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Creativity within Qualitative Research on Families: New Ideas for Old Methods

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers are continually searching for research methods that engage their participants in the data collection process. When researching living, dynamic systems such as families, researchers need to find methods that can encapsulate the multi-dimensionality of the human experience. The purpose of this paper is to acquaint researchers with some creative and active methods they can use to not only involve their participants in the research process, but also to more fully learn about and experience the perceptions, feelings, and life events of their participants. The methods discussed include sculpting, photography and videography, art and drawing, role playing, writing exercises, metaphors, and timelines.

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers are continually searching for research methods that engage their participants in the data collection process. When researching living, dynamic systems such as families, researchers need to find methods that can encapsulate the multi-dimensionality of the human experience. The purpose of this paper is to acquaint researchers with some creative and active methods they can use to not only involve their participants in the research process, but also to more fully learn about and experience the perceptions, feelings, and life events of their participants. The methods discussed include sculpting, photography and videography, art and drawing, role playing, writing exercises, metaphors, and timelines.

Introduction

Most people either love or hate research; they are either energized by the idea of gathering data and stories and analyzing findings or think it is too reductionistic and separated from real life. In many cases and for many people, research has become routinized to the point that it involves "standard procedures" (Patton, 1997). The same methods are being used in the same ways with the same analyses. I believe that there is much room for innovation and creativity in the research process and I have chosen to start by integrating new methods into the process.

Family researchers today are likely to consider using both quantitative and qualitative methods in their research designs (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). Yet, they are not as likely to consider creating a new method with which to gather data. However, therapists are constantly creating new qualitative methods for family assessment; a primary aspect of research on families (Goldman, 1990, 1992). Through a research project focused on qualitative evaluation of HIV/AIDS prevention programs, I, along with colleagues, had the opportunity to devise some creative ideas for doing qualitative research. Actually, the methods I describe are not really "new," but rather it is their use in qualitative research that is less widely known.

The purpose of this paper to acquaint readers with some of the more actively creative methods they can use to collect qualitative data. I will discuss how to gather information from research participants through the use of sculpting, art and drawing, metaphors, writing exercises, timelines, and photography and videography. The intent behind this paper is to stimulate the creativity of qualitative researchers, to make research more engaging and exciting for everyone involved, and to place high value on the stories and feedback of research participants.

The Underlying Research Philosophy

Research methods should flow logically from the questions one asks (Patton, 1997). The way we do research should be a reflection of the issues and values embedded in our area of interest (Whitmore, 1994). At the same time, many researchers support multiple methods that capture the various dimensions of description and change. Our research traditions, by and large, privilege either numbers or words and focus on the use of numerical measurement instruments or interviews for data collection. More active and tangible methods for data collection (e.g., videos, photography, artwork) are rare in both quantitative and qualitative research literatures. Yet, more active methods of data collection may be a better fit for those studying dynamic, living systems, such as families and human service programs. Why not use more multi-dimensional methods to study these multi-dimensional systems? Further, some populations (such as children, adolescents, those with limited verbal or writing skills, etc.) may be able to better respond to methods that match their active, continually developing context.

The methods below serve to accomplish the goal of making research with human systems more multi-dimensional. Further, these methods were derived with a participatory research philosophy in mind. The methods attempt to reduce the level of the researcher-participant hierarchy and create partnerships between all those involved in the research (Piercy & Thomas, 1999). The purpose behind many of these methods is to find ways to make living systems actually come alive; to not only hear, but to see the stories behind the participants' perceptions and experiences; to not only observe, but to actually become a part of that which we as researchers are studying.

At the same time, data gathering can be more naturalistic (such as with observations) or more manipulated (such as with structured interviews). The activities below also represent both sides of this continuum. For example, with videography, participants may be freer to express themselves in whatever way they normally would. However, with writing exercises and incomplete prompts, researchers limit participants to a particular focus and means of expression. Therefore, the creative methods below are not intended as completely naturalistic, but rather represent a similar range of means with which researchers can control the data they gather.

