

Unfolding Meanings: Some Considerations For Qualitative Interview Studies

Anlamların Açılımı: Nitel Görüşme İçeren Çalışmalara Dönük Bazı Yaklaşımlar

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Abstract. Inside interpretivist paradigm, the repertoire of approaches have been enlarged in the last two decades with the popularity of qualitative research practice. While this present new opportunities to craft better social science texts, it also confuses scientists especially when they are in the process of forming research designs in their early field work experience. Based on my past research experience, during and after my doctoral studies, this paper suggests a set of ideas that might clarify some basic considerations regarding descriptive studies which attempt to unfold people's understandings through interview conversations. For this purpose, the study discusses some selected considerations regarding epistemological stance, method and textual possibilities. Informed mainly by hermeneutics, the set of ideas presented here aims at providing the readers with the qualities that leads to genuine mode of understanding, sharing with them information on how traditional concepts of "validity" and "analysis" can apply to qualitative studies, and making suggestions on the possibility of crafting richer texts for qualitative interview studies.

Keywords: Interpretivist paradigm, qualitative research, interview, hermeneutics

Özet. Yorumlamacı paradigma çerçevesi içinde yer alan araştırma yaklaşımları son 20 yılda nitel araştırma uygulamalarının gittikçe popülerlik kazanması sayesinde oldukça geniş bir repertuar oluşturdu. Bu genişleme özellikle sosyal bilimler alanında yetkin metinler oluşturmak için yeni fırsatlar sunsa da, nitel araştırma alanına yeni adım atan deneyimsiz araştırmacıların kendilerini bir çeşit karmaşanın orta yerinde bulmasına da neden olmaktadır. Doktora sürecimde ve sonrasında edindiğim tecrübelerle dayanarak, bu çalışmada amacım, insanların belirli bir konuyu nasıl anladıklarını, o konuda nasıl anlamlar kurguladıklarını görüşmeler yoluyla ortaya koyma hedefi güden nitel çalışmalarla ilgili temel bazı unsurların netleştirilmesidir. Bu amaçla, çalışmada epistemolojik duruş ve buna bağlı olarak geliştirilecek yöntemsel ve metinsel olasılıklar üzerinde detaylı bir alan yazın taraması sunuyorum. Esas itibarı ile Hermeneutik birikimden faydalanarak derlediğim argümanlar, araştırmacıları daha yetkin ve bütün bir anlama durumuna ulaştıracak niteliklere işaret ediyor. Bu niteliklerle birlikte, "geçerlilik" ve "analiz" gibi geleneksel bazı kavramların nitel araştırmadaki konumlarından da bahsederek daha zengin metinler oluşturabilmenin yollarını sorguluyorum.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yorumlamacı paradigma, nitel araştırma, görüşme, hermeneutik

Introduction

In general, the initial design decision a social science researcher must make is whether the research is to be predictive or descriptive. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) define these terms respectively:

The purpose of predictive research is to measure precisely the impact of a specific activity or treatment has on people and to predict the chances of being able to duplicate that impact in future activities or treatments. The purpose of descriptive research is to document exactly what happened, whether the researcher is describing an experimental treatment or something occurring in the natural habitat of study participants (p. 39).

If one does not set out to look for truth in social science research, and moreover finds such encounter absurd knowing that reaching truth is a fantasy, an assumption based almost solely on methodological correctness; if one simply wants to understand (not predict or control) the individual perspectives of people on any proposed problem area; if one does not seek, in his inquiry, universal claims that binds every single one of us; and finally, if one neither intends to apply a treatment on research participants nor have a predetermined hypothesis to reject or prove, then he/she needs to consider many things together. The following sections in this text attempts to clarify some considerations that might lead researchers to craft suitable research designs if they aim to unfold local meanings rather than enhance some notion of certainty. These considerations have informed and shaped almost all of my research studies including my dissertation.

