

Methods podcast transcript: Johnny Saldaña, Professor Emeritus, Arizona State University's School of Film, Dance and Theatre



Catherine McDonald 0:00

Hello and welcome to Methods a podcast from the National Centre for Research Methods. In this series as part of the EU Horizon 2020 funded Youth Life project, we're looking at how researchers can do better longitudinal research on youth transitions. I'm Catherine McDonald and today I'm talking to Johnny Saldana, Professor Emeritus from Arizona State University's School of Film, Dance and Theatre, and a leading authority on qualitative and qualitative longitudinal methods. Johnny's qualitative methods work has been cited and referenced in 25,000 research studies across over 135 countries. I began by asking him how that makes him feel?

Johnny Saldana 0:43

It certainly overwhelms me to know that my work has had that kind of impact and spread across so many countries in the world. I am in my late 60s now and at that age, I think that a lot of people think about legacy. And so it's very humbling for me to know that my life's work will continue on and that it's had such an impact in the field of qualitative inquiry.

Catherine McDonald 1:11

And before we move on to talk about your qualitative and qualitative longitudinal methods work, I just like to talk a little bit about your areas of expertise, as you list them as arts based research, ethnotheatre and ethnodrama. Can you tell us a bit more about those?

Johnny Saldana 1:28

Well, my original background is in theatre, and English education. So my degrees are focused on teacher education, kindergarten through 12th grade, specifically in theatre, and in English language arts. When I went into qualitative research, I was actually quite intrigued to learn that there had already been a body of literature that discussed topics such as performance ethnography, that discuss things such as arts based research. And so it was wonderful to find those tribes that I could connect with and to review the literature of how I use theatre as a way of representing and presenting my research. I've done some plays, that were adapted from field notes and interview transcripts, ranging all the way from homeless youth in pre-Katrina New Orleans, to adapting the written works of educational ethnographer Harry F Wolcott, and doing a case study of a young man and his love for theatre. So it's a fascinating blend. I say that being an artist has made me a better researcher. And being a researcher has made me a better artist. Artists are trained to think conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically. And so those three ways of looking at life come in actually quite handy when it comes time to analysing qualitative data in narrative and visual form.

Catherine McDonald 3:02

And as you say, it's a fantastic mix was that a mix that came about accidentally, that just sort of evolved around you because of how your interest was piqued at different times?

Johnny Saldana 3:15

It was, I believe, probably serendipitous, because, coming into qualitative inquiry, I had no idea really, that that body of literature existed from writers such as Victor Turner, Dwight Conquergood, Richard Schechner, Anna Deavere Smith, those works that I read, just opened my eyes and helped me realise that I could use the art form that I was trained in as a research modality. So it was, I guess, let's call it fate that qualitative inquiry and my theatre background blended together in a very natural, organic way.

Catherine McDonald 3:56

And how do you see the relationship between theory and qualitative research?

Johnny Saldana 4:01

In my training as a theatre artist, I was certainly exposed to dramatic theory in English literary theory, but I was a complete stranger to social science theory. And so when I began getting into qualitative inquiry, I was noticing how grounded theory was certainly a key method in the field. And so that was something that I approached in one of my very first longitudinal studies, I was following a group of children from kindergarten or age five to sixth grade for a theatre study, where we interviewed them several times throughout the academic year, and then I analyse their data longitudinally. Well, theory grounded theory certainly came in usefully at that point. And what I did was I was reading the literature on how theories and education theories in theatre response and reception We're coming together. And of course, in grounded theory, you don't test a theory that's already been developed. Instead, you inductively develop one. So I was really glad that I had the opportunity to conduct that type of study. So that that way I could learn how a theory is built from the ground up. I'm now working on research methods for developing social science theory. I have a workshop coming up in a few months. And I'm also thinking of turning that content into a book. So it's really exciting for my own professional development, to learn how social science theory gets developed.

Catherine McDonald 5:39

And what sort of model or best plan of research methodology do you adopt now and why?

