Desystematisation of Collaborative Qualitative Research: Reaching Clarity by Embracing the Messy

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ABSTRACT

This challenge paper proposes desystematisation of qualitative research descriptions to enhance collaborative interpretation. Qualitative research is often messy but the descriptions of it aim to follow academic conventions, which seldom allow room for describing the research process as it truly takes place. In collaborative work, individual interpretations of the research and data can enrich each other and lead to new ideas and realisations, but too strict systematisation (e.g. fixed coding rules) may obstruct this process. This paper is an example of a desystematised collaborative interpretation process, and a reflective process description exercise is presented as a means to support collaboration. The paper highlights the need to embrace the messy in qualitative research to enhance a creative collaborative practice.

KEYWORDS

Collaborative Interpretation; Qualitative Research; Messy Qualitative Research; Scholarly Practice

INTRODUCTION

Interpretation (i.e. constructing meaning based on different materials and processes in qualitative research; Gabriel 2018) may be done in several ways, and in many approaches it is seen as an integral part of qualitative research (Given, 2008). Interpretation may also be done in collaboration, where two or more researchers agree upon an interpretation of a body of data, which is one way of bringing new perspectives into research and constructing ideas (Cornish et al., 2014). Janesick (2001) highlighted the researchers' creativity, intuition, and unique thinking as being essential parts of qualitative research and urged us to consider qualitative research beyond rules and technique. However, some twenty years later the review comments qualitative researchers receive reveal that the rules are still there: Which coding scheme did you use? Which validation process did you use?

Firstly, we argue that there often is an attempt to systematise the interpretation to the extent that the benefit of having several people's interpretation vanishes. Secondly, the systematised ways in which researchers describe their research often hinder collaboration as they cannot describe their true, messy, qualitative processes but limit themselves to systematised descriptions that may tell their co-researchers, peer reviewers, and readers quite little about the actual fieldwork and data. Qualitative research being *messy*, a concept used especially in the context of ethnography and referring to the complexity of research, fieldwork, and data contrary to the neat and tidy descriptions of it (Vickers, 2019), is not necessarily a problem but an opportunity that should be embraced in collaboration as well.

The collaborative contribution that this paper is based on started with spontaneous discussions on how we as researchers would benefit from more truthful descriptions of qualitative research when planning and conducting our own research and how our research communities would benefit from other kinds of discussions around methods, data, and analysis. In essence, we felt that the methodological parts of our projects were not supported by the academic discussion traditions; that is, our questions were not answered. Building on earlier studies discussing the tension between systematised and messy research, this challenge paper proposes desystematisation of qualitative research processes and descriptions as a way to enhance collaborative interpretation. In this context, desystematisation does not refer to a complete rejection of the existing research practices, but rather it highlights that the scale between messiness and structure in research may be large. Hence, we do not propose new methods and tools per se but highlight a certain mindset and a shift of perspective to strengthen collaboration. In addition, the paper itself serves as an example of a creative collaborative process utilising desystematisation, and an exercise to do this is presented. We demonstrate the need for open and more creative approaches and descriptions to enhance discussion, collaboration, and genuine possibilities to develop our methods and interpretations.

SYSTEMATISATION IN METHODOLOGICAL INSTRUCTIONS

Our starting point for describing the current state of qualitative research practices is a selection of methodological handbooks that describe how to do research interviews and analyse qualitative data. This small sample of handbooks, deliberately showing both the historical and the more recent perspective, serves as an example of how qualitative research processes are described (in both handbooks and methodology sections of publications). However, a similar approach to qualitative research practices can be seen in other handbooks, too (e.g. Saldaña (2014, p. 581; Ward and Delamont 2020, p. 2). Handbooks serve as a good example of what is being taught by senior academics to students and junior researchers as best practice in the craft of research. Serving as a general

example of the systematisation of research, Harvard University Research Support (2023) explains the research lifecycle as 'the process of conducting research, from the initial planning, funding, and designing of a project to publishing and disseminating the conclusions or scholarship', listing 'collect & create', 'analyze & collaborate', and 'evaluate & archive' as some of the separate steps in the lifecycle.

This chronological systematisation of a research process is reiterated in methodological handbooks, which can quite well be observed in the tables of contents of different handbooks (Table 1).

Auerbach and Silverstein 2003	Flick 2014	Gillham 2000	Mishler 1986
Part I: Getting into qualitative research	Part I: Mapping the Field	1 The Nature of the Interview	Introduction Problems of the Research Interview
Part II: Planning your first research study	Part II: Concepts, Contexts, Basics	2 Interviewing: For and Against	1. Standard Practice
Part III: Analyzing your first research study	Part III: Analytic Strategies	3 Focusing on the Interview Questions	2. Research Interviews as Speech Events
Part IV: Designing and analysing your next research study	Part IV: Types of Data and their Analysis	4 The Interviewer as the Research Instrument	3. The Joint Construction of Meaning
Part V: Final thoughts	Part V: Using and Assessing Qualitative Data Analysis	5 Organizing and Managing the Interview	4. Language, Meaning, and Narrative Analysis
		6 The Use of Prompts and Probes	5. Meaning in Context and the Empowerment of Respondents
		7 Piloting and Running the Interview	Conclusion: Prospects for Critical Research
		8 Carrying out a Content Analysis	
		9 Writing up Interview Data	
		10 Special Interviewing Techniques	

