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VISUAL ANALYSIS AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CONCEPT

Challenges of research application of qualitativity

Research standards are often quite unclear, and entail numerous unresolved inner problems - professional, as well as problems which are in their nature and content methodological and epistemological. This is why qualitative researchers sometimes have problems finding a definitive answer in their research practice, and cannot make many methodological questions and concerns clear for themselves. Research questions in the processes of designing methodological approaches and other methodological aspects, therefore remain inconclusive, unclear and ambiguous.

On the other hand, qualitative approaches, research strategies, and the implementation of qualitative methods, techniques and procedures have become more dominant and frequently used, even preferred in some academic and professional circles, and almost established themselves as a sort of separate methodological paradigm. This is why completely different strategic situations in empirical researches have occurred, in which some researchers faced the unknown by implementing already well-known research methods, while others also faced the unknown, but by using new methodological tools.

Qualitative researcher will try to observe the phenomenon in its natural surroundings, trying to give it a meaning, and he will interpret it in accordance with the meanings which were given to it by the respondents or observed research subjects. Other essential characteristic of implementation of qualitativity is related to social contextualization of phenomenon which is the subject of the research. This means that the researcher places them in a certain concrete space and time-frame.

All this enables the researcher to give more detailed descriptions, which can be a basis for establishing new theoretical statements, theories, or theoretical approaches. Ultimately, this results in deeper, more suitable, and broader understanding of research subjects.

However, in conducting a qualitative research, one can encounter some unpredictable methodological difficulties, ranging from sometimes questionable nature of the research results, to their excessive volume, all of which can lead to questionable and vulnerable interpretability, etc.

Nevertheless, the future of qualitative research projects is definitely not questionable, and we are not talking about a passing trend, some methodological fashion, or random methodological choices.

Visualization of social life

Considering more intense methodologization of a number of research concepts, there is an active debate among social scientists about a need to enrich and more intensely develop methods from different field disciplines. Alongside these processes scientists inevitably made numerous new developments, not only in methods and methodological approaches (orientations and strategies), but also in new theories, new theoretical settings, and relating to aforementioned, changes within existing methodological paradigms.

Implementing visuality as a research subject, while simultaneously developing visual methods, techniques and procedures, raised intense discussions about visual research as a separate type or kind of empirical research in the field of humanities. However, some debates are solely focused on using photographs as analytical or methodological tools in such researches or analyses. Still, it is undisputed that we can already talk about an established and existent **visual methodology**, as a perspective methodological sub-discipline or a scientific branch of methodology.

Researchers are beginning to focus on observing visual dimensions of culture and social life, which raises debates about perspectives of **visual research** as a type of qualitative research that could and should become more productive, and adequate for the social reality. Although, even as early as the 1980s, there was a significant change in social sciences, where a recognisable context was (re)defined, in which pictures were for the first time recognized as empirical information, and as research data, which then become empirical facts.

At the same time, other methodological concepts, not only visual, are developed, and similar research methods appeared. They were based on collecting empirical data through conversation, modelling life histories and biographies, and implementing observational techniques and similar qualitative procedures, which were especially developed on the field defined by very important qualitative element of the researcher's approach.

However, it is possible to conclude that the growth and methodological enrichment of various research disciplines can be seen in the development and intensified implementation of visual researches, which change their status within the scientific community, especially the one that articulates methodological questions and problems, putting them in the focus of their rare discussions, but also considerations of potential and perspective trends.

In these methodological contexts, other than words and concepts, we can now observe pictures, photographs, drawings, cognitive "maps", film and audio tapes, and other forms of (empirical) data, used as relevant research results in new, or partially forgotten, or methodological and analytical tools / techniques / procedures known by a different name.

In any case, we can witness overall **visualisation of social life**. This is why implementing visual research and methods can reveal many aspects of this social world and objective reality. Understanding all these social processes / occurrences / relations that are visualised, will be enabled by researchers and strategies of research institutes. Besides, the nature of visual research is *per definitionem* interdisciplinary. Therefore, the use of qualitative materials / data / techniques in visual research is inevitable, necessary and expected.

