

THEMATIC METHODOLOGY

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Using a thematic methodology in qualitative research offers opportunities to expand the already established horizons of knowledge. What is learned may reveal something that has been unknown or it may correct or expand what is already known. It is a way to simultaneously deepen and enrich the heights/depths of personal and collective knowledge and to expand forward/backward comprehension. As personal learning deepens so at the same time collective knowledge about human nature grows and expands. By revealing both personal and structural aspects of experience a harmony is achieved, transcending the opposition and bridging the gap between personal and collective knowledge. This is accomplished by an intensification of attention. Until now, this approach has remained only a theoretical philosophical proposition first offered by Pierre Thévenaz. Thévenaz suggests that rather than coming to know oneself *only* through one's relation to others and objects, that is, through intentionality it is possible to become conscious of oneself directly. This is reflexive consciousness and Thévenaz argues that reflexive consciousness is the ground for intentionality rather than the other way around. When this reversal in the priority of the functions of consciousness is applied in a research methodology a shift in emphasis naturally emerges.

Simultaneously expanding the horizons of already established understanding and transcending oppositions means that the horizons of consciousness itself are stretched and expanded. From this expansion an enhanced and enriched understanding emerges. It becomes visible and available. This does not happen by reducing or bracketing experience. Rather than finding the bones, the structures of experience alone, it becomes possible to see the dynamics, the acts of meaning constitution, that is, consciousness of self-in-expression. The original meaning of the experience by the self-in-action and how it moves through reflective consciousness, the dynamics of experience as it happens, can be reached.

When a person describes an experience there emerges some understanding and comprehension of what that situation means for the person who has described it. This includes guiding and supportive leitmotifs of meaning. These motifs of meaning may not be explicitly stated but become visible and identifiable. They are guides to meaning and run through the description, flowing through the story as it unfolds much as water flows through the terrain. Motifs of meaning describe emerging themes, they may appear, disappear and reappear later, strengthening particular aspects, leading to increased understanding, deepening and enriching comprehension. They are revealed in a spontaneous expression of the self as it is personally

comprehended. People describe experience as they have lived it and understand its personal meaning by its impact and effect.

There are three methodological movements in this thematic methodology. The first is identifying Experiential Expressions.

1) Experiential Expressions

Beginning research with Experiential Expressions provides access to what is given, how it is given and to whom it is given. When a person describes an experience, the description contains a meaning matrix that is specific to that person. But it also contains social and cultural aspects. Meaning is embedded within this matrix. By staying with the expression as it is given, it is possible to stay close to the meaning of the experience as it comes into expression. Experiential Expressions reveal patterns and boundaries to meaning that may be taken-for-granted. At the same time they point to contours that outline a wider social context. These expressions illustrate emphases that punctuate experience, revealing its mood and tone, that is, the ever-changing variety and inflections of human expression. Because experience always occurs in a situation, in a history, there are assumptions involved that either have or have not been examined. Cultural aspects give shape and form to experience through assumptions that have been learned and taken up without the benefit of reflective thought. They influence the interpretation of one's own situation.

Experiential Expressions are phrases which illustrate how someone experiences and what that experience means. They are recognized by the way they identify a personal style of experience and reveal the way a person has taken up a particular meaning, the way it is lived. They provide a quick glimpse of the person's ongoing experience of consciousness of self-in-action. Acts that constitute particular meanings are creative acts. Each act establishes the person in a unique style of becoming which is recognizable and identifiable while still sharing some characteristics with others. They can be short expressions or sentences which convey qualitative dimensions, including attitudinal statements, identifying personal beliefs, revealing values or giving expression to other thoughts or impressions. When seen together, Experiential Expressions reveal patterns of meaning.

