

Research and meaning



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Meaning in research

As a research aim

To explore / elucidate / illuminate / uncover / understand the **meaning** of a phenomenon or experience

As a research method

To identify themes by analysing interview transcripts for (common) **meanings**

As an aim

- to uncover an understanding of the **meaning** of quality for practising nurses
- to elucidate the **meaning** of pedagogical practice
- to illuminate the **meaning** of fear of falling in a daily-life context

As a method

- These in-depth interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed for common **meanings**...
- Transcripts of audio recordings were analysed for themes and fundamental **meanings**...
- The interview transcripts were analysed for common **meanings** and recurrent themes...

Questions one might ask

- What kind of thing is a meaning?
- Why would you want one?
- How is it "elucidated" or "illuminated"?
- What would you do with it?

Methodologists on meaning

The "inside" of "outside" behaviour

Weber

A certain way of directing one's gaze at an item of one's own experience

Schutz

Reality is a construction in the minds of individuals, with meanings being attached to the phenomenon

Lincoln & Guba

We must engage language in a primal incantation of poetising which harkens back to the silence from which words emanate

Van Manen

Example from a methodologist



Amedeo Giorgi

The structure of jealousy

Steps in Giorgi's method

- Read the descriptions to get the overall sense
- Establish meaning units
- Transform the meaning units
- Formulate the structure of the phenomenon

Meaning transformation

Meaning units are expressed in language “revelatory of the psychological aspect of the lived-through experience.”

This requires “a heightened articulation of the psychological aspect of each meaning unit”.

The transformation’s main purpose is “to describe carefully the intuitive psychological senses that present themselves to the consciousness of the researcher.”

Transformation method

“It would have lengthened this section unduly to demonstrate how the transformations were worked out and such detailed work properly belongs in a workbook or practice manual. It is important for the reader to know that the analysis requires discipline and many attempts at getting the right expression.”

Example transformation

7. Later it got worse. He didn't know any of the people in the lunch group that he went out with. P_1 found out from other friends that were together with them, that one woman in the group was flirting with him over lunch.

P_1 states that the situation got worse for her. While P_1 's new close friend was unfamiliar with the people with whom he went to lunch, P_1 found out from other friends that were present at lunch that a particular woman was demonstrating romantic interest in her new close friend.

Example transformation

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P_1 states that the situation got worse for her. While P_1 's new close friend was unfamiliar with the people with whom he went to lunch, P_1 found out from other friends that were present at lunch that a particular woman was demonstrating a romantic interest in her new close friend.

Heightened articulation

How do the expressions in the second column express the “psychological aspect” of the experience in a “heightened articulation”? How do they “bring forth” the psychological **meaning** of each unit? How is the participant’s “phenomenal world rendered more visible”.

- Synonyms
- Minor syntactic modifications
- “was flirting with” =
“was demonstrating a romantic interest in”

More examples

each happily married to their spouses	both in happy marriages with their spouses	[omitted]
had a cold	was a bit under the weather and fatigued	<i>[column blank]</i>
felt abandoned	felt like he deserted her	[omitted]
secretly hoping	covertly wishing	secretly entertaining the... wish
the same woman	the very woman	<i>[column blank]</i>
continued to flirt	continued displaying romantic behaviours	<i>[column blank]</i>

Example from a methodologist



Amedeo Giorgi

Corpus linguistics

British National Corpus	100 million words
Corpus of Contemporary American English	450 million words
Google Books: American English	155 billion words



<http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal/>

Collocates of “means” and “meaning”

means + *that*

means + *participle*

means + *comparative adjective*

means + *quantity noun*

means + to + *be*

means + to + *me*

meaning + of + *general concept*

meaning + of + *particular event*

Means + that

- A fault in the drying cycle **means that** the machine overheats.
- An hour-a-week meeting **means that** there's not adequate communication.
- Jesus' resurrection **means that** we will not die, not in the eternal sense.

Means + *participle*

- A cure **means giving** up drugs.
- Horses need ample fresh water, which **means keeping** water troughs clean and filled.
- To see things differently **means changing** ourselves in some way.

Means + *comparative quantity adjective*

- Tourism is still down; that **means fewer** jobs and lower wages.
- Being a breastfeeding mother also **means less** ovarian cancer and fewer hip fractures
- Scarce ice **means fewer** perches from which polar bears can search for seals.

Interchangeable constructions

- To see things differently **means changing** ourselves in some way.
To see things differently **means that** we have to change ourselves in some way.
- Tourism is still down; that **means fewer** jobs and lower wages.
Tourism is still down; which **means that** there will be fewer jobs and lower wages.
- Horses need ample fresh water, which **means keeping** water troughs clean and filled.
- Horses need ample fresh water, which **means that** water troughs clean and filled.

“Means” as an inference marker

- Seeing things differently
Therefore, changing ourselves in some way
- Horse need ample fresh water
Therefore, keeping water troughs clean and filled
- Tourism is still down
Therefore, fewer jobs and lower wages
- Jesus’ resurrection
Therefore, we will not die, not in the eternal sense

Means *that*
means + *participle*,
Means + *comparative quantity adjective*

- An inference
 - Practical
 - Cause and effect
- Presupposes a background theory/belief.
This theory is usually causal or quasi-causal
- Belief may or may not be shared by others

Collocates of “means” and “meaning”

means + *that*

means + *participle*

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means + *quantity noun*

means + to + *be*

means + to + *me*

meaning + of + *general concept*

meaning + of + *particular event*

“Meaning + of + *general concept*”

- The **meaning** of marriage is the union of a man and a woman
- The unitive **meaning** of marriage cannot be separated from the procreative
- To create a gay marriage is change the **meaning** of marriage
- All heterosexuals in this state have been deprived of the basic **meaning** of marriage



“Means” and “meaning” are **inference** markers, based on a background **beliefs**, often involving **causal** theories.

The background belief is one that others may or may not **share**.

The inference may be **practical**, but can also be **causal**.



Methodological
implications?

The meaning?

If this account is correct (and if it is generalizable to other constructions) ...

... there can be no such thing as **the** meaning.

Meaning is an inference based on a **theory** held by the **individual speaker** or writer.

The source of meaning

We tend to think of meaning as an attribute possessed by whatever is said to “mean” or “have meaning”.

But, on this analysis, it is a way of referring to an inference made by somebody.

If the speaker says “X means...” or “the meaning of X is...”, she is not saying that X possesses anything. She is saying that she has a theory, and that this theory warrants (for her) a certain inference.

The source of the “meaning” is not X but the speaker.

The researcher or the participant?

If a researcher seeks to elucidate the meaning of something, the first key thing to get clear about is:

Whose inference-warranting theory are we talking about? The participant's or the researcher's?

Many researchers and methodologists fudge this.

van Manen and Smith, Flowers & Larkin are examples of this kind of ambiguity.

The participant's theory

A wider range of methods is required to identify the participant's background theory.

Traditional "open-ended" questions aren't enough.

People do not have transparent access to their beliefs, especially those that precipitate action.

Researchers can borrow methods from psychology to identify beliefs, theories and attitudes of which the participant may be unaware.

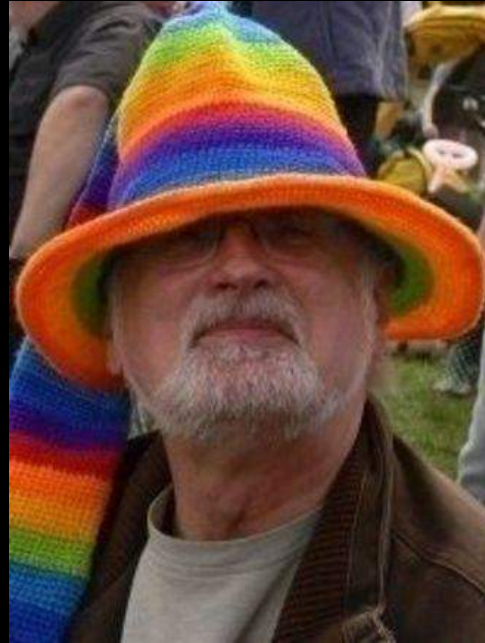
Researcher's theory

A wider range of theories borrowed from psychology and sociology can be used to explain the data.

These theories should be explicit, and used to model and/or explain the data.

The data are the interview responses of the participants. The interview transcript is a topic rather than a resource.

IPA gets closest to this, although Smith, Flowers & Larkin restrict themselves to a very limited range of theories.



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