Although one's epistemological, methodological, and textual tendencies form an intertwined whole in which each tendency interacts with one and other continuously, for the purpose of a brief description of each one of them, I treat them as separate stances in the pages ahead.

Epistemological Stance

The reason why one looks (and at what) is essential in determining what to see and how to see. If one looks for obtaining others' meanings, understanding the kinds of ideas they have, and unfolding the essential characteristics of such ideas, I think, the following orientation of seeing is more appropriate compared to others.

Dilthey (1976) favors seeing social phenomena such as texts, verbal expressions and action from the inside (pp. 247-260). John Dewey (1925) describes "to see an organism in nature" (a student at school) as a seeing "to be in, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing, never finished process" (p. 295). But seeing the organism in such space-time continuum without recognizing qualities that mark off everything, says Dewey (1925), would be seeing it as "a meaningless flow, possessing neither identity nor habitation"(p. 266). In other words, Dewey not only requires seeing to be in context but to be directed to particular qualities as well. Geertz (1973) states that "anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods, etc.); they study in villages" (p. 22). Cole (1996) suggests that "objects [organisms] and contexts arise together as a single bio-social-cultural process of development" (p. 136). For him, all human behavior must be seen in relation to its context, "in a situation and time bounded arena" (Cole, 1996, p.142). Eisner argues that "a piece of science" sees "a very limited account of a situation and does not attempt to capture the richness, the complex reality of situations such as those occur in classrooms" (Eisner 1997 cited in Phillips & Burbules, 2000, p. 38).

Greene (1995), referring to a novel by Thomas Mann, explains two ways of seeing: big and small (pp. 9-10).

To see things or people small, one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviors from the perspective of a system, to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than intentionality and concreteness of everyday life. To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face (Greene, 1995, p. 10).

To see big, “to achieve valid discovery of universals,” says Erickson (1986), “one must stay very close to concrete cases” (p. 18). Patton (1990) uses the word “immersion” to refer to the first condition of such seeing (p. 40). When applied to schooling, the vision that sees things big brings us in close contact with details and with particularities that cannot be reduced to statistics or even to be measurable (Greene, 1995, p. 10).

In social science, such orientation of seeing phenomena has been associated mostly with the inductive processes of interpretivist research. Induction refers to a from-part-to-whole reasoning mechanism, which differs in its aim and procedures from the mainstream positivistic position which favors the hypothetico-deductive process.

According to Eisner (1991), research studies that aim description as one main purpose of their inquiry are field-focused, constructed so that the researcher is an instrument, interpretive in nature, highly detailed, and persuasive (p. 43). Erickson (1986) uses the term interpretive to refer to the whole family of approaches (e. g., qualitative research, case study, ethnography, etc.), in which researchers genuinely participate in the activity to be studied, in other words, participant observational research (p. 1).

The issue of using as a basic validity criterion the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors’ point of view, is crucial in distinguishing interpretive participant observational research ... Interpretive, participant observational fieldwork ... involves,

- (a) Intensive, long-term participation in a field-setting.
- (b) Careful recording of what happens in the setting by writing field notes and collecting other kinds of documentary evidence (e. g., memos, records, examples of student work, audiotapes, and videotapes).
- (c) Subsequent analytic reflection on the documentary record obtained in the field, and reporting by means of detailed description, using narrative vignettes and direct quotes from interviews, as well as by more general description in the form of analytic charts, summary tables, and descriptive statistics (pp. 1-2).

Interpretivist approaches activate possible themes such as design flexibility, holistic perspective, naturalistic inquiry, qualitative data, personal contact and insight, context sensitivity, inductive analysis, and unique case orientation (Patton, 1990, pp. 40-41). It is not assumed that there is a single, fixed reality shared by people that is there to be found and validated (Hafeli, 2000, p. 132). Instead, interpretive social research “presumes that meanings-in-action that are shared by members of a set of individuals who interact recurrently through time are local” (Erickson, 1986, p. 14).

Greene (1997) argues that it may be possible to identify the quantitative- qualitative debate with the tension between epistemology and hermeneutics that is so central to philosophical conversation today (p. 203). From that point of view, hermeneutics might be understood as the original orientation of all interpretive approaches in human sciences.

Hermeneutics (from the messenger of gods, Hermes and translates to the Greek word for interpreter) has been introduced as a main concept in methods of human sciences that seek

interpretation by the historian and the social philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (Erickson, 1986, p. 7). To interpret the other in a culture, says Geertz (1973), is a form of literary criticism, 'like reading a manuscript' (pp. 3-30). For Gadamer (1989), interpretation is the mode of realization of understanding (p. 350). In hermeneutic orientation, the text of an interview, for instance, is not the representation or symbol of isolated utterances by the interviewee but a collectively constructed and negotiated dialogical reflection of the whole interview experience on the planes of both "life world[s]" (Husserl, 1962, pp. 91-100).

Hermeneutics does not –as in Heidegger's critique of Western Philosophy- riddle by a fear of failing to know the "real world" with certainty, rather it refuses such addictive longing for closure (or the end of the need to address the same issue again) with an eclectic and exploratory spirit. In such generative discourse, there might be "no pre- packaged portion of meaning sufficiently independent of the world" (Inwood, 1997, p. 50). In tune with these ideas, Caputo (1987) suggests the following two concepts that can facilitate researchers toward genuine interpretation:

1. Respect toward polyphony, multiple meanings of participants.
2. An awareness of the complexity of meanings by avoidance of one-dimensional certainty (p. 1).

The German philosopher Gadamer, akin to Heidegger, assumes that meanings, actions, and words are world-laden (Inwood, 1997, p. 50). Believing this, he equates privileging of method in positivism to privileging of propositions derived from theories in Western and modern consciousness. He distances himself from the theory-laden conceptions of things and does not specify a method to be followed. He develops a dialogical model of interpretation in which the text is a "thou" with whom we are engaged in (Aylesworth, 1991, p. 63). Language, for Gadamer (1989), is the universal medium in which understanding itself is realized (p. 350). Gadamer understands conversation as openness of parties involved. He writes:

A conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says (Gadamer, 1975, p. 347).

Agreement is essential in such conversation and it is perceived to be more than exchange of words or looks, but a relationship, a dialogue to be more exact. The attitude of openness is required in such effort and it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists (Gadamer, 1989, p. 383). The researcher's role, commonly named as participant observer, here implies that the researcher is learning from people and not just studying them (Stokrocki, 1997, p. 37). This is true for all research methods, but the proximity and duration of the participant observation enable the prospect of a dialogue or a multilogue between the observer and the observed, in which such "learning from" is not secondary to the research purpose. Understanding, approached in this dialogical fashion, becomes even less of a domination of a state of affairs than a participation in shared meanings (Grondin, 1995, p. 30).

Gadamer's interest in true conversation, agreement and understanding can be summarized by the following sentence he wrote for a speech in Heidelberg Colloquium in 1989 (Grondin, 1995, p. 124): "The possibility that the other person may be right is the soul of hermeneutics." He thinks that being human implies being in a hermeneutic situation in which we must interpret (Descombes, 1991, p. 264). For Gadamer, understanding is not only thoroughly linguistic in character, it is also transformative and productive of new meanings, which implies an affinity with deconstruction (Madison, 1991, p. 129).

In addition, “historicity is part of all understanding,” says Gadamer (1989, p. 333). Hermeneutics argues that only a person who stands in history, subject to the prejudices of his age, can hope to understand it. History, understood as a flow of events, requires one to look back in order to grasp the meanings of the current, which leads to a fresh interpretation of events, ideas, and people of this day.

Developing Gadamer’s hermeneutics into principles of interpretation is a difficult task, since every categorization, Gadamer would argue, is also a limitation to and deviation from the original text. Yet, it is crucial for me to convey here the main components of my sense-making mechanisms. The following list adapted from Klein and Myers (1999) seems thoughtful enough to respect Gadamer’s considerations regarding categories while representing Gadamer’s concerns about the nature of interpretation:

The Hermeneutic Circle: This principle suggests that understanding is achieved through iterations in a dialogical reflection. The researcher iterates between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form. This principle underlies the other interpretive principles.

Contextualization: The research must critically reflect upon a social and historical background of the field of the actors, taking into account the historicity of events and foregoing interactions that shaped the environment of the researched phenomena.

Interaction between researcher and participants: The research process must support reciprocal dialogue between the researcher and participants, wherein the contributions of participants are allowed to affect the co- construction of ideas. This principle calls on the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on the social construction of the data derived from the interaction.

Abstraction and generalization: Hermeneutic interpretation cannot be generalized directly from the findings, but must be tempered by an abstraction process. General findings are abstracted from their ideographic details and applied to the appropriate level of understanding.

Dialogical reasoning: The researcher becomes required to adjust (and iterate) among contradictions between initial theoretical preconceptions and the emergent findings of the data. It is incumbent upon the researcher to allow the data to tell the story, not to fit the findings within a predetermined theory.

Multiple interpretations: Each participant in the research may offer differing and novel interpretations of the issues studied and questioned. The multiple voices (polyphony) should be supported in the research by specifying where individual differences among participants affected the findings. The voices should be represented in the actual words of the participants.

Suspicion and sensitivity: The researcher must be sensitive to his/her own biases, and must practice “suspicion” of his/her own systematic distortions. While suspicion begins with the researcher’s adoption of epoch to clear the field of analysis from prejudice, the notion of suspicion carries the freedom from bias throughout the hermeneutic analysis (p. 72).

Methodological Considerations

Kvale (1996) writes:

If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them? In an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own words, learns about their views on their work situation and family life, their dreams and hopes. The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples’ experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations (p. 1).

I consider what Kvale calls “interview conversation” an essential source of understanding in social science research since it enables the researcher to take into account the implicit nature of the actors’ meanings on any proposed problem area.

Kvale (1996) mentions two contrasting metaphors that can illustrate the implications of different theoretical understandings of research based on interview conversations:

In the miner metaphor, knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. Some miners seek objective facts to be quantified; others seek nuggets of essential meaning (p. 3).

The miner metaphor, in its theoretical approach to nature of knowledge, is more in tune with the tenets of the positivist paradigm. The alternative traveler metaphor, in Kvale’s (1996) words, understands the interviewer as a traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home (p. 4). The interviewer traveler wanders through a landscape exploring many domains through conversations with people encountered. Kvale (1996) further argues: The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks question, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of conversation as “wandering together with” (p. 4).

The traveler metaphor in Kvale’s above description is one that is in tune with the participant observer concept in interpretive research. The observer’s participation in the everyday life of subjects is crucial in observations in order for him/her to be able to understand immediate and local meanings of actions, such as the gestures during interviews, as defined from the actors’ point of view (Erickson, 1986). “Gathering” becomes an essential part in the process of such participant observer or traveler inquiry (Jardine, 1992, p. 125).

To keep the hermeneutical circle in charge during data analysis, one should prefer a systematic but flexible orientation. Avoiding pre-figured data analysis methods and setting out by deriving assertions from the transcripts and warranting them with similar instances in the general context of the interviews, keeping in mind the following questions, I believe is more reasonable:

This is an issue of what? If this is a causal relationship, what is the cause and what is the effect? How is this new utterance related to a previous one? Are they pointing at the same bigger issue? What general forms of arguments exist? Under what categories should I store them? Is this particular instance relevant to a new category, or is it in between two categories? How is what is happening here related to what is happening in other settings? In which context this utterance was received? Can there be a link between the utterance and a particular detail in the context? Is this link warranted enough to generalize within the case? What utterance derives its content from a historical concept? What historical concept can lead to such utterance? Is what is being said consistent with the actions observed?