Johnny Saldana 5:46

I actually leave myself open to wherever the methodology takes me, I acknowledge that there are some people in their careers who devote themselves entirely to a particular methodology such as autoethnography, or phenomenology. My own background, however, and research experiences have given me opportunities to take a look at virtually all the key methodologies. I've done grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, ethnodrama. Name a methodology, and I have most likely done it. And I feel that that has made me a better instructor and a better researcher, because I've had experience in learning how data are collected and analysed through the various methodologies. So I believe in eclecticism, I feel that as qualitative researchers, we need to be well versed in all the different methodologies possible. So that empowers us to select the best methodology for the particular research project at hand.

Catherine McDonald 6:54

But which is your favourite?

Johnny Saldana 6:57

I don't think I have a favourite but I certainly have a repertoire of ones that I use most often. For example, coding. Codes are prompts or triggers for the deeper meanings that the data evoke. And because I think conceptually, symbolically and metaphorically, as I explained earlier, as an artist. I apply those same analytic strategies to my data analytic work with codes. I find that codes helped me rise above the data, I acknowledge that there are some people who feel that coding is rather mechanistic, and perhaps that's the way it was presented in earlier works. However, codes can be very evocative. For me, codes have the ability to bring out from the data what is salient? What is evocative, what is essential, rather than just simply what is descriptive. And so I find that I use codes frequently in my own work, regardless of the methodology I've chosen. And when it comes to interview transcripts, I rely heavily on in vivo coding in particular, where you use the participants own language as the codes, I find that that technique that method keeps me strongly rooted in the participants worldview and perspective. And certainly another method that I use is Artspace research, specifically, ethnodramatic and ethnotheatrical adaptations of data. I find that I really enjoy transforming a participants interview transcript, let's say it is approximately one hour in length into five minutes of monologue that captures the most important parts of the interview. So those particular methods, they're sort of, if you will, my favourites in my repertoire, but I certainly keep myself open to whatever analytic method may be needed for the research question or project at hand.

Catherine McDonald 9:05

And what sort of research questions or issues do you see as best suitable for qualitative longitudinal research?

Johnny Saldana 9:14

I say that during these times, these times of COVID, these times of upheaval, that qualitative inquiry people are necessary documentarians of the social change that's happening right now. I feel that we need to be recording in field notes, in video, in audio, what is happening right now because we are in a time of parentheses. And so we need to take a look at what is happening in the world. We need to not just document it, but also to analyse it, because this is such a unique phenomenon in our history. And I feel that when it comes to thinking about how we take a look at what has happened since 2020, and the upcoming years, certainly that is a longitudinal project, right there. So our own experiences as humans, certainly, that becomes necessary data. But people are affected by COVID in different ways. And so we need to take a look at the spectrum of how COVID has affected people in different countries have different socio economic backgrounds, in order to make sure that we leave this legacy for future researchers.

Catherine McDonald 10:39

Absolutely. And those of us who are of working professional age right now, we have never really experienced anything quite as big and as complex, as a collective, as we have over the last few years, have we it's just been enormous.

Johnny Saldana 10:54

It certainly has. And certainly, I've been affected by COVID. But I think I have been more affected by the people around me and their reactions to COVID. I will say, personally, I've been through worse, meaning personal health matters in my past. And so COVID, for me, I've always been looking at it through a researchers lens, filter, and angle. And as I see, the people around me being affected by COVID, I'm taking a look at things such as motives, emotions, I seemingly can never turn my researchers mind off. And so I've been looking at it. And I've been making mental notes. And I've been analysing in my mind, this unique, yet horrible phenomenon. And so for me, the world is a living laboratory. And I think it's necessary for qualitative inquirers, to not just be nooked away in their own particular projects, but to really just open their eyes around them, and find out and try to make meaning and make interpretive sense of what's happening in the world at this time.

Catherine McDonald 12:10

And do you remember thinking back to sort of March 2020, or the spring of 2020, when it was quite quickly becoming apparent that we were heading for a pandemic, or we were at the beginnings of a pandemic, as a social scientist, and as a researcher can you remember how that felt in that moment? Sort of processing your own personal shock, but also the professional in you rising to the fore if you like and think we have to document this, we have to capture this?