In these contexts, we can discuss the development of **visual culture**, while simultaneously devising its research and methodological concepts and needs. This cultural domain could be interpreted as a sustainable social domain. Some new forms of visibility and visual experiences can be developed within it, because we should not forget about the boom in development of new mediums, which are capable to present, design and pluralistically enrich new forms of the visual.

Moreover, any analyst will gladly accept the advancement in possibilities within which it would be relevant to combine, then integrate data of different type and content, e.g., visual and audio with verbal, etc. Knowing that the visual communicates in different ways and in different methodological levels than, for example, the verbal, these possibilities in combining potent data will enrich analytical tasks, and in more different directions orient its own research thoughts / stories / projects / strategies.

In addition, in estheticizing visuality we can expect interferences from politics, assertion of ideologies, as well as a number of other cultural influences and impacts, associated with the existence of different forms of sociality. Because different visual messages and informations transmit different political, ideological or cultural messages, whereas they are used by a number of different studies, from ethnographical and anthropological, to cultural, linguistic, sociolinguistic, etc. All these social constructions can even provoke in their sociality, even imply or form social conflicts, etc., as they can ultimately homogenize, unite and integrate.

Methodological originality of visual analysis

The originality of each visual research project is undeniable. Researchers, in their interpretations of the research findings acquired through visual analysis or procedures, often emphasize the fact that their visualizations “tell a story of their own”, implying that the visual speech has this unique power. Still, it is the researchers who construct these interpretative images. On the other hand, we have the viewers, readers and other consumers of the research findings, who actually individually process the presented visualizations, by using some details to focus on some elements of their own memories, experiences, imagination, or some other creation. Schegloff (1988) comments similarly in his discussions about sociologising content, emphasizing the meaning of typicality in using these details.

Namely, we are talking about discussions in which the use of photographs as analytical units of content or units of observation, is transformed or interpreted as potential affirmative advantage among researchers.

Visual analyst will, as a qualitative researcher in each of his (visual) analysis as a representative of the qualitative school / orientation / approach and in the contexts of qualitative paradigm, methodologically form his research project as a continuous (processual) creation of research material, and its monitoring and simultaneous analysing the empiric thus constructed.

These visual pictures / stories / narratives are certainly interpretative, so for example, if we are talking about a cultural research subject, it is possible that they can be socially engaged, even socially more sensitive in some of their manifesting social aspects or activities.

Ethno-methodologists can have special benefits in their projects of these perceptions of empirical data, because visual analysis can handle diverse signs, maps, diagrams, and a number of other symbolic tools. Besides photographs, we have advertisements, posters, some film

devices, and innumerable dimensions and aspects of everyday life, such as elements of human behaviour, and in that context body language, clothing, jewellery, numerous communicative elements, from facial expressions to eye (or some other body part) contacts, etc. Visualisations can be used in a great measure in constructing identities as research subjects, or as analysis subjects focusing on processes of constructing certain profiles/ types, and similar (i.e. types of social behaviour), profiling the culture of dressing or behaviour, etc.

Visual analysts can find their empirical data in various spaces, which is attractive to architects, social ecologists, environment sociologists, urban sociologists, urban planners, and others. They all deal with space, analysing it using visualising different interactions within social groups and between individuals, their movements, coordination, established contacts and similar connections. This actually means that in these visualisation processes, they will analyse what they witnessed as researchers, or what other collaborators of the research witnessed.

Therefore, they analyse that which can be seen and visible, by visualising variables such as space, location, public, and others, that were professionally defined as visible (manifested) dimensions of social life or sociability, and that are the ones they focus on in these visual analyses.

This is why visual informations in these analyses have to be numerous and various, so every profession will form their own categorical apparatus, and perform specific processes of operationalisation. Because every type or category of visual data will be contextualised in a different manner, depending on the intention of the analyst and their main goal, which in qualitative analyses comes down to determining the meaning of the phenomenon / relationships and everything they researched.

This actually means that every analyst will first and foremost act as a researcher, because they will in their conceptualisations deal with visual data, converting them to research results, and later on, empirical facts. Many potential influences on redefining existing theoretical claims or models are undisputed, until now codified in a scientific branch, field or discipline. Here, we can recognize numerous possibilities in formulating new, alternative hypotheses, as well as new and original theoretical claims or even more complete theories.

