

39. Visualizing data collection and the presentation of RAP findings: Enhancing qualitative research

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Dr. Kartoglu, a public health specialist and physician, is also an internationally published cartoonist. His talent for communicating visually has led him to begin exploring the potential for using small camcorders for data gathering and communicating results. His conference presentation reflected an experimental but firm commitment to this new tool. He made only a slight attempt to delve into the complex, controversial depths of human perception, but his point was clear - the camcorder holds strong potential in qualitative research. He sees this tool as simple to use, unobtrusive, and an important addition to the tools of qualitative research. He notes that researchers, including those highly committed to visual and auditory observation, often do not give audiences of their research a chance to observe and hear scenes and voices from the field. Dr. Kartoglu has identified an appropriate and potentially valuable tool. It remains to be seen whether this tool will be widely used in RAP and other forms of qualitative research. - Eds.

WE OFTEN FORGET that seeing comes before speaking. We explain the world by words but we see reality. Our beliefs and thoughts always impact on our way of seeing. They also affect our perception of words. How words turn into visual images inside the brain depends on many factors. When we say "fire," one can imagine the fire at the end of a match, a campfire, or a forest fire, or even gunfire. Some words tend to create similar visual images across groups which hear them. The word "pregnancy" creates for most people the visual image of a pregnant woman with a round abdomen. Despite the knowledge of the reality of pregnancy development, few of us, except perhaps the gynecologist think visually of the zygote when we hear the word pregnant. Other concepts like health or happiness generate a wide spectrum of visual images. Thus, when we think of designing effective communication of research data, we need to think of how our words will be seen by our audiences. This leads us toward the arena of data communication.

In a scientific world, data and findings need to be communicated effectively to various audiences and thus applied communication becomes an important part of research. If the results of a successful study cannot be communicated properly, much of the work value is lost.

As we read of work in scientific journals and listen to presentations of studies at conferences, we often face a variety of tables, graphs, diagrams, and charts. These are what we might call "semi-image" forms of presentation. These forms are created to summarize data and usually show quantitative relations. Such data displays can be placed along a range from abstract to concrete. For example, the same data could be depicted using a bar chart, a pie chart, or a more literal diagram or drawing. Another example might be slides which show the setting of a study or examples of various activities of behaviour. None of these visual forms has greater intrinsic

value in terms of communication. However, any one of them might be more appropriate and more effective for a specific audience.

For the policy maker, there is often no time to examine detailed sets of tables, and there may not be a need for him or her to do so depending on the goals of the communication. For example, if data are to be used to show a need for additional resources, or to change a technical strategy that is not working, the findings that demonstrate these needs and issues can be highlighted within a chart or brought out of the chart and made into bold separate illustrations. The "semi-visual images" are used to highlight and bring the most important data to the forefront based on knowledge of a specific audience and the intent of those presenting the data. Another use of the "semivisual image" is to condense or portray highly complex relationships which would be extremely difficult with words alone.

Effectively communicating research data is critical for public information, education, basic knowledge promotion, and to help guide policy, but action is very often neglected. When the social benefits of research are seen they help stimulate an effective demand for more research. For all of these reasons, proper, planned communication needs more attention by researchers.

Health workers, researchers and social scientists who use RAP do not work in laboratories or in clinics. They work in houses and villages with families and communities. By using practical anthropology, they conduct RAP studies of health seeking behaviours. Most information is collected by observation and by listening closely to people. Anthropological methods give researchers a chance of detailed recording in the socio-cultural context where health seeking behaviour appears. Just like bird-watchers, RAP researchers act as "man watchers." During the collection of information, she or he has to use all of her/his senses to examine an object, an individual, a family, a community, or an event. Not only verbal, but all aspects of non verbal postures and gestures are important. The researcher can take notes that will be expanded later the same day. When expanding the field notes the researcher will often add impressions which she/he has observed.

Because sight is dependent not only on our own predilections and what we see, but also on where and when we see an object or event, a variety of tools can help the RAP researcher to gather and interpret data and to present findings and interpretations effectively. One such tool for collection of health related behaviour is photography. Another is the video recorder. Small camcorders can be a powerful tool for data collection.

Cameras may be the easiest way to add life to written notes on human behaviour. Segas Verto, the Soviet film director calls the camera a "mechanical eye." He says,

"The camera opens new windows for us to see new details in human life. It never stops, it moves around and comes closer, zooms out. It can observe from different reference points and can run as fast as a child how each of his movements are developed under different circumstances. It doesn't matter how complicated the behaviour is. It never misses, never lies. It records all actions and sounds simultaneously in a time warp.¹

RAP researchers can record primary interactions using a video camera. They can record physical and human environments, conversations, peripheral interactions, non-verbal cues, and both verbal and non-verbal interviewer behaviours. They can subsequently use what they have recorded for data gathering, data checking, team building, and interviewer improvement. By expanding on brief field notes, the team can review video tape that focuses specifically on non-verbal communication, on postures, and on gestures. These are usually missed because most interviewers focus on only a limited number of visual points such as eyes and hands during interviews and focus groups. By watching the tape the team can re-enter the assessing process and can repeat the viewing several times. Using video allows the team to discuss and evaluate their daily work on a daily basis or later. They can also watch themselves and other members of the team from different perspectives and can criticize themselves and each other. Watching themselves can also serve as a guide for designing interviews and conversations for upcoming activities.

Finally, the videotape obtained in the field can be used to supplement the report of the RAP studies. It helps. The visualization of findings has always complemented report reading and presentation. It also allows readers, and other audiences to become more a part of the study. They become part of the interviewing team and gain a better sense of the credibility of those who provided the data. Again and again, when videotape is used to supplement a report, audiences watch and they listen. Video can also be used to demonstrate to policy makers how the data gathering team worked and collected the data.

Researchers should always consider strongly the use of visuals for data communication in presentations. Videos give the audience the chance to become "TV watchers" instead of "radio listeners."

In conclusion, RAP researchers use anthropological methods to collect data. They need not have a degree in anthropology. It is almost the same for the team who wants to use video. No one needs to be a cameraman or a trained film producer. All he or she needs is the camcorder, an eye to select, a proper place to record the video, and a finger to push the record button. With this in mind, it would do all those working in RAP well to open new doors and windows, so that they can better see the details of human behaviour.

Reference

1. Berger, John. Ways of Seeing. 1973; Viking Press, New York: 160pp.

QUESTION:

How do you communicate effectively with the community? This is critically important for RAP research.

ANSWER:

Community communication is more likely to be effective if the communication techniques and

strategies are planned. Some key points are: 1. honesty, 2. operating at the pace of the community rather than the pace of the donor or the government, or your own cultural definitions of pace, 3. there is an obligation to feed back research results to a community regardless of whether you are going to be able to bring innovations or programmes, and 4. there should be some efforts and procedures for bringing data and information from one community to another and also to bring comments and ideas of policy makers back down to the community from which the data originated (camcorders can help with this).

QUESTION:

Print and electronic media have been emphasized. How can traditional communication channels such as religious leaders, community organizations and traditional leaders be brought into the field of RAP and be used?

ANSWER:

There should be a link between mass media and the traditional community channels through which the rich interpersonal communication of the community flows. There is little likelihood that mass media will bring about behaviour change on its own, but it can prod and remind and introduce new ideas. Trial and adoption are seen as the result of a complex process in which effective work with the community and the communication channels into and within it are critical. RAP can be used to identify and explore these channels and determine how they might effectively be used in social development.

COMMENT:

RAP provides opportunities to take decision makers into the field and, with planning, an abbreviated workshop which is designed as much to provide this type of experience to decision makers has been developed by the UNU.