Johnny Saldana 12:38

What came to my mind first, when you asked that question. The grocery stores, I do the grocery shopping for this household. And at that time, there were those strange rushes for things such as bottled water, toilet paper, necessary essentials. And I started taking photographs of empty shelves in grocery stores, to document what had happened with this beginning surge of COVID. And they were very unusual kinds of photographs, that were scary to think that we are in a time where people are beginning to hoard, people are kicking into survival mode. And so that was my first documentation of what was happening at that time. I was also collecting over the internet stories in particular that were published by online news outlets, of people's individual stories, not the worldwide type of story, but something that was more personal about a particular family or about a particular individual affected by COVID. Certainly, it was difficult for me because I lost my best friend to COVID in the summer of 2020. And that certainly brought it home to me. But here's the thing, I was made executor of his estate, he gave me the rights to his Facebook account. He documented his transition to COVID. He left me the gift of his life data during his final months. I will always be forever grateful to him because he knew what my background was. And he wanted to leave me this gift. So as macabre as it may sound, I was both devastated by his passing, but also grateful for the

legacy that he left me because this was important and I'm going to make sure that he is always remembered by making sure his data is out there.

Catherine McDonald 14:55

That is an incredible legacy. And as you say he obviously knew that he was leaving it in the best hands. Does your experience of living through COVID? And as we all did, change, did that change your opinion on what research questions and issues are best for qualitative longitudinal research?

Johnny Saldana 15:15

Two things are interesting to me for longitudinal qualitative research. One of them is trajectory. And the other one is through line. In a trajectory, you're looking, of course, about the arc, the narrative arc, about how things are happening. In through line, you're taking a look at that one unifying thread that ties everything together from beginning to end of the longitudinal journey. To me, the trajectory that we've been exploring has certainly been a series of ups and downs, because as soon as we think we have a handle on COVID, all of a sudden a new variant comes out, or all of a sudden, something happens that we weren't anticipating as such as the supply chain, for example. And so it's been an idiosyncratic journey, the trajectory the arc has certainly been erratic. But it's been a fascinating one to take a look at longitudinally. As far as the through line goes, I certainly have to wait for the story to complete. Before I figure out what is the through line, what is the one thing that ties everything together? I read recently, in a book called *The Art of, The science of Storytelling*, that control is the one thing that seems to drive all human action. And as I think about that, from Will Storr the author of that text, I think about how we have tried to control this as a possible through line, we've tried to control the virus through vaccination, we've tried to control our own health through certain types of measures like masks and vaccines. So I'm taking a look at that as possibly the through line of this particular story. However, it's not over yet. And I anticipate several more years of this. So we're still in Act One. And we haven't even approached intermission yet. So I'm waiting for Act Two to begin.

Catherine McDonald 17:25

Do you have an approach to comparison and generalizability? And if so, what is it?

Johnny Saldana 17:33

I was very influenced by the work of James Bradley, who was an ethnographer. And in his methods works, he talked about how you transcend from the individual case, to more generalizable or transferable applications. He has a particular series of steps where for example, you try to find out not only what is unique about the individual, but what is cultural about the individual. And from there, you can take the next step towards generalising to a broader population. And then he encourages you to continue finding, alright, you've taken a look at what is cultural. Now try to find out what is universal about this case. Now, certainly one case study, one person does not represent the entire world. But it's up to the researchers ability to think how one person's story does speak to humanity in general. And it's a matter of how the researcher can develop a persuasive case, how you can find those bits and pieces, where one person is like all people, certainly emotions are a universal. And that's where I always try to tap in. Because I'm a theatre artist, I take a look at not just how people behave, I take a look at how people act, both literally and metaphorically. And so I'm always looking at people as if they are actors in an improvised script. And I'm taking a look at how these things unfold over time. For me, that's how I get into a kind of a generalizability. Because we say that theatre is a microcosm of the world. And so when I'm taking a look at real life, that too is a microcosm of the world and a bigger picture idea.

Catherine McDonald 19:30

And with longitudinal research, what tips can you share on keeping people involved in your research? Because it's quite a commitment for them, isn't it?

Johnny Saldana 19:40

Absolutely. My longest case study followed a young man from age five, to age 26. And I'm still in touch with him through social media. In fact, I think now, social media is probably the best way to maintain contact with our participants. Certainly it wasn't available when I was doing some of my key works in the 1990s and early 2000s. But nowadays, if our participants have access to social media, and they belong to certain platforms, like Facebook

or Twitter, that's certainly one way that we can maintain that contact. In fact, I've read in the literature that some people get periodic checks from their participants through brief text messages, or Facebook posts. That's a wonderful way of just keeping small little nuggets of communication going through time. So that, for me is probably the best way now to maintain contact. But it certainly is dependent on the researcher to make those efforts to continuously reach out in whatever ways that he or she can to make sure that the participants are still willing and able to continue with their projects. I found that just simply maintaining a good not just rapport, but a good friendship with participants is what keeps them openly engaged.

Catherine McDonald 21:12

And in terms of motivating and sort of incentivizing participants, do you find that being able to show them the difference they're making and the evidence they're helping to create? Do you find that it's a good motivation?

Johnny Saldana 21:25

I find that when I share my analyses, my writings, my field notes, with my participants, hopefully that suggests to them how invested I am in their lives, how important they are, to the research that they are a part of, certainly, we need to avoid exploiting our participants for our own gains. But I find that when I've got some trust, when I have some friendship developed with my participants, they're more likely to continue their work. Now, I've certainly had people in the past who have dropped out for certain types of reasons. And I understand that completely. But the ones that I feel that I've held on to for a long time, was just simply because we developed a good relationship. And so I feel that that is what is critical in keeping participants in for the long haul.

Catherine McDonald 22:24

Absolutely. And as you say, it's all about trust, isn't it? What about ethical dilemmas? Have you faced any ethical dilemmas? And if so, what could others learn from those?

Johnny Saldana 22:34

The main takeaway, the main lesson is to realise that participants will not tell you everything that's going on. My biggest ethical dilemma was interviewing someone who presented themselves in a very good light. And when I interviewed this person's significant others, they to present it this person in a very good light. Well, after a certain phase of the study was over, I had learned that this person had made two suicide attempts in their life. Fortunately, both unsuccessful but I was not made aware of that dark past. And that totally surprised me. And my ethical dilemma was, do I talk about this in my research? In other words, I heard about this third hand, I didn't hear from the participant directly. And well all is data, according to Barney Glaser, but at the same time, my ethical dilemma was, do I present this story, if it wasn't told to me directly by the participant? So I wrestled with that. And I realised that I had to decide what is best for the participant, not what is best for me as the researcher and what is best for me for the publications. But what is best for the participant. So I always had to keep his best interests in mind. That was my biggest lesson. And the thing that I always pass along to others is to realise that participants will not tell you everything that's going on in their lives.

Catherine McDonald 24:23

And how do you go about analysing data? And why do you take the approach you do?

Johnny Saldana 24:28

I analyse data very systematically. I acknowledge that there are some approaches to qualitative inquiry now that are very openly interpretive that are very contemplative, for example, and for me, that's not the way that I feel comfortable with my analysis. There is no blue ribbon panel in qualitative inquiry that says we must analyse data in these ways in these ways only. It is a signature approach to data analysis. And as for me, I am very careful and systematic in my ways of working, because that's the way that I am. I was trained as a craftsperson in my art. And so I feel that you need to have a good handle on your craft, before you can transcend into the art. And so I'm the same way with my data analysis, I take a look at my data in very careful, systematic, well organised ways, I work very strategically, with trying to get to higher levels of meaning. But then after I've done all that foundation work, that's when I then allow myself to transcend the systematic work, and go into those more artistic, more human

realms of meaning making. So I'm a combination of both craft and art. And I feel that that's what makes a good qualitative data analyst.

Catherine McDonald 26:02

And what about when it comes to writing up your research? Is there a sort of combined approach there as well? Do you have any top tips to share?