Finally, analysis should not be understood as a reduction or standardization process of data, because hermeneutics does not seek to come to one general understanding but represent multiple understandings of each actor’s stance in relation to the research matter and exhibit the polyphony in their ideas in context. In that respect, the data analysis aims conserving the differences as well as uniting the similarities in actors’ interpretations. Looked from this perspective, the richness of research depends on finding recurring and shared themes as well as differing and personal ones. A good way to achieve this is always including direct quotes from interview conversations and linking them with the historical and cultural roots of any given research problem.

When objective knowledge is not an aim in research, the traditional notions of validity and objectivity have to be rethought. Rather than objectivity, the purpose of hermeneutics is to

create understanding or understandings. Radical hermeneutics, for instance, not only does not accept the existence of objectivity in matters of interpretation, but considers it as a problem that is on the way of the generative nature of life. The quest for such generativity clashes with the idea of objectiveness that might be understood as an abstracted consensus embedded in adherence to method. Such quest favors ambiguity as a condition of human nature and life.

From the philosophical hermeneutics point of view, each attempt to understand will involve an interpreter and a text or another person. The idea that understanding is dialogical simply signifies that each conversation generates a new interpretation, which cannot be achieved or repeated by others. Each individual in hermeneutic effort is seen as unique and therefore their interpretations will differ. To come to an objective understanding, in matters of interpretation, means either such uniqueness has been standardized by various methods or the object to be interpreted is over-simplified.

Validity, like objectivity, when used in the context of a research study of interpretivist approach, does not sound very compatible with the concerns of such approach, because it has traditionally been used as a term of positivist paradigm and various kinds of validity originates from the positivist orientation of science.

For example, external validity (or generalizability) traditionally refers to a response to the question “to what individuals other than those in particular study, might we generalize these results” (Smith & Glass, 1987, p. 6)? In this sense, external validity is a matter of the extent the sample represents the population, and traditionally this has been achieved by sampling strategies. Unlike traditional quantitative approaches, qualitative approaches, especially the kind I utilize in this study does not apply such sampling strategies. As mentioned in the method section of this study, the aim here is contextuality, particularizability or authenticity, yet a kind of analytic generalizability might be achieved by the reader if he/she can assess the similarities and differences in his/her context departing from the rich particulars provided. The ability on the part of the reader to assess similarity of difference depends on the ability on the part of the researcher to include rich and relevant description of the local study aura. Internal validity traditionally refers to “the relative absence of reasonable alternative explanations” (Smith & Glass, 1987, p. 5). This kind of validity is again very much related to “ruling out” or “controlling.” One might argue that the process of warranting assertions, and generating assertions in terms of the causal claims made might be considered as a matter of internal validity. Still, interpretivist research, especially the kind mentioned in this paper, does not look for one explanation that cannot be challenged by others.

There are attempts to promote new validity criterion for interpretivist paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that the parallel term for “rigor” in interpretivist paradigm is “trustworthiness,” and the criteria to ensure “trustworthiness” are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Graue and Walsh (1998), also, approach the issue of validity in case studies by creating new kinds of concepts of validity:

Technical and methodological validity, they argue, can be summarized with a question: “Given the questions asked in this research, are the methods appropriate?” (p. 246).

Interpretive validity is a close concept to internal validity in terms of emphasizing relations among methods, data, theories, and interpretations (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 247).

Textual / narrative validity refers to a judgment related to the purposes and frameworks of the researcher as well as the needs and intentions of those who read the work. A good way to assess such validity is to ask how the written report relates to the theoretical perspective taken and understandings generated (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 247).

Praxis-oriented validity refers to the basic question of why we do research, or “What good will this work do and for whom” (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 248).