Rigorous research need not be limited to systematic designs and analyses but can be broadened to absorption in the actual gathering of data. We change as researchers by merely studying and interacting with our participants and the data we gather (Rosenblatt, 1995). We are the research instruments (Patton, 1990). Thus, in using these more active methods of data collection, it is also the responsibility of the researcher to analyze and include his/her own experiences and perceptions in the data analyses and report (whether it is through triangulation, member checks, audits, etc.). Active and creative research that is engaging and everchanging can be sound research.

Finally, many of the methods described below can stand on their own as the main means for gathering data. However, researchers can also use them as additions to more formal data gathering (such as structured interviews) or in various combinations. By using multiple data collection methods, researchers triangulate their data, allowing them to analyze a question or topic from multiple angles, sources, and varieties of expression (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). This is turn can increase the trustworthiness of the data and findings-the degree to which

others can have confidence in the authenticity, believability, and applicability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, in broadening the ways we collect data and using multiple data sources and collection methods, we are also increasing our avenues to build trustworthiness within our research.

Creative Means to Gather Data

Readers can use the means described below in basic or applied research, program evaluations, and needs assessments. Furthermore, many of these activities can take place in interviews or focus groups and can be used in case studies and archival analyses. I have chosen to focus the methods primarily on research with families; however, researchers can adapt these methods to almost any topic or research question.

Sculpting

Family therapists have used sculpting to assess relationships, roles, and functioning in families as a way to gather data about clients (Constantine, 1978). Family sculptures are physical representations (using actual people) or in-vivo statues that depict how someone perceives a specific group or system (such as a family, program staff, or business). In a standard sculpture, one person ("the sculptor") directs the others to assume postures that depict how he/she sees them at a particular point in time (Duhl, Kantor, & Duhl, 1973). Sculptors use closeness and space, body posture, facial expressions, and props to show their perception of each person's (e.g., family member's) relationship with the others. For example, a parent might sculpt a rebellious son far apart from the rest of the family, sticking his tongue out at them and making faces. An involved, peacekeeping employer might have her arms reaching out to her employees. Whatever the situation, researchers can ask people in a specific group to sculpt one another in order to get a better picture of how they relate to and perceive each other. To gather historical information or future predictions, the researcher can ask various research participants to sculpt the group at some time in the past (perhaps a time of crisis or at a significant event), in the present, and at some point in the future. Family therapists, such as Gehring and Schultheiss (1987) encourage participants to use dolls, sticks, and chess pieces instead of humans to make sculptures which allows all participants to create their own sculptures simultaneously.

There are also special kinds of sculptures. In a linear sculpture, participants place themselves along an imaginary line on the floor which represents their feelings about some bipolar dimension of some issue or topic (Constantine, 1978). Researchers can ask participants to physically place themselves along a continuum of power (from "high" to "low") to assess their agency in a given system. Researchers can also use continua of personal traits such as cheerfulness, respectfulness of others, willingness to follow rules, helpfulness, talker-listener, etc. In a recent program evaluation, I asked the staff of an agency to rate their superiors on leadership qualities (e.g., collaborative, respectful, flexibility). The staff was surprised to see that they all perceived one leader in a very negative way, as they all continually congregated on the same area of the line. This empowered the staff, as a group, to discuss their concerns with the superior. As an evaluator, I was able to develop hypotheses about where improvements could be made in the agency to promote a more positive atmosphere among the staff and leadership.

Researchers can learn about participants' opinions and attitudes by asking them to physically place themselves along a continuum (an imaginary line on the floor) of "agree-disagree" according to a series of value-laden statements. For example, researchers can make statements such as: "This family cooperates with each other"; "The staff communicates well"; "The rules in this organization are fair"; or "The children in this family have little say in what happens to the family." I encourage readers to consult Constantine (1978) for additional types of sculptures (such as polar sculptures, boundary sculptures, relationship sculptures, and typological sculptures) that researchers can use to actively involve participants in the data collection process while gathering valuable information at the same time.

Art/Drawing

In qualitative research, we often think of verbal dialogue or observation as the optimal means in which to collect data. But as the saying goes, sometimes a picture can be worth a thousand words. I have discovered that people's drawings, whether literal depictions or abstract symbolisms, can be data that provide quality information in a fun and creative manner.

