FIELDWORK AND THE QUALITATIVE - INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Fieldwork is scholarly and professional research work that requires first-hand observation, recording or documenting what one sees and hear in a particular setting with the aim to understand and to know what people under the study are doing from their perspectives. Fieldwork is a study of conceptualisation as much as observation. In qualitative fieldwork, the researcher is the instrument of inquiry. With that notion, the ontological (nature of being, becoming and/or reality), epistemological (nature of knowledge) and axiological (values) underpinnings related to the researcher are paramount importance in making the research acceptable. With an emphasis on the importance of recovering and reading meanings, beliefs and preferences or practices of the people in the field, the researcher is expected to perform hermeneutical action, with Collaizzi's help, where the knower and the known are inseparable, interacting and influencing one another in shared interpretation. In this regard, semiotic as a device of knowing is an asset. Specifically, the researcher must get engaged with hermeneutical process of circular understanding that celebrates *vorurteil* ('prejudices'). In that appreciation, *verstehen*, instead of *erklaren*, as a method of interpreting human action must be employed. Meanwhile bracketing is becoming a prerequisite for research trustworthiness. As fieldwork is a situate activity, metaphorically, turning oneself into a bricoluer makes fieldwork as an engagement a worthwhile journey. In the nutshell, as the field is a terrain of alterity that lives on 'otherness', fieldwork concerns with deep understanding via thick description on 'local interpretation' and 'local knowledge'.

Keywords: Bracketing, Bricoluer, Fieldwork, Hermeneutics, Qualitative Inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork or field research is basically a practical research work done by a researcher in the 'field', outside the comfort zone of a laboratory or office. Qualitatively speaking it is an action of collecting data about people and culture within a natural environment. Specifically, fieldwork is a process of collecting primary data using face-to-face interview or observation methods. A fieldwork is about 'mapping' data whereby the observational dimension of social science is highly appreciated. Here, the importance of walking, looking and gazing around in the world, in and of itself, is important. Sumser (2001) posits that the goal of fieldwork is to understand what that people are doing from their perspectives. Thus this makes fieldwork as much a study of conceptualization as observation.

As a method, fieldwork provide the following advantages: it is a source of data not available elsewhere and is often the only way to identifying key individuals and core processes; it gives voice to groups all too often ignored or marginalized; it allows access to the 'the black box' or internal processes of groups and organizations; and, it permits to recovering the beliefs and practices of actors. Indeed 'being there' in the field gets us to the

below and hear the 'back region' accounts which is more 'real' and rich than the official accounts (Rhodes, 2007). Crucially, fieldwork allows and admits of surprises, of moments of epiphany, which can open new research agendas. In fieldwork, the researcher is a professional stranger that look and search for mystique that can be described as communication problem (Agar, 1996, pp. 57-58).Among recommended texts on fieldwork are as follows: Bryman (1999/2012); Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, 1983) and Wolcott (1995). My favourite is James Scott's (1985) fieldwork at Sedaka. In the context of research with political slant, fieldwork is now gaining hot currency (Joseph, 2007).

The Researcher

In the qualitative fieldwork the researcher is the instrument of research (Pezalla, 2012). Within this epistemological understanding, the research is being seen as an 'engagement', a meaningful energetic involvement of self with all participants. The researcher-in-the-field could be a 'naturalist' or 'interpretivist'. In the former, the researcher take the human sciences should strive to develop predictive and causal explanations as that similar to the natural sciences. For the naturalist doing fieldwork is just as a method for collecting data whereby the emphasis falls on systematic data collection, validating that data, avoiding observer bias, and writing up in the third-person. At times naturalist go to the field to test certain theories. In general, a naturalist is more concerned with generalization. Meanwhile qualitative - interpretivist emphasis on the importance of recovering and reading meanings, the beliefs and preferences or practices of the people as embedded in social reality at the site. This approach is more concerned on speaking about everyday life dramas (Rhodes, 2015). Practically, qualitative - interpretivist is doing a hermeneutical action. The knower and the known are inseparable, interacting and influencing one another which resulted in shared interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Here, the knower and the known are interacting and influencing each other. Hence writing reports means 'writes our own construction of other people's construction' (Geertz, 1973).