In all these emerging concepts of validity, one might find meaningful claims in terms of replacing the validity concepts of mainstream science practice. My response to the validity of interpretive research however is more fundamental. In Kvale’s (1996) words:

The issue of what is valid knowledge involves the philosophical question of what is truth. Within philosophy, three classical criteria of truth are discerned –correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic utility. The correspondence criterion of truth concerns whether a knowledge statement corresponds to the objective world. The coherence criterion refers to the consistency and internal logic of a statement. And pragmatic criterion relates the truth of a knowledge statement to its practical consequences (p. 238).

In many types of interpretivist research, researchers do not express any validity claim in the traditional sense in terms of correspondence criterion. However, the coherence and pragmatic criteria seem compatible enough with the methodologies they adapt. The term trustworthiness seems more preferable for many researchers. I believe it is the responsibility of the reader to assess the degree of over-all trustworthiness of the accounts researchers present. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, these issues are almost always under development in the research community (p. 184).

Textual Considerations

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that language is composed of countless languages, each the product of a particular kind of experience (e.g., of a profession, ethnic group, social class, generation, region) and each with its own way of understanding and evaluating the world (Morson & Emerson, 1997). In terms of multiplicity of meanings in a text, Bakhtin (1984) suggests, authors might include a wide variety of different ways of speaking to express different social experiences, different values, and assumptions.

It can be argued that particular epistemological stances require particular kinds of languages that serve the aims they seek to reach. Hence, without a belief on traditional understandings of truth, objectivity and validity, researchers may not need the propositional language these concepts suggest. At this point it becomes the researcher’s duty to configure the most suitable language(s) with which he/she comfortably communicates his final co-constructions. For example, clashes of ideas and polyphonic statements on the same information in traditional research texts can be considered as a weakness on the researcher’s part. In research texts explained here, however, such “weakness” should deliberately be configured in order to provide the reader with a multiply but not overly determined picture of the research topic. Such multiplicity requires authors of research reports to utilize a variety of languages in the text to portray different roles in the structure of research sites and the broader contexts they belong to. If in hermeneutics it is incumbent upon the researcher to allow the actors to tell their stories, authors have to be able to represent the particular language(s) through which they communicated those stories.

Another main concern in crafting the research report is to emphasize the particulars of the context in order to make sure that the reader can assess the similarities and differences in the study context compared to their own contexts. Only with detailed description can readers reach their own judgments and then analytically generalize the assertions made here to their own contexts. Therefore, the language to be used must suit the needs of a highly descriptive text. Since these descriptions involve not only physical aspects but historical, social, ideological, and psychological ones as well, a flexible and rich tongue has to verbalize them.

Narrative, as a form of research reporting, is compatible with this purpose by letting in “highly descriptive, prosaic, expressive, metaphorical, evocative, experiential, and participatory forms of writing” (Barone, 2002, class notes). After all, a participant observer “narrates” what unfolded in the observed process.

It is also essential in social science research to give voice to both the actors of the interviews and to people who previously wrote on the issue. By this way readers can experience various speech genres, tones, attitudes and approaches embedded in utterances and texts which will help them assess the merits in context. To promote critical insights regarding the issues discussed in research reports, scholars should also try to give voice to various textual orientations other than scientific writing. These are newspaper columns, religious texts, official documents, and transcriptions of relevant correspondences through meetings, vignettes, e-mails, letters, and so forth.

Conclusion

Unfolding other people’s meanings on a particular issue requires more than a set of rules to be followed. A fixation on any certain methodological rule often falls short of the human complexity embedded inside various contexts. A genuine understanding, therefore, should primarily be governed by a sincere need to understand, which usually remains indifferent to official deadlines, political sensitivities, and strict methodological concerns.

Finally, another important responsibility for any social science researcher is to remain critical of the social institutions, specifically of schools. A genuine critical orientation gives strength to social literature by questioning assumptions that are so widespread in modern life. In Foucault’s (1980) words, the real task in any inquiry is:

... to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them (p. 171).

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