You can actively engage research participants in the data collection process by asking them to draw their perceptions, feelings, or a situation instead of using verbal description. If you are interested in the context in which they live, you might ask them to draw a picture of their house or neighborhood or a map of their city (Coppersmith, 1980; Moelino, Anggal, & Piercy, in press). For example, in an effort to understand the streetlife of rural Indonesian at-risk youth, Moelino, Anggal, and Piercy (in press) asked the youth to create maps of their neighborhoods and indicate what activities (prostitution, drug deals, etc.) took place where. If you want to know about people's perceptions of their family's history, you might have them draw a picture of their family or create a family tree labeling family members according to certain characteristics (e.g., history of depression, substance abusers, ethnicity, educational level, etc.). You can also gather information about research participants' perceptions of some event by asking them to draw something symbolic that represents the event to them. For example, when I asked a group of participants to draw a reflection of their work with HIV/AIDS prevention, one woman drew a bridge to symbolize the path of education from "uninformed" to "safe and educated."

Qualitative researchers might also be interested in interactional processes. Researchers can use drawings as enactments, that is, activities in which they observe participants working together and take note of communication style, conflict resolution, teamwork, roles, rules of interactions, etc. Adapting the art therapy exercises used by Wadeson (1972), researchers could ask a specific group of participants to draw a joint picture (of anything) without talking to one another (to assess nonverbal communication and conflict resolution skills), individual self-portraits which each gives to the other to edit and complete (to understand each person's perceptions of self and another), an individual abstract of the relationship (to assess views of the relationship), a mural which reflects all of their experiences separately yet as a whole, or scribbles/free drawings (as data about interests, feelings, ideas).

In addition to drawings, researchers can gather information through activities such as painting, clay sculpting, or other creative constructions. Research participants may choose to paint instead of draw, or even create a setting or symbol with clay. They might use clay to physically represent

a map or neighborhood or to create a three-dimensional representation of their thoughts or feelings about a specific topic. In one research study, the researcher asked participants to create life-size collages or representations of their lives, which others could view through an actual window (the director set-up a temporary wall with windows set in it ten feet back from the wall where the participants displayed their collages). The participants were then able to describe their lives by creating a scene with various media and pictures and then supplementing their creation with their own reactions and words. Furthermore, observers were also able to react to the scenes and share their own stories and meanings about what they saw. Literally, others were able to interact with the collages and various dialogues took place.

With all of the above examples, my hope is to inspire readers to find ways in which research participants can use their creativity and actively engage in sharing information through drawing and art. Additionally, art and drawing are expressive ways that children can provide information to researchers and serve as participants in the research (Kwiatkowska, 1978; Willmuth & Boedy, 1979). Further, art is not only a way to gather information, but it can be an actual therapeutic or interventive experience for research participants. Art is a way to capture participants' experiences in vivo, rather than through words alone.

Metaphors

Similar to drawings, research participants can use metaphors to describe their experiences, feelings, or specific events. Metaphors allow people to describe one thing using an analogy of another (Cade, 1982). When researchers ask participants to describe something in metaphors, participants have more freedom to use their creativity and own experiences to reflect on the specific topic; they leave established mental sets to think of the topic in a new and varied way (Cade, 1982). Language develops different meaning as words become more vivid and we capture moods and interpretations in metaphors. In essence, we create verbal pictures through metaphors, while at the same time making room for new insights on an old topic (Confer, 1987; Kopp, 1995).

There are a variety of metaphors a researcher can elicit. The researcher, for example, can ask participants to describe themselves, each other, or certain events as colors, styles of music or specific song titles, television shows or characters, fairytales, movies, household objects, foods, shapes, modes of transportation, sounds, book titles, toys, games, or articles of clothing. The researcher can then ask participants about why they chose their metaphors and what they symbolize. For example, a researcher studying the grieving process might ask participants to describe their grief as if it were some kind of moving object or cycle. To study adolescents' perceptions of their parents, the researcher could ask them to describe their families in terms of a popular song, style of music, or book. In a meeting of AIDS service workers, I asked each person to describe their work in terms of a television show or movie. One participant moved the group to tears as she described her work as the show "Touched By an Angel." She popped in and out of people's lives always hoping to have made a difference, but knowing that their fate was not up to her. This person's creative example had a synergistic effect as others in the group started discussing the difficulties and rewards of their work in relation to media analogies. I, as the researcher, gathered abundant information about the personal experiences of these individuals

through their metaphors. For any research, metaphors can be an engaging, vivid way to gather information that is meaningful to both the researcher and participants.