In relation to the above, qualitative - interpretivist must acts as a bricoluer who understands that research is an interactive process shaped by personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003/2018; Creswell, 2018). As such bricoleur research activities give provision to abandon 'fit into' a prescribed research engagement framework (Robinson-Aberdeen and Markless, 2012). In that continuum, it permits the researcher to submit to the contextual constraints inherent in the field. The bricoleur, in the spirit of Claude Levi-Strauss (1962) memorable term, moves with complex work of weaving and interconnecting stories, images and representations (Lincoln and Denzin, 2003); 'piecing together a patchwork of ideas (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991) into 'emergent construction' as a comprehensible bricolage. In this fluidity process, the bricoleur may change and take new forms or use different tools, methods and techniques for greater insights into the phenomena under scrutiny. In this freedom the bricoleur do a diverse tasks ranging from interviewing to observing, to interpreting personal and historical documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection. Indeed the central concern of the researcher as bricoleur is to achieve 'rigor, breadth, complexity and richness, and depth to any inquiry (Flick, 2014).

Designing Qualitative Fieldwork

This is about the overall shape of data collection and materials needed for the field. How to approach data collection? What sample that could give rich and factual data? As deep

understanding is the aim of a fieldwork, purposive sampling is often being adopted. Not to be forgotten is the method applied, whether the humanistic methods or the mechanistic one. Both methods are often being used in a fieldwork. The researcher tried their best to be 'invisible' (Lune, 2017) --- 'a-fly-on-the-ceiling/wall' (Malinowski, 1961) --- but at the same time work hard to develop 'rapport' with the informants. Indeed to 'hit the point' for a 'reliable picture', it is worth to turn interviewer and interviewee as 'peers or companions' (Rowan and Reason, 1981). In the said situation, the fieldwork is no more an intrusion but as part and parcel of native's life.

In qualitative fieldwork, if data are beans, researchers are going to answer three main questions: What is a bean? What does it mean to be a bean? What is the 'beanness' in the field? Similarly it conveys the idea that all beans are not alike, and doing the fieldwork is not to count beans.In dealing with 'beans', a division between the world or reality 'out there', and the claims made about it must be a clear cut case. A reflective on trustworthiness of the given information must be observed too. Similarly being pragmatic with the notion of truth and reality is an action of necessity. In that regards some beans may be 'indicators' or 'testimonies'.

Is the researcher going for 'thin or thick description'? Clifford Geertz (1973) described the practice of thick description as a way of providing cultural context and meaning that people place on actions, words, things, etc. Thick descriptions provide enough contexts so that a person outside the realm can make meaning of the behavior. Meanwhile thin description by contrast, is stating facts without such meaning as of the above. Surveys provide thin descriptions at best. The above choice is intimately linked with time spend in the field. Are you doing hit and run or deep hanging out (intensive) field work?

A point to note, experienced scholars suggest that walking about in the field is at best in pairs rather than in a large group. The aim is to avoid attention of informants toward the group that may create 'unreliable data-making'. A basic understanding of reading 'signs' and symbols or having knowledge on semiotics is useful while doing observation (Manning, 1987). Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Often, this dimension of observation is often being neglected by novice researchers. Contextually, semiotic-fieldwork is able to reveal the underlying code system structuring the meaning of materials/artifacts and informants experiences in field sites. Semiotic provides access to an array of non-verbal codes in the field that reflect informants' lifestyles, mood states, and social life. In this regard, researchers can use projective tasks that invited informants to be associate their experiences with non-verbal symbols. Truly, knowing the native semantics (local dialect or accent) is a plus factor. In relation to the above my favourite semiotic starting point is the local grocery store. It is here that many indicators being deposited; reading habits via newspapers, drinking habit through type of coffee sold or even political indications as manifested on the shop walls.

Meanwhile in interviewing, topic guides (what subjects to be include) rather than questions should be the aide-memoire, that is on what should be explored (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Of equal important is ordering data collection for a smooth progression of sensibility. What enabling techniques to use? The term enabling technique refers to a technique for stimulating thinking and self-expression, thus 'enabling' participants to talk and discuss about topics further and deeply (Ritchie, 2014). What case examples and vignettes to be employed? What objects or artifacts that could be brought to the field discussions? These materials help 'to move beyond the initial general responses and to achieve greater level of

depth and specificity' (p. 165). Do not forget expressions and metaphors used in the field. As said by linguist, the language sets up the world. What should be included in the field notes? How the data should be recorded? Jackson (1990) suggests field notes 'represent an individualistic, pioneering, approach to acquiring knowledge. "They symbolize the 'ordeal by fire' that is journeying to the field and the 'uncertainty, mystique and … ambivalence' of that journey'. In sum, it is worth to create visual of big oval (research purpose/research question), smaller ovals (relevant research dimensions) and rectangles (indicators or concepts that effectively will be engaged).

