

***Unplugged* - The Interpreters**

Data we collect and use in organization and management studies look like “cold cases”. We want to offer more conversations, interpretations, arguments, even disputes. The Interpreters is a nexus where academics invite colleagues and friends to analyze and discuss freely an argument, raw data, cases, qualitative materials.

Interpreting aesthetic video data

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INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE DATA AS AN ACT OF SENSEMAKING

Interpreting qualitative data is never easy, even when you have collected them yourself. Interpreting fragments of data, collected by someone else, as part of someone else's study – even if supported by video clips – is particularly difficult.

Interpretative qualitative data is really a search for patterns – patterns that help us bring order into the chaotic flow of observations and experiences that were part of our study; patterns that help us “make sense” of them. According to Weick (1995), we do so by connecting cues (our observations, often in the form of textual data) and frames (the mental categories that are part of our research question and/or the theories we use to guide interpretation). Or by connecting multiple cues to build new frames. This is, in essence, how we “make sense”; this is how we construct meaning.

In qualitative research, meaning is constructed – some may say “imposed” upon the data (Astley, 1985) – as an interpreter envisions connection between them (similarities, differences, sequences, implied causal connections, etc.) or between them and a research question. Working with a handful of brief excerpts, however, makes it less likely for the interpreter to be exposed to “connectable” cues that may support grounded theorizing of a phenomenon. How one brackets the flow of data, what one pays attention to, and how it is framed, therefore, likely reflect one's own interests or past research.

As I read the transcripts I received – I always prefer to start with the text – then, my attention was caught by the difficulties of expressing and articulating aesthetic knowledge (see Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007), which was the subject of a study that Ileana Stigliani, as the principal investigator, and I conducted a few years ago, but managed to publish only recently (Stigliani & Ravasi, forthcoming). Our ethnographic study helped us identify practices, such as cross-mode shifting or the development of an “aesthetic discourse”, that industrial designers use to overcome this difficulty when working in team. In my view, the excerpt I received offered direct insight into micro-level interactions between a team of perfume makers sharing their aesthetic experiences as they “designed” a scent aimed at evoking a particular set of meanings and emotional responses (see Islam, Endrissat & Noppeney, 2016).

These excerpts first reminded me of the subjectivity of aesthetic experience, whereby the same stimulus (in this case, a particular fragrance) may evoke different associations in different people. The two perfume makers, for instance, seemed to disagree on what caramel smelled like – and turn to real world examples to illustrate (“...those caramel bonbons, they are like square, they are like brown, and they are very chewy”). While they seemed to agree on what coconut smelled like, they disagreed about whether they could smell it at all in the fragrance. Some associations were quite personal and/or difficult to grasp for others – possibly recalling multiple sensorial perceptions, as reflected also in the use of synesthetic expressions, such as “I smell hot metal”. Past research suggests that metaphorical language can be used to compensate for the “muteness” (Taylor, 2002) of aesthetic experiences (Strati, 2008). These excerpts point to how the subjectivity of aesthetic experiences makes it difficult to communicate them, even using metaphorical language.

At the same time, it seemed that the process unfolded within a web of conventional (cultural?) associations between fragrances, the objects they alluded to, and the uses and occasions of use (perhaps even users)

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of these objects. For instance, one perfume maker rules out a fragrance (rosemary) on the account that 'that is not a fragrance to wear'. While the explanation remains implicit, one may speculate that the association between rosemary and cooking may make this fragrance inappropriate to other spheres of life (a night out? A date? A Valentine gift?) by evoking associations unwanted in those circumstances. At the same time, makers seemed to rely on conventional associations between objects and emotions to stimulate emotional responses (e.g. calm) through mental associations triggered by aesthetic stimulation (the smell of chamomile). I am not a chemist, but I am not sure it is possible for the mere smell of chamomile to have the neurological effect of the infusion...

My attention was also caught by how the conversation constantly shifted back and forth from evocative and metaphorical language of aesthetics to the language of chemistry, precision, and objectivity – whereby fragrances were described in terms of precise proportions, percentages of chemical ingredients (e.g. "methylate"), etc. The second excerpts revealed the inability to perfectly align the two dimensions – the chemical-analytical and the aesthetic-associative one – as it was not always clear to the makers what part of the formula caused what aesthetic sensation. The ambiguous connections between these two dimensions were also manifested, in the third excerpt, in the surprise of the makers at the unexpected results of changes in the formula. This observation highlights the limited predictability of changes in chemical compositions on the aesthetic outcome of the process.

I found this duality fascinating. It triggered reflections about whether the shifts I observed were unique to this setting, or whether one could theorize the particular characteristics of the technological processes through which scents are developed that induce these exchanges. Could it be, for instance, that they reflect a process where the output (the fragrance) is experienced aesthetically, but the input (the ingredients and their proportions) are determined and 'designed' analytically? Can we find other processes that are similar in this respect? Electronic music? Molecular cuisine? Fashion apparel? I know too little about these settings to speculate, but this seems an interesting avenue for future studies.

More generally, as I progressed through the interactions, I began wondering: Are they really listening to one another? Many expressions of aesthetic experiences and mental associations, are only partially responded to by the other perfume maker – and perhaps they are not even intended to be responded to. As if they were rather a verbalization of an internal mental process, of a train of thought stimulated by the scents. As if hearing their own voices helped makers reflect on their experiences. Which made me wonder about how valuable was the interaction at all. Ileana and I showed how material practices help designers "think together" as they develop new ideas (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). As I read through the excerpts, I asked myself how collective the process really was. To what extent were the makers involved really collaborating, as opposed to being engaged in two, only occasionally intersecting, monologues?

This "messiness" was also reflected in the apparent absence of a linear path and overall vision, the makers' focus on individual aromas, and the apparent absence of tracking of who liked what ("I said there is a coconut chocolate thing in there that I don't like. That's already what I said last time"), which was particularly manifest in the second excerpt. Whether the process followed a clear plan was difficult to discern. Immediate visceral, aesthetic responses seemed to matter more than the focal task. It is possible, however, that this impression reflects the fragmentary nature of the available data, rather than of the process itself. Having the opportunity

to follow interactions as they unfolded throughout the process may reveal patterns that otherwise remain undetectable.

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