Writing Exercises

When we think of using writing as a method of qualitative research, we usually think of open-ended questions on a survey. However, there are other writing activities researchers can use that are not ordinary or monotonous to gather information from participants. Researchers can ask participants to keep journals of their daily activities or feelings, and then use these journals as one way to understand and describe participants' and their lives (Symon, 1998). Researchers can also request that participants keep logs of certain activities, memories, or dreams as a way to gather information.

Incomplete prompts are words or beginnings of sentences or stories ("prompts") that researchers can ask participants to finish with their own ideas. With incomplete sentences, researchers ask participants to fill in their thoughts for a list of unfinished sentences that relate to the topic of study. For example, "When I was in the hospital, I felt. . ."; "The hardest time in my life was. . ."; "The turning point was when. . .". Researchers can also give participants topics to write on or titles for stories and then ask participants to use their creative writing skills to write the story. In studying rural farm families, a researcher might ask the family to write a story on "The challenges of farm life that most people never realize." Or, to study reactions to a devastating flood, a researcher might ask participants to tell a story titled, "Lessons for Recovering." Finally, researchers can ask participants to write about headlines in newspapers that reflect current events ("The Future Direction of Our Community" , "One Family's Reaction to the Tragedy"), or classified ads for specific desires ("Perfect Parent Wanted: Qualifications:. . .", "Perfect Job. . .", etc.). In a focus group with children going through various family crises, I asked each child to tell me about himself or herself by creating the front page of their local newspaper and writing the headlines and stories of their lives. The children enjoyed the process and were very open to describing the crises that were happening in their families as "news events", while I gathered much information about the children's perceptions of their family crises and current events.

Writing is one way for participants to tell their stories (Gilbert, 1993; Oskowitz & Meulenberg-Buskens, 1997). One of the greatest benefits of writing exercises is that research participants actually give the researcher their stories and words in an exact form. The words are directly from the participants and reflect their stories. On the downside, participants must be willing and able to write down their stories and take the time to develop them.

Timelines

Often qualitative researchers are interested in changes over time, history, and developmental processes. Timelines are one way that researchers can document such events. Together with participants, researchers can create timelines of specific family histories, program histories, historical developments and events, and contextual factors contributing to change. One human services program tracked its history and development by creating a timeline on the wall of the major events that occurred in the program. The employees tacked up news releases, program brochures, pictures of meetings, minutes, etc. as they occurred chronologically. They were then

able to actually see where periods of progress occurred and analyze periods of "quiet." They could discuss the successes and shortcomings of the program's development as they actually viewed it through time.

Duhl ([1981](#)) discusses the use of a chronological chart to track major family events and compare family members' reactions to them. Researchers can gather information about births, deaths, marriages, divorces, job history, education, relocations, immigrations, etc. It is important in any research to understand the context in which the events or topics we are studying occur. Timelines are simple and easy ways to organize this information and analyze the impact of context on current life.

Videography & Photography

When we use qualitative research as a means to really understand some event or peoples' lives, we are trying to create a vivid picture in others' minds that reflects that which we are studying. What better way to show others what/who we study than by actually *showing* them? Photographs and videos can be excellent ways to disseminate qualitative data. Researchers can take videos or pictures of the settings they are studying, the people involved (with their permission of course), the events that occur, and the situations they experience. Television proves this: what makes more of an impact, hearing about children suffering in other countries or seeing their faces and the environments in which they live? Researchers might choose to take photographs of a family throughout their day, depicting the daily goings-on of the family, or they might collect photos of weddings in an effort to describe the cultural traditions around this family milestone. That is the heart of qualitative data, actually "seeing" the big picture.

In conjunction with a participatory philosophy, researchers can ask participants to create videos or photo albums that depict their lives or specific events. In a project in Indonesia, youths created a video to teach others about their high-risk environments related to HIV/AIDS (Moelino, Anggal, & Piercy, [in press](#)). This video gave researchers abundant data about the lives of these youths on the streets. Other researchers have used photographs and video clips in presentations to funding agencies and agency boards as a way to acquaint them with the populations and problems under study.