Prior knowledge and experience are the experiential referents to current self-understanding. They reveal thematic groups and patterns of meaning in their relationship to each other. Experiential Expressions in each description, stand out in ways which, when seen together, represent not only the person who provided them but describe some aspect of collective knowledge and understanding. Emerging out of these cultural and social contexts, Experiential Expressions express an internal dialectic between the

personal and the self-other-world. These expressions, when grouped together into natural meaning constellations provide opportunities for amplification.

The advantage of this thematic methodology is that it provides access to these dynamics of meaning constitution while revealing one's grasp of consciousness of self-in-expression. It shows how things work. In this method immediate experience is revealed in personal expression and shines through in the findings. Experiential Expressions provide the first glimpse of personal meaning, a nexus of meaning that opens up to thematic amplification.

2) Thematic Amplification

The second movement, Thematic Amplification, is a focusing and deepening of the thematic meaning first identified by Experiential Expressions. Amplifying thematic meaning expands it to reveal what resides within the experience, those personal and social referents which guide personal choice and action. This movement also stays close to rather than moves away from the original feel of the description and remains specific rather than abstract. This differs from other methods that reduce experience, thereby taking apart the initial impressions of experience, disturbing the image and destroying intuitive understanding. Amplification of the atmospheric qualities of experience resound its meaning and preserve its dynamic quality.

Thematic amplification is a becoming, an inclusive movement in consciousness, intensifying, revealing an expressive flow. This is an effort of concentrated attention as an act of will. Becoming conscious of what is present is an action that requires concentrated effort. Amplification of themes conserves and expands subtle nuances and intuitive vibrations that often give shape and form to that which stands out in a person's expression.

Experiential Expressions are retained through the movement of Thematic Amplification as a way of staying in close touch with and making clear the experiential referents to specific action. Amplification of consciousness works somewhat like time-lapsed photography where slowing down time reveals processes which cannot be seen by a single grasp of the human eye. For example, microphotography opens up the temporal processes and a whole new world is revealed to exist inside another. This thematic methodology is similar in its effect. Intensifying the attention of the researcher reveals not only what an experience is but also identifies its relation to a self-in-action. Expanding the attention can only be done through an effort, increasing the focus upon what is immediately given. What is thereby revealed is included in ever-widening and deepening horizons of meaning, becoming expansive while preserving within it the specificity of the experience, the unique and personal. This shift in research attention

deepens and clarifies what is already known, it offers a way to see the workings of experience, the dynamics of meaning constitution as it emerges in personal action. It allows access to the immediate grasp of consciousness of self, that is, the emergence of the dynamics of meaning constitution.

3) Reflective Synthesis

In the third movement, Reflective Synthesis, the researcher again reviews the flowing and unfolding meaning that unifies into an overarching, inclusive synthesis. This is a reflective distance, a stepping back to allow a panoramic vision. This is achieved by returning to the projects, goals and objectives in the situated context, maintaining reference points that resound what has been revealed in a fully informed understanding. A Reflective Synthesis does not provide the definition of a phenomenon but culminates in a transcendence of the opposition between structural and personal meaning, it unifies. It is a mutually enriching dialogue, synthetic and synergistic.

Through the movement of Reflective Synthesis the researcher arrives at a comprehensive understanding, allowing a smooth transition from implicit to explicit and from explicit to implicit meaning. The shading of meaning, the obscure feeling qualities in dialogue combined with supportive patterns of structure allow the experience to be seen in its wholeness and to place it within the wider social/cultural and temporal contexts. The particular is preserved within the universal. This comprehensive understanding enables the researcher to relate findings to existing theory, to compare and contrast and make distinctions.

Concluding Remarks

This view of thematic methodology emerging from the amplifying complexity of consciousness first establishes one's immediate and explicit relationship to self and secondly, one's relationship to objects. This means that one now interprets intentionality on the basis of reflexion.

Notes

- 1) Pierre Thévenaz, *What is Phenomenology?: and other Essays*, trans. James M. Edie, Charles Courtney and Paul Brockelman, ed., intro. James M. Edie, preface John Wild (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), pp. 113-132.