



Full Length Review Article

AN INTRODUCTION TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ARTISTIC APPROACH

***Faaiz Alhamdani**

Lecturer, College of Dentistry, Ibn Sina University for Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Baghdad

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 19th July, 2016
Received in revised form
24th August, 2016
Accepted 05th September, 2016
Published online 31st October, 2016

Key Words:

Qualitative research Methodology,
Artistic approach to qualitative research,
Qualitative research in health.

Copyright©2016, Faaiz Alhamdani. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

ABSTRACT

Many published textbooks and articles dealt with qualitative research and its methodologies; still, it is difficult for a clinician without proper qualitative research background to be engaged with these texts. They represent a different research paradigm. The essence of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon in a natural environment appose to experimental setting in quantitative research, in which all the aspects (variables/ parameters) are examined under experimental conditions. Qualitative research studies the patient's experience within the patient's natural life setting. Understanding and interpreting human experience is the essence of similarity between art and qualitative research. On this basis, this article tries to introduce qualitative research paradigm and some of its widely used methodologies using well known master pieces of fine art.

INTRODUCTION

Despite qualitative research in health has gained more attention in the last decade, many clinicians find qualitative studies as alien territory. Clinical researchers who used to deal with numbers and statistical values find it difficult to rely on patients' subjective accounts to understanding the nature of the disease, as part of human experience. In addition, most clinicians find it difficult to understand the methodologies adopted in qualitative studies, such thematic analysis, phenomenological, or grounded theory. Many published textbooks and articles dealt with qualitative research and its methodologies; still, it is difficult for a clinician without proper qualitative research background to be engaged with these texts. They represent a different research paradigm. Being a researcher of clinical background I face difficulties to explain what does qualitative research mean to my fellow colleagues in the way used to be mentioned in the published material. I have an artistic interest and I have published books on fine art criticism. This made me consider my background in fine art as an alternative way to introduce qualitative research in general and some of popular qualitative methodologies in health studies using fine art approach for the hope of achieving this aim

***Corresponding author: Faaiz Alhamdani**

Lecturer, College of Dentistry, Ibn Sina University for Medical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Baghdad

Why art?

Art and science are both forms of knowledge (Eskridge 2003). It might be thought that art lacks rigour and defined methodological frame. In fact real art is a true example of rigorous quest for knowledge and understanding. This makes masterpieces of art continue to be adored for centuries. In addition, art and qualitative research share the same ultimate aim; understanding human experiences in different life situations. Understanding patient's experience and suffering in different disease conditions is becoming an important aspect in modern medical practice. Furthermore, there is something common between art and qualitative research, which is the creativity. Data analysis in qualitative studies, in which the researcher makes sense of the textual data moving from data coding to abstracting, considered as the creative part of qualitative research (Cresswell 2009). There is another important aspect of creativity in art, which the ability of a picture to tell thousand words. Cresswell described qualitative research as a woven fabric with tiny threads, many colours and different textures (2007). I can't think of a different definition for a modern painting canvas.

The essence of qualitative research is to understand a phenomenon in a natural environment appose to experimental setting in quantitative research, in which all the aspects (variables/ parameters) are examined under experimental conditions. Qualitative research studies the patient's experience within the patient's natural life setting (Pope and

Mays 1995). For the sake of explanation, this article will consider the painter as a patient expressing him/herself in a natural way, and the fine art critic would be the researcher. In this sense, imagine the painting as your qualitative data you wish to analyse. Each painting reflects a particular painter's experience and view to a particular life event. In another word it reflects the painter interpretation. This can defines the term "interpretivism" commonly used in qualitative research. Interpretivism as a term apposes "positivism" in quantitative research. In which for a phenomenon to be studied it should be a physical entity represented by numbers or can be tested or measured (Nicholls 2009). Patients' experience and understanding of a particular health problem is not a physical entity and cannot be measured. Hence it cannot be investigated using quantitative research methods. Here comes the role of qualitative research. Being a qualitative researcher / fine art critic you need to justify your approach to study the data/ painting. This is the essence of qualitative methodology. In qualitative research there are more than one approach to study the data, because human experience is not numbers can be investigated in statistical way. The researcher deals with textual documents in most of the cases. You need to understand the nature of the text/ data and choose the suitable approach to make sense of this data. Fine art critic needs to ask himself: What made him interested in this particular painting, what is it he is looking for? This is his quest/ the research question. There are many paintings in a particular art exhibition or an artist webpage, why this particular theme or particular idea caught the critic eye and why? This is the question art critic/ qualitative researcher needs to answer. Here the qualitative researcher needs to choose the correct methodological approach to answer his question.

Some common qualitative methodologies in health studies

There are many fine art schools and directions. This reflects the difference of views adopted by artists toward their reality, which is the same for qualitative research methodologies (Nicholls 2009). Accordingly, each fine art example will used in this article will be used as an example or a particular qualitative methodology.

Phenomenology

Portrait paintings are examples or individual's account of a particular phenomenon. As an example of phenomenology the article considers "The Girl with Pearl Earring" by Vermeer as an example (Figure 1)



Figure 1. The Girl with Pearl Earring" by Vermeer

What does this painting really mean, why this posture in particular, what is specific about the pearl earring, what was Vermeer thinking of. All our questions circles around the real meaning of this master piece. These types of questions are similar to the questions related to phenomenological studies. As the researcher interviews patients and analyse the interview data he tries to expose the essence of their experience and what is the real meaning of this experience to them. In phenomenological studies the researcher dig down to find what is unique about a given phenomenon in terms of experience and meaning to individuals. In fact many portrait paintings can be good examples of phenomenological studies, because these paintings are about a single person. Phenomenological studies examine a given phenomenon on an individual basis. In another word the researcher isolates between individual accounts as he gathers the data. This means the research does not used the information provided by the first interviewee with the second interviewee (Nicholls 2009). It is similar to the notion that each painting is a unique experience. It has been created in different environment and it is the response to different life situation. In this way the collected data will preserve its specificity and attachment to the original experience.

Interpretive phenomenology

When a fine art critic analyses a portrait painting, does he study the painter view of the subject or he lets his view to be part of the process? Apparently, it is difficult to tell whether he is analysing the painter view of the painting or his view of the painter's. This is what interpretative phenomenology deals with. Let us take Mona Lisa as an example (Figure 2).

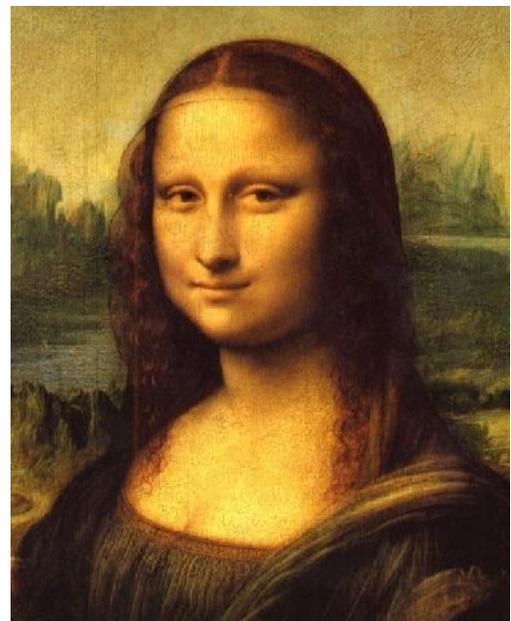


Figure 2. Mona Lisa by Da Vinci

What does her smile really mean, why did Da Vinci put this strange background, what was it he want us to see, what is the essence of this painting, what is it really about?

Do these questions help us to understand the artist view or answer ours? Here we have to consider both sides; the painting side and ours. I chose Mona Lisa painting because of its richness. It is a clear example of the possibility of different interpretations each spectator can add to its meaning. In

interpretive phenomenology the researcher needs to be aware about his/ her position, reaction and view of what he is studying to separate between the phenomenon and the way he/she think and react about it (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008). In qualitative research, the researcher is the research instrument. He needs to be clear about his position as a researcher, because he is part of the analysis process. Sometimes is difficult to separate between the researcher and his findings (Snape and Spencer 2003). Interpretive phenomenology is a good example of stating the researcher position as he analyses the data.

Grounded Theory

Not all art works are portrait paintings. There are paintings, which depict other aspects of human experience, such as "The Blinds", a painting by Pieter Prugel (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The blinds by Pieter Prugel

What is specific about this painting is the story telling nature. The action of the scene, the interaction between the figures (element) and what made the events move to a particular direction. These aspects are more suitable to be approached by Grounded Theory Methodology. In grounded theory there is no separation between elements (Nicholls 2009). This painting is about the story and the interaction between its figures within the context of the drama and action of this story. In grounded theory the researcher can use the information provided by the first interviewee in the next interview, because he is dealing with a phenomenon in its social context. Many qualitative research methodologies in health field of research adopt this concept.

Thematic analysis

An example of such methodological approach is thematic analysis approach. A good artistic example of this approach would be Canaletto's "Grand Canal" (Figure 4). This painting is not about a story or there is some sort of meaning behind the scene. It is an eye capturing scene from Renaissance Venice. Here, you are mainly interested in the colours, or the figures. It is more about the surface of the canvas rather than what is really behind it. You are not interested in the story behind these colours. You are just interested in the striking features of the painting itself. Identifying these striking features are and their components resembles identification of themes in thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Giving artistic examples for qualitative data reflect the methodological diversity of qualitative research. Qualitative research deals with human experience. Human experience is rich and divers.



Figure 4. The Grand Canal by Canaletto

In quantitative research we do not have methodologies. We only have statistical methods, because in quantitative research measurements and numbers are what really matters, not human opinions or experience.

You may have seen that the nature of the painting is governs the methodological approach for its interpretation. You may here spot an important difference between painting interpretation and the methodology of qualitative research. In qualitative research you can, to some limit, govern the nature of data you work with. This is done by the way you conduct the interview and analyse your data. You will be the painter as well as the critic at the same time.

REFERENCES

- Biggerstaff, D. and A. R. Thompson, 2008. "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 5:(5): 173 – 183.
- Braun, V. and V. Clarke, 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77-101.
- Cresswell, J. W., Ed. 2007. *Qualitative Enquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. CA, Thousand Oaks.
- Cresswell, J. W., Ed. 2009. *Qualitative Procedures. Research Design- Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. CA, Sage Publications.
- Eskridge, R. 2003. *The Enduring Relationship of Science and Art*, The Art Institute in Chicago.
- Nicholls, D. 2009. "Qualitative research: Part one – Philosophies." *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, October 2009, Vol 16, No 10 16(10): 526-533.
- Nicholls, D. 2009. "Qualitative research: Part two – Methodologies." *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 16(11): 586-592.
- Pope, C. and N. Mays, 1995. "Reaching the parts other methods cannot reach: an introduction to qualitative methods in health and health services research." *BMJ* 311(6996): 42-5.
- Snape, D. and L. Spencer, Eds. 2003. *The Foundations of Qualitative Research. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. London, SAGE Publications.