Context is an important methodological determinant in any qualitative analysis, but especially in visual analysis, processes of contextualisation will be the determining orientation to the analyst, for the direction as well as the order of analysing visual data, regardless of their type or the meaning they imply. Clearly, all this occurs in the setting of interpretative logic,

even in a logical order the analyst will set for himself in his visualisations. Furthermore, all other outside elements and contextual influences that dimensionalize the observed everyday life, its ethnography or some other socio-elements of the contemporary will here be in a feedback loop.

Dimensionality of visual data is also one of the qualitative characteristics a visual analyst will observe. Depending on dimensional structure of empirical data, the analyst can perceive their two or three-dimensionality, but they will always do so within the range of research possibilities of reaching conclusions on some aspects of social behaviour, or cultural actions, etc. So, a statue in a social environment can have a cultural meaning, and those observing it, watching it, or just walking past it, visually express their relationships with the statue, or their understanding of its cultural reach, they can even explicit their own ideas and viewpoints of its value, etc. Precisely these passers-by or visitors can use their own visualisations (i.e. photographing the statue) and interactively participate in visual analyses already initiated by others.

Social acceptability of these types of interactions can be developed and multiplied in many future combinations, of visual or other nature (verbal, communication, etc.). Mostly, the majority of visual material is almost always used in interpretative purposes. Depending on the level of personal involvement or analytical level and complexity of these visualisations, the visual data will be structured, classified and typologized. Examples of research studies that used visualisations as the basic analytical procedures or techniques are very illustrative, as are the ones carried out in galleries, museums or other cultural institutions, as a part of a cultural event.

Besides, visual data not only construct some of the dimensions of the real social world, they interpret this reality, and in their specific ways even represent it as a kind of empirical verified data. This verification is always constructive, original, authentic, dynamic..., because it is constructed as a meaning in phases of interpretation. Therefore, it is an analytical construct, and no matter what the subject of the research is, this construct is going to have clear and interpreted meanings in these multiple interpretations, which can only be carried out within and in conceptual frameworks of qualitative, as one of the eminent methodological paradigms.

Visual sociologists will insist on being critical in methodological approach to visual representations of the social world and reality. These visual representations interpret the reality, explaining its many meanings, and often discover some dysfunctional individual or group or

collective experiences. We could discuss the **visual paradigm** as a methodological construct here, more than one of the methodological categories.

Moreover, the sight, visual ability, visual symbolism and semantics, have been used as research variables in numerous and various empirical researches, by a number of different professions. In a series of theories, visual dimensions of social practices have been introduced, so the researchers have been telling themselves and others, that visualisations of these research objects enable them to draw very reasonable, well-founded and productive generalizations.

This is why it is possible to treat visual analysis as a type of interpretative “sketch” that is abundant in detailed descriptions of a number of different stories about individuals, groups, organisations, events, etc. These outlines are a valuable contribution to social researches, whose research subjects are *a priori* treated as fragmented, problematic, unsuitable to human living, etc.

We should still point out that visualisations as analytical processes, and visual analysis as a research concept, are methodological concepts that have to be construed mechanically in a social sense, and they contain some psychological, even biological dimensions that are possessed by the analyst. Ultimately, he lives, works and creates in a world and environment that he can observe and visualize as a culturally determined structure by himself, that forces him to construct some based, already well-known and defined categories. Actually, he or she is already determined by their cultural identities by themselves (Spencer, 2011).

Although visual analyses today can be treated as a relevant research concept, applicable in everyday research practice, there are still those who will resoundingly and energetically put these analyses, as qualitative innovations of recent date, outside the scope of **visual methodology** as a new and separate methodological discipline. This will be contradicted by the researchers who will confidently use visualisation as an analytic procedure or research concept in applied research and analysis, i.e. (visual, non-verbal, etc.) communication, then (visual) culture, etc.

In conclusion, visual analysis is only one of numerous qualitative possibilities of methodological reflection, understanding and researching the contemporary society, its relationships, occurrences and developmental perspectives.

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