Table 1. Tables of Contents in Qualitative Research Handbooks

In Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003, p. 35) handbook on coding and analysis, coding is mentioned as a procedure to support grounded theory, essentially defined as 'a description of a pattern that you find in the data.' While grounded theory, built on inductive reasoning, methodologically allows for stepping away from the concepts of reliability, validity, and generalisability often present in quantitative methods, its focus on finding patterns and 'offering a precise route to follow' (Faggiolani, 2011, p. 9) can be limiting. Individual cases can be informative in themselves without being constrained by patternmaking (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 241-242).

In a handbook for research interviews, Gillham (2000, pp. 59-60) focused on content analysis of interviews through categorisation, stating that 'choosing and identifying categories is a subjective business but not an idiosyncratic one: a "sensible" way of ordering the data' while simultaneously acknowledging that '"left-over" or unique statements [can have] possible value or significance, perhaps in an "unclassifiable" category'. The existence of unclassifiable categories supports our notion that not all relevant information can be organised in categories and therefore the messy is unavoidable.

Flick (2014a) described qualitative data analysis as 'the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material' and that the final aim is 'often to arrive at generalizable statements by comparing various materials or various texts or several cases.' The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis (Flick, 2014b) brought up several aspects relevant for collaborative interpretation, for example reanalysis of data (Wästerfors et al., 2014), participating in collaborative data analysis on the basis of knowing that 'that no single interpretation is taken as representing an all-encompassing portrayal of a phenomenon' (Roulston, 2014; a point agreed upon by Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 36), and that the 'definition of codes, categories, inclusion and exclusion criteria for individual codes, and other conventions needs to be clear and agreed upon' (Cornish et al., 2014). An interesting point Mishler (1986, p. 4) made is that even with an elaborate coding manual 'the actual work of coding cannot be done reliably until coders build up a set of shared assumptions, specific to the study, that allow them to implement the code in a mutually consistent way.'

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES FOR COLLABORATIVE INTERPRETATION?

In empirical papers, descriptions of methods and ethnography are often brief, average (cf. Ruokolainen, 2022), and, we argue, systematised. The systematised descriptions may to some extent be useful for reviewers to assess the execution of the study, but they are not necessarily helpful for other researchers to plan future studies with similar settings, as these systematised descriptions often lack the richness and uniqueness of individual studies. However, for example, Ruokolainen (2022) demonstrated that other types of methodological descriptions are possible. She described in detail the different questions and discussion in the interviews that led to discussing misinformation, which was the topic of the interviews. Describing the interviews in such a way was seen as an important contribution benefitting other researchers conducting similar research.

The tension between systematised and messy research is not new. Social sciences have been through shifts between systematic interpretation and non-systematic interpretation. For instance, Geertz (1983) wrote about the change in social sciences from a more objectivistic approach influenced by natural sciences to a more subjectivistic approach influenced by the humanities. Geertz (1983, p. 34) wrote that this change will impact 'our notion not so much of what knowledge is but of what it is we want to know' and stated that social scientists should note and inspect expressions rather than count and measure them.

Burkette (2022) noted that a shift back from the (current) 'positivistic to interpretive and critical paradigms within qualitative research entails a certain messiness in its methodology and analyses' and argues that this is not necessarily a bad thing, as social scientists' 'training, preparation, and analytical bent don't become worthless due to epistemological uncertainty destabilizing a primary research tool.' Rather than being a limitation, our limited individual perspectives create a more diverse view while also highlighting the limitations of our, and everyone else's, perceptions.

What does this all mean for collaborative interpretation? The proposed solutions for collaboration in the handbooks usually respond to a practical need (e.g. coding manuals, transcription conventions) but with the messy in mind, as motivated above, they do not fully solve the need for flexibility in a collaborative process. Instead, they may include a caveat against a too rigid structure, but the messy in the unsystematised parts of the research process are rarely accounted for.

We argue that, in a collaborative interpretation process, we need diverse individual perspectives, which become visible only with descriptions reflecting the messy in each individual process. If the individual voice is suppressed or conformed, we may question what the point of collaboration is and what do the individual members offer other than their time and work effort. As Geertz (1983), Burkette (2022)—and we—argue, the key strength of the social scientist is interpretation. Nevertheless, despite emphasising the importance of individual perspectives, different interpretations must be discussed in a collaborative process. As we argue that a systematic approach is not the answer, this discussion should then lead to other kinds of answers on how the individual interpretations may enrich one another and collaboration as a whole.

HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN COLLABORATIVE INTERPRETATION?

Here, we present an exercise to shape our thinking and way of working, which is one solution to strengthen(ing) collaboration while still embracing multiple interpretations.