Practically advises given by Lofland and Lofland (1984) and Spradley (1980) are worth to be employed in note taking. The former list is as follows: Who is he? What does he do? What do you think he meant by that? What are they supposed to do? Why did he do that? Why is that done? What happens after _____? What would happen if _____? What do you think about _____? Who is responsible if _____? (p. 48). Meanwhile Spradley list includes: 1. Space: the physical place or places 2. Actor: the people involved 3. Activity: a set of related acts people do 4. Object: the physical things that are present 5. Act: single actions that people do 6. Event: a set of related activities that people carry out 7. Time: the sequencing that takes place over time 8. Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish 9. Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed (p. 78).
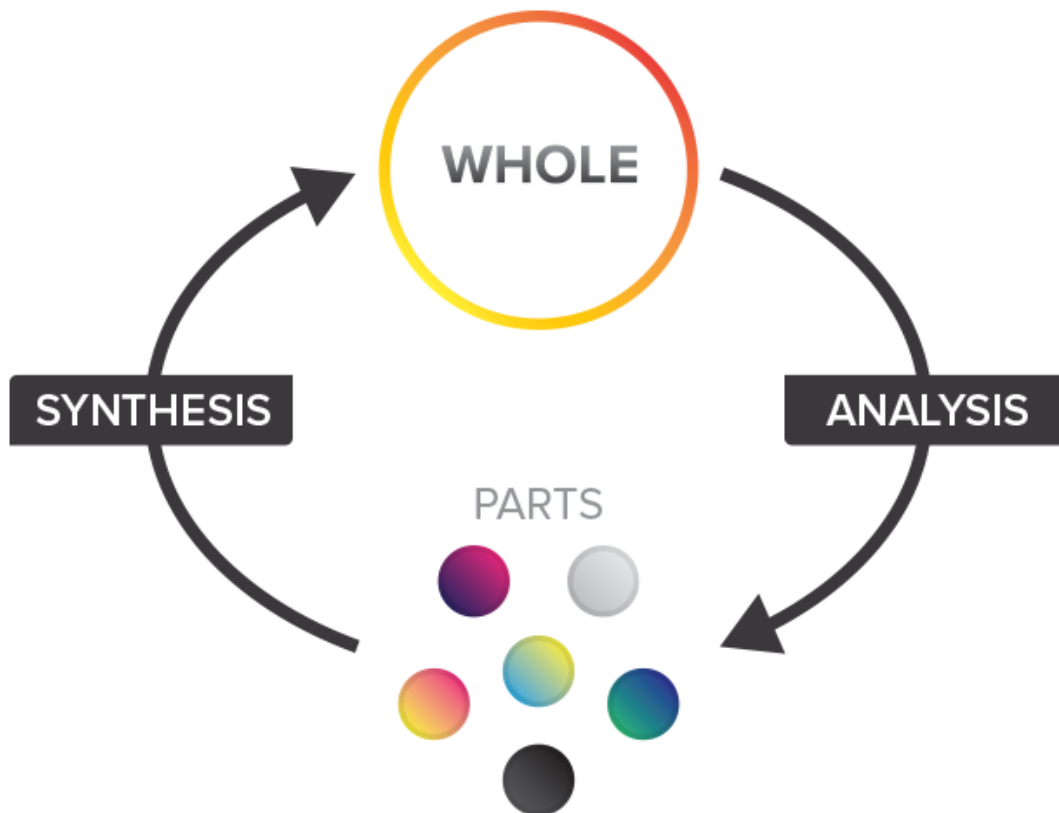
Data as Text

In field work engagement all verbal and visual data are transformed into texts by documenting them, and by transcription. Texts serve three purposes, namely as the essential data on which findings are based upon, the basis of interpretation and as medium of presenting and communicating findings (Flick, 2014). The collected data made into texts now become a substitute of reality and they are now being transformed into a life-world. As a concept in social sciences, life-world (German: *Lebenswelt*) refers to the world as lived prior to representation or analysis.

Hermeneutic Analysis

Nowadays, hermeneutics is being viewed as an assertion that understanding is an interpretation of texts. Historically, understanding via hermeneutics is deeply rooted in German tradition of 'sciences of the spirit' (*Geistwissenschaften*). Such action is done by taking the inner process of *verstehen* (the interpretive or participatory examination of social phenomena). As a term, *verstehen* is a systematic interpretive process in which an outside observer of (textual) phenomena attempts to relate to it and understand the meaning of action from the actor's (authors) point of view. In this research stance actors (characters) are subjects, rather than objects, of researchers' observations. The opposite of *verstehen* is *erklaren* (causal explanation).

