther L. Huber 206

18. Group-Based Dialogic Introspection and its Use in Qualitative Media Research
    Gerhard Kleinig and Thomas Barkart 217

19. The Process of Understanding in Qualitative Social Research
    Julia Nentwich 241

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20. Forming Categories in Qualitative Data Analysis: The Teaching Research Project "Teachers' Attitude and Practice concerning Elementary Science in Primary School"
    Bernad Reinshöffer 246

    Hanna Soini 262

22. Contributions of Qualitative Approaches to Psychological Inquiry
    Leo Günter, Josef Held, Günther L. Huber and Mechthild Kielhmann (in alphabetical order) 274

Author Index 283

Subject Index 291
What is understanding?

The question I am addressing here is, how we can be confident that we have understood a certain passage in an interview properly. What do we mean when we are saying that we have understood a particular part of a text? The fact, that we do understand what was said is taken for granted and not reflected by most methodologies. Researchers use their everyday hermeneutic knowledge and competence, but it is never really made explicit how they exactly would do this.

- The question remaining is: “What exactly do researchers do when analyzing a text?” Reflecting on this question provides a basis for the discussion of the following topics quality criteria for qualitative research
- the justification of methodological procedures
- how to teach qualitative methods

Leithäuser & Volmerg (1988, p. 119-130) have taken this problem more seriously, than for example, grounded-theory-oriented methodologies (i.e. Strauss & Corbin, 1999; Wirzel, 1989, 1996). Leithäuser & Volmerg talk about understanding as a method, which means that they use the everyday hermeneutic competence of every researcher as a method for understanding. To do this thoroughly, it is necessary to define the notion of understanding and how it could be used for justifying the research process. In doing this they refer to Wittgenstein’s notion of understanding as participation in a language game (PI 17).\(^2\)

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1 I am referring to texts originally written in German. All technical terms were translated from these texts. With understanding I am referring to the German Verstehen.
2 PI is the abbreviation for Wittgenstein’s ‘Philosophical Investigations’. The numbers are referring to the paragraphs. All citations and page numbers are from the German issue ‘Philosophische Untersuchungen’ (1957, first published 1953).
Each language game has its rules, and if we play a certain language game we are engaging in certain rules (PI 217-241). Following a rule in a language game means participating in a social practice which is only possible in a given community. The rules are identical with the agreements in this community. The rules of language games are not firm however, – they are flexible, indefinite and vague (Leithäuser & Volmerg, 1988, p. 125ff). It is possible to change the old rules into new ones or to make up new ones. If one is following a rule in a language game, one is following a tradition or practice. Rules describe acts in a certain context and therefore have a close link to the meaning of those acts.

What does this tell us about understanding? Following Wittgenstein, talking is part of an act – or a form of life (PI 23). The meaning is created in language games that are following flexible rules depending on the form of life. This means, that understanding is only possible, if one is participating in a certain form of life. "Wenn ein Löwe sprechen könnte, wir könnten ihn nicht verstehen." ("If a lion could speak, we could not understand it") PI, part II, p. 568, translated by the author). We could not understand the lion because we are not participating in its form of life. It would also be impossible to understand the meanings of our ancestors or, as Europeans, the Chinese, if we are not participating in their forms of life (Grayling, 1999, p. 135). Participating in different forms of life is the only possibility we have to join in a certain understanding. Wittgenstein’s notion of understanding is not "primarily concerned with anything mysterious going on inside our head, but simply with us ‘going on’ with each other, with us being able to sensibly ‘follow’ each other, to intertwine our activities with those of others" (Schorer, 1995, p. 4). Understanding is not a feeling or psychological process but the possibility or chance to participate in a form of life (Fischer, 1991, p. 58).

Methodological implications: participation, systematization and documentation of the research process

Leithäuser & Volmerg (1988, p. 234-261) use Wittgenstein’s notion of understanding as a foundation to explain what researchers should do when evaluating qualitative research. To make understanding possible, one has to participate in the forms of life and join the language games. Leithäuser & Volmerg suggest the so-called Kernsatmethode as a method for text analysis. Using this method one looks for natural generalizations or subtexts that break the text up and express the main topic of the abstract (Leithäuser & Volmerg, 1988, p. 245) in the language used by the interviewed person. Being forced to use the subject’s own words for discussing and legitimizing the interpretation is a way of participating in the language game. The Kernsatmethode is an attempt to reduce complexity within the material and at the same time minimize the loss of context. The method also suggests that the researcher needs to provide the findings along with the context, providing as much context as is necessary for readers to join in. Understanding without knowing the context, in which the meaning was created, is impossible because the participation in the forms of life is not possible without context.

Two other important parts of the research are the systematization and documentation of the interpretation process. Leithäuser & Volmerg (1988, p. 256) developed a model for systematizing their psychoanalytic oriented research. In addition to Wittgenstein they make reference to Lorenzer and his notion of scenic understanding (Lorenzer, 1995). The Model distinguishes four different levels of understanding: the subject or content ("what are they talking about?"); the relational level ("how do they talk with each other?"); the pragmatic level ("how do they talk about what?") and the intentional or scenic level ("why do they talk in a certain way about something?"). Each level in the communication model guides the researcher to different questions and therefore helps to navigate through the research process. I am not discussing their model in detail because the purpose of this paper is more general and not focusing on psychoanalytic social research.

Having a model that tells the researcher what questions to ask in order to accomplish understanding changes the research process from an indefinable and intuitive process to a process consisting of several conscious steps. The process becomes easier to navigate and allows others to understand what has been done. The model is built on everyday communication skills. This includes both the questions asked in everyday life in order to achieve understanding as well as the questions developed from a specific research interest. This model leads to the identification of the rules one has to follow to achieve understanding.

Systematization of the interpretation process implies that this process must be made explicit. That is, what the documentation of the process of understanding means. One has to record what questions were asked and where and in which context the answers were found. Or – according to Wittgenstein – one needs to become aware of the rules one has followed to achieve this understanding.

The short reflections on the notion of understanding give us an idea about what issues should be tackled in the future and clearly show that the discussion has by far not reached an end. There is still a lot of work to be done. The argumentation of the more explicit tasks of participating, systematization and documentation, however, give us some interesting clues for future discussion of the following kind of issues:

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1 The term "Kernsatmethode" refers to the identification of central sentences in the text.
• The criteria for qualitative research
  If understanding is possible through participating in different forms of life and playing the same language game, then the process of participation should be the basis for quality criteria in qualitative research. Developing and discussing different models for the systematization and documentation of the research process could lead to more specific guidelines regarding general quality criteria of qualitative research.

• The justification of methodological procedures
  Wittgenstein’s concept of meaning and understanding enables researchers to explain what is meant by the notion of understanding in a certain context and how the process of understanding was navigated, systematized and described. This is the basis for reasonable and therefore well-founded qualitative research. Well-founded research is where its results can be legitimized and justified through the explanation of every step in the process; for example, the explanation of a specific procedure preference and its consequences.

• The teaching of qualitative methods
  The Kernsatzmethode is a detailed step-by-step ‘what to do description’ of how to read a text and how to perform an interpretation. Additionally, the systematization of the research process provides guidelines for students when conducting their first qualitative research. Taking part in different research processes through a method of documentation would give students some clues about what questions to ask in order to be able to interpret a text.

References: