

"Listen to your gut": a reflexive approach to data analysis

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Over the last two decades qualitative research has seen significant shifts towards the narrative, reflexive and creative. And yet, analytical frameworks do not seem to have stayed abreast of these developments. Using research into the construction of identity under the influence of fibromyalgia as an example, this paper seeks to exemplify a reflexive approach to data analysis that accounts for the researcher's positionality as well as the increasingly untraditional, unconventional data stemming from creative data collection methods.

Typically, analysis would be approached through coding data, which would then lead to the generation of themes and combined with relevant theoretical frameworks would result in conclusions. Under the cloak of providing objective, robust, valid interpretations commonly used approaches are Grounded Theory, Narrative Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Content Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Comparative Analysis, or some amalgamated form of those. But what if we took a different approach? What if we acknowledged that the themes "emerging" from our data are actually shaped and even generated by our own thoughts, values and beliefs? And what if, as a consequence, we were open to using all kinds of data – transcripts, songs, poetry, sketches and photographs – for what they are: the meaning we attribute to them?

This paper provides insight into data analysis and reflexivity and offers two practical examples of reflexive data analysis – an illustrated poem and an installation. Both analytical projects are assemblages and recompositions of existing data into a new form, which allowed for a clear separation of "voices", my own "I" voices and all voices of the many participants. Creating the assemblages therefore was a conscious decision to engage in an analytical process that would combine active meaning-making with metaphorical representation; an analytical process influenced by the principles of arts-based research (Leavy, 2015).

After an outline of the processes and practical steps involved in the creation of these artistic, analytical outcomes, the paper concludes with thoughts relating to challenges, potential areas of application and a look to the future of this reflexive approach to data analysis; an approach, where data analysis is in itself a form of knowledge generation through the process of assemblage and "listening to gut feelings". This approach may be seen as unscientific, but given its advantages in relation to new insights, dissemination and communication of ideas, it is more fruitful than detrimental to developing qualitative research further. Taking this intentional stance of listening to our guts and identifying what grabs us as researchers means that we are more honest to ourselves, our participants and those who read our research reports, as themes do not emerge but are constructed anyway.

Engaging with this reflexive approach to analysis requires researchers to truly become bricoleurs, "a trickster, a person who is a jack-of-all-trades, a person who can fix things with the materials that are at hand" (Denzin, 2016, p.36). And through engaging more openly with our roles and positions within and in connection to our research topics we are able to create a reflexive foundation for the systematic analysis of data.

Keywords: reflexivity, reflective practice, reflexive data analysis, creative data collection methods, qualitative research, messy data, arts-based research practice.



References

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