Psychodrama & Role Plays

Researchers can use psychodrama and role-plays to enact specific interactions and events. Within psychodrama, people express their thoughts and feelings in spontaneous and dramatic ways through the use of role-playing (Blatner, [1973](#); Greenberg, [1974](#); Moreno, [1964](#)). For example, researchers can ask participants to re-enact a specific event or interaction that they describe as life-changing or pivotal in relation to the issue they are studying. In a study of family rituals at bedtime, a researcher could ask families to role-play their usual behaviors. Researchers can assess the perceptions of different participants by asking them to direct the interaction as they each see it and then discuss how each of their experiences is different.

Researchers who study families can ask them to re-enact holidays, a typical day, dinner table interactions, daily rituals, a vacation, or any other event that might provide a window into the

dynamics of the family (Leveton, [1992]). Researchers can assess how the family communicates, who maintains the power, how members attract or repel each other, who gets the attention, who does what, how problems begin, and what meaning the family attaches to various interactions.

With a group of adolescents, my colleague and I transformed the typical focus group into a "talk-show." We assigned one youth the role of "host" and gave him a list of particular topics and questions to ask the guest "experts" panel and audience. Others then volunteered to be the "expert" guests whom the host interviewed about the topic we were studying. The remainder of the youth served as audience members, raising their hands to comment on questions and react to the opinions of the "experts." While this looked like a role-play, we were able to gather important information about real life for these youths.

Although role-plays and dramas can seem fake and contrived, they can also give researchers information that is only attainable through direct observation of an event (or re-created event). Further, when researchers watch role-plays they can generate questions about specific interactions that they can then inquire about later.

Analyzing, Interpreting, & Presenting the Data

The data that is produced and gathered through these active methods can be analyzed and interpreted as data collected through most other means. The researcher analyzes the created products and the participants' interpretations, reflections, and reactions to them for themes, categories, quotes, etc. For example, the researcher might analyze the commonalties and distinctions between the family sculptures of various adolescents. Or, if studying the familial traditions around weddings, the researcher might analyze wedding photographs or videos for common interactions, rituals, or events. Finally, to analyze drawings, a researcher might look for ways to categorize the drawings or objects in the drawings (by color, by amount of detail, by the subject in the drawing, by the mood of the drawing, by various sizes of people in the drawings, etc.) and then use constant comparison to compare the different meanings participants attributed to their drawings.

The key is that the researcher also needs to be overt about his/her own interpretations of the products (artwork, photographs, sculptures, and so on) and should clarify his/her own reactions from those of the participants. At the same time, since the researcher and participants can actively engage in these processes together, it is important to include the researcher's perceptions and experiences as data that has influenced and co-created the results.

In reports and presentations, researchers can then use these "tangible results" as examples of the research findings. With permission of the participants, researchers can actually show their audiences what they studied and the data they gathered. Researchers and their audiences can physically interact with the data and react to it, creating more data and dialogue about the topic of interest.

Limitations

The methods I discussed above are not meant to be used in every context and for every research purpose. Rather, they are ways to broaden the context of data gathering in order to make the process interesting and engaging for all involved. Clearly, researchers need to assess whether these methods would enhance the process or limit or detract from it, according to the issue and population they are studying. For example, with families with children, such methods might make the process seem less monotonous and more interesting. However, people who feel self-conscious or shy or studies focused on highly sensitive topics (such as sexual abuse) may not lend themselves as well to such methods as sculpture, role-playing, or artwork. Further, if the researcher is unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the method, the participants will detect this and the researcher and research may lose credibility. In sum, these methods can enliven the research process when they are used effectively and with good reason.

Conclusion

Qualitative research can be systematic and rigorous and still be innovative, creative, and actively dynamic. Researchers can integrate the methods I discuss in this paper in interviews, focus groups, or case studies, or simply use these methods on their own. The goal is to make research engaging for everyone involved, while at the same time capturing the real experiences of dynamic, multi-dimensional, living systems such as families.

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