We used a spontaneous exercise when writing this paper: *reflective process description exercise*. Our whole process started with discussions sparked by our thoughts and questions about methodology. We decided to work on this together, more concretely with this challenge paper, and started an iterative process of conversations, individual reading and thinking, meetings, and finally writing. During writing, we noticed that we were still bound to the academic structures of writing a paper, which affected our thinking, and reflected on ways to challenge this. We decided to separately write individual descriptions of our process but also our thoughts and feelings about it. When ready, we read each other's reflections, which were surprisingly similar but still adding individual value. For example, Karolina described our process in a way that made Hilda understand its iterative nature:

> Our process has been conversation, individual reading and thinking, more conversation, an idea to write something together about the issue, individual reading and thinking, a meeting to decide what and where we should present our ideas, conversation, a meeting to write a draft structure for the paper and divide tasks, individual reading and thinking, writing, a meeting to review the draft and reorganise the structure and divide new tasks, individual reading and thinking, writing…

In turn, Hilda's description made Karolina understand each step of the process as distinct actions with separate meanings and results. Therefore, Karolina's *reading and thinking, meeting,* and *conversation* became more than just a part of a larger process in Hilda's text, for example by her highlighting the nature of the meetings as *brainstorming* and describing individual actions in the meetings (e.g. "we listened to each other"). The exercise, thus, helped us interpret our own process. We were more confident that our interpretation of the process and goals were similar but

that the ideas and contributions of both researchers were needed in the process. The descriptions were put together and approved by both researchers.

The exercise should not be seen as a tool for analysis but as a means for collaboration. The aim is not to create more boundaries but to help to collaborate without strict rules. The exercise is an example of a process that is simultaneously individual and collective: people are encouraged to keep their own views but voice and share them. Collaboration happens in both informal and formal modes, sometimes with structures and schedules but most often in dialogue building on new insights gained since the previous discussion. In practice, people's way of working, in qualitative research especially, may be very different to the structural presentation of the research process. Thus, the process description exercise aims to break the linearity and highlights the iterative parts of the process. The exercise is a process inside a process.

However, we see also challenges in the exercise (which may exist in any collaborative interpretation). Firstly, people need to feel comfortable in sharing their thoughts, and there might be issues with power imbalance. This can be a tough barrier to overcome in communities with strict hierarchies, and we do not have a ready answer to it. Secondly, some researchers may feel this kind of exercise, and overall embracing the messy, increases their workload. Perhaps focusing on richer and polyphonic interpretations results in more work. However, this shift in focus may give a broader understanding on different phenomena, which is the goal of qualitative research. On the other hand, our experience was that the exercise did not increase the amount of labour during the writing process—rather the opposite, as it helped to clarify, construct, and combine our thoughts. It was a way of clarifying a messy process while still letting it be messy.

The exercise demonstrates a way of thinking that is also used in an ongoing project of ours, where observations are conducted by different researchers in different contexts, with one common denominator: encounters where integration-related information is shared or discussed. The concept of encounters (Ruokolainen, 2023) is thoroughly discussed throughout the project, but the individual researchers are otherwise allowed to have their way of working on the field, interpretations, and gut feelings. Discussing one central concept in detail leaves room for other interpretation, which is seen as welcome, and the concept of encounter itself may also evolve when exposed to collaborative interpretation. Thus, multiple interpretations and descriptions are not seen as problems, and this shift in perspective is deemed essential in the project.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we challenge some of the current paradigms in qualitative research and suggest that social scientists put a greater focus on the messy in qualitative research to harness its full potential, which we argue is a prerequisite for collaborative interpretation. By looking at examples of qualitative research methodologies in handbooks and drawing on our experiences of how these are reiterated in the research process we see how this guidance can sometimes become a restrictive box of checklists and requirements rather than a supporting element—also for thinking outside the box. Collaboration is often supported by rules and techniques, through which we may lose the benefit of having several researchers working together and sharing their ideas. Seeing desystematisation as being aware of structures and challenging them when needed, we presented a concrete exercise, *reflective process description exercise,* to shift our thinking in a more desystematised way. This paper was built on our collaboration that emphasised the individual interpretations and how they enriched one another in a very organic and creative way.

The challenges and solutions we presented tend to reflect on collaborative interpretation in a joint research project, but they are also applicable to a larger perspective—in research communities and publication practices. One of the pillars of academia, the peer review process, is a collaborative practice. This practice is meant to improve and develop the research through constructive feedback and insights based on the reviewer's interpretation. A shift in thinking that the messy should perhaps take place on all levels of academic work, also means that we as researchers accept that not all methodological descriptions answer to the exact same questions. Bringing this communication, and indeed collaboration, to an even higher level, we see the opportunities of open science in boosting collaborative practices beyond the individual research project. A publication with open data (e.g. interview transcripts, field notes, annotations) allows for any reader to make their own interpretation of the material, perhaps adding to or questioning the author's interpretation and conclusions. Open science then extends its role from *opening up* research to *inviting* people to conversation, and even to collaboration.

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