Johnny Saldana 26:09

My top tip is to learn about as many different ways of writing qualitative inquiry as you can, just as I'm an advocate of learning about as many different methodologies as you can. From the literature, we have different ways of documenting our work, the confessional tale, the impressionist tale, writing reflexively, and all these different we literally have dozens of ways to write up qualitative inquiry, I wrote a book called *Writing Qualitatively* from Routledge. And what I did in that particular book was I discussed briefly different approaches to writing. And I provide an example from my own previously published work of how that writing can be approached, like, for example, writing, as an action researcher, writing enrol, writing ethnographically, writing auto ethnographically, so that the different ways that we have of documenting our research work, I feel we need to become well versed in all those different approaches. So that that way, again, that makes you a better qualitative researcher, that makes you a better writer, as well.

Catherine McDonald 27:24

So that basically, you can choose the best approach dependent on the project that you're undertaking,

Johnny Saldana 27:30

Well certainly it's part of the project, but it's also who are you accountable to? Are you writing a thesis or dissertation that you have to follow your committees' requirements and the university's requirements for formatting? For example? Are you writing for a particular journal, whose editor perhaps prefers a certain type of stylistic approach to articles? So it's not just a matter of what is going to be best for the research project? But also what is going to be best for the audience that we're trying to reach?

Catherine McDonald 28:05

I see, I see. So as you're aware, the Youth Life project is aiming to bridge qualitative and quantitative approaches to life course research, or with the aim of advancing mixed methods design, and it's particularly focused on youth transitions. How important would you say that bridging and strengthening is?

Johnny Saldana 28:25

I would offer that it's very important. Without quantitative research, we wouldn't have the advances in science, technology and medicine that we have today. In matters of Social Inquiry, the qualitative paradigm has proven itself to be quite an insightful way of documenting the human condition. In the past, we used to think that mixed methods research was good because it helped buoy the weaknesses of each paradigm. Like for example, the quantitative yes, would present the rigorous numbers, but it wouldn't have the rich insight. Qualitative people will say, well, it's not as rigorous as the quantitative and instead of thinking of the weaknesses of each paradigm, instead, we should be thinking about the strengths. Each paradigm has wonderful gifts to offer to the research enterprise when they're both combined, merged and mixed. Quantitative provides us with that evidentiary rigour, it provides us with statistical persuasion. Qualitative inquiry brings to the research enterprise insightful, and I think revelatory guidance for the human condition. So rather than thinking that each paradigm has its own weaknesses, that combining them if you will, fulfils or cancels each other out. Instead, think of the strengths that each paradigm brings to the research project, when you combine and merge them together.

Catherine McDonald 30:05

As a final question, Johnny, you're a renowned scholar. And you're one of the most internationally cited and referenced methodologists. I'm curious to know, what would you say to your younger self, so to that early career, researcher version of yourself?

Johnny Saldana 30:23

I would probably offer, read, read, read, read, read. There is so much literature out there in such diverse styles in different ways. And I find that today's generation, and the information age and the internet age, you know, millions of articles are available out there. When I was learning qualitative inquiry, I was just absolutely blown away at the diversity of different kinds of writings because I thought that because it was a scientific enterprise that we could only write in one way. But then when I read about performance, ethnography and poetic inquiry, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, I was just absolutely enthralled at the wonderful ways that we can document the social condition. And so to my younger self, I would probably say, read as many different things as you can in as many different disciplines as you can. Because I've learned from reading qualitative inquiry articles in nursing, in sociology, in psychology, and I would encourage people who are in the traditional social sciences, read some things in theatre, read plays, read poetry, immerse yourself in the literature, and all the different genres and styles that are out there. I would like to see the field of qualitative inquiry, really embrace all the different approaches that are available out there. I find that there are certain camps and certain tribes in qualitative inquiry that are very dogmatic about their particular method and approach. And I feel that we get into turf wars when we start knocking down other methodological approaches. We should be embracing all the different approaches that are possible in qualitative inquiry. And as I say, it's a diverse way of documenting the human condition and the better versed you are, in all those different methodologies the better researcher you become.

Catherine McDonald 32:41

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