Hans Georg Gadamer is the most forceful and coherent exponent of contemporary hermeneutics. Gadamer (1985) proposes, among others, that hermeneutical analysis must live on certain order, namely the hermeneutic rule: understanding the whole in terms of the detail, and the detail in terms of the whole. Here, the correct understanding means the harmony of all details with the whole (p. 291). In Gadamerian hermeneutics, data analysis begins with the following philosophical assumptions:

a)   There is no pre-suppostionless knowledge; the known and the knower are recognized to have their own conception and prejudices (*vorurteil*) about the life-world under study. The fusion of both x and y worlds makes understanding possible.

b)   In order to understand the researched life-world, the researcher must understand based upon the researched own light. Meanings in this regard are constantly shaped and re-shaped by both the known and the knower.

c)   Situatedness especially the historicity of various events and moments is at the centre of the understanding process.

d)   In understanding, a circular movement from the part to the whole and back again from the whole to its parts tied the known and the knower, the researcher and the researched, in a research engagement has become a method of interpreting data that being recognized as texts.

Simply, hermeneutical understanding is produced through systematic interpretation processes. These processes are known as a hermeneutic circle. Interpretation of details affects the interpretation of the entire phenomenon; reviews of these interpretations produce a deepening understanding of the phenomenon. The circle starts at any point of engagement, perhaps before entering the field work. For example, reading literature on the topic in the light of our prejudices --- previous experiences or events. Here, moving back-and-forth of iterating 'facts' is common and expected action. Pertti Alasuutari (1995) noted that the most basic of what being sought from this hermeneutic circle is to grasp the subjective sense of a way of life where latent/manifested *motives and meanings* are being floated before our eye. Making

typologies should not be the result, but only a starting point for analysis and interpretation (p. 49).

Having said the above, supposedly going for hermeneutical analysis should be an action after doing Colaizzi (1978) process of data analysis. Sander (2003) summarizes Collaizzi method of reading textual data as follows:

1. Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content. 2. For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and lines numbers. 3. Meanings should be formulated from these significant statements. 4. The formulated meanings should be sorted into categories, clusters of themes, and themes. 5. The findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study. 6. The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described. 7. Finally, validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.
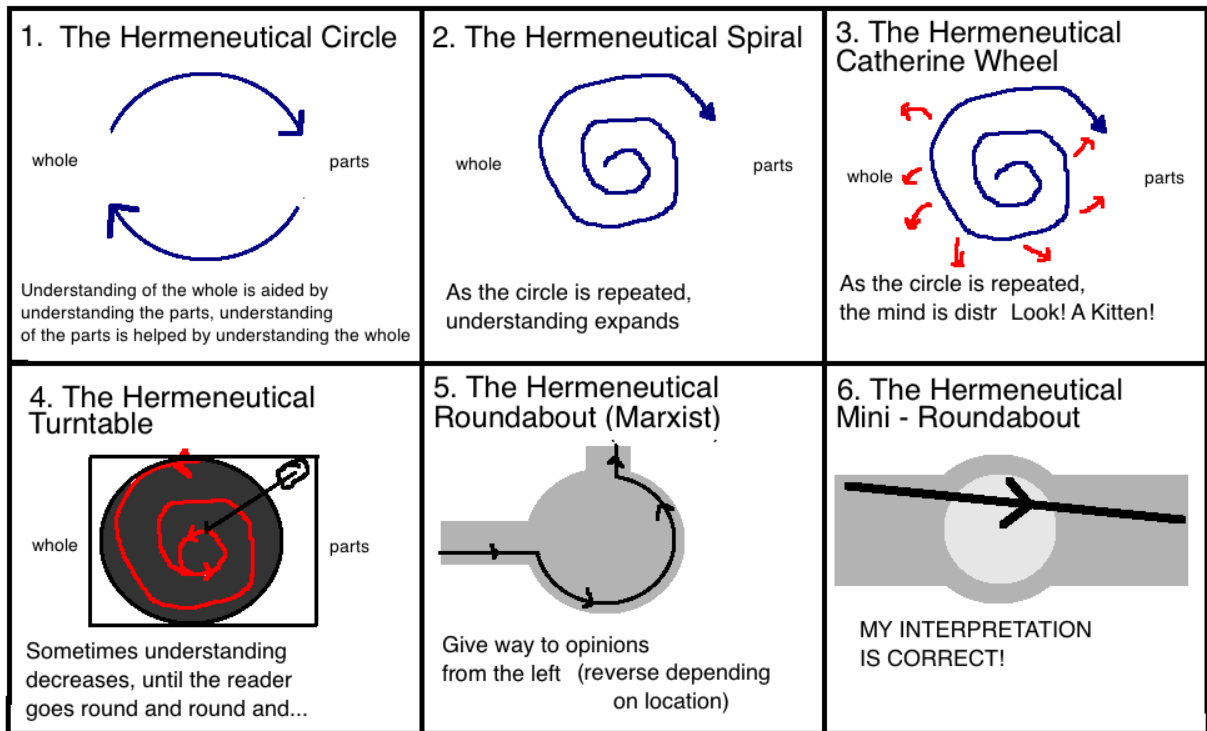
In general, the interpretation of texts (the transcript of the interviews and field notes) should uncovers the internal logic of the data. As themes and common patterns emerge, the net of interpretation widened. Themes were those that came researcher's mind, intuitively (Macaulay, 2004), and it is supported by the 'individual' text after 'projecting' one's own before the constructed text. This first meaning emerges due to one's 'prejudices' toward the constructed text. A good discussion on this aspect of bias in qualitative research can be seen in Mantzoukas (2005) works. Indeed, such inclusion of bias and prejudices is a prerequisite for securing validity in the research. After all, in fieldwork the 'I-witness' not the 'eye witness' is at work. Surely, this 'inner prejudicial gazing' (Behalves and Strindberg, 2000) must be in the form of 'bracketing' as meeting in the horizon had not yet takes place. Bracketing is a kind of reduction that describes the act of suspending judgment. In other words, the metaphor of bracketing means one's must bracket *vorurteil* and personal commitments as meanings are with describing experiences. Zenobia Chan (2013) suggests "BRACKETING" strategies as follows:

Begin with a mentality assessment of the researchers' personality; **R**eflexivity helps the researchers to identify areas of potential bias; **A**nalyze data in IPA using Colaizzi's method; **C**omply with the prevailing gate-keeping policy when deciding the scope of the literature review; **K**eep a reflexive diary, helping to awaken the researchers' own pre-conceptions; **E**ngage participants in bracketing during the data collection process when indicated; **T**horough research planning before data collection; **I**nterview the participants using open-ended questions; adopt a **N**ot-knowing stand to maintain the curiosity in the participants; **G**enerate knowledge from participants via semi-structured interviews (pp. 6-7).

However, the above attitude should be acceptable when *verstehen* is not at work. Qualitatively, it is just a *vorurteil* that one must live with. At this point, reflexivity on biases must be celebrated even though the interpreter project on the text is going to be shaped by one's own assumptions and biases. The projects of meaning multiply with further readings, and some of them conflict with each other. The best solution is to go back to the text and commits oneself to *vorurteil* check via reflexivity.

One of the key for recovering meaning embedded in text is to embrace 'question'. Gadamer says that every text is an answer to a question, but the question is not always in the

text. So the interpreter must seek "the horizon of the question" to which the text is an answer. As such the interpreter must go behind the text to find the meaning. Indeed the text is asking a fundamental question,' what do I mean?" This position is line with the principle of superfluity where every word is precise and significant. Perhaps the above performance can be realized by interrogating two interacting and interplaying leitmotifs (guiding motif) of hermeneutics --- language and historicity. "We live out our lives in time, but that who we are is through and through historical" (Wachterhauser, 1994). Similarly it is through language that 'the past is transported into the present and carried over into the future' (p. 9). Simply, the text must be understood as an answer to the question, and it could be found in the fusion of two (of the known and the knower) horizons. Illustratively the phase toward the answer can be seen as below:

Whatever, the hermeneutical analysis is expected to give answers or extracting more from the material than is visible from the naked eye. It should give answers to question of why not merely answers to questions of what. Therefore researchers must go 'unriddling' (asking why) mysteries with the data collected (Alasuutari, 1995). Strategies include the following: cross comparison with other fieldwork, view contradictions with other cases of similar nature, relationship with artifacts and images as prevailing in the public sphere, identifying silences, internal contradictions within research materials, the search for normative conceptions, and search for umbrella concepts.

End Notes

Fieldwork concerns with 'local interpretation' and 'local knowledge' although it is by no means the end point of the study. It should be a departure of opening new theoretical ideas. "I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?"
― James P. Spradley (1933-1982)

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