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Analytic Methods' Considerations for the Translation of Sensitive Qualitative Data From Mandarin Into English

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Abstract

Background: In non-English or cross-cultural qualitative research, scholars have long debated the impact of involving translators on the transfer of meanings during the process of translation between languages. The management of sensitive data can even further complicate the research process when translators outside the research team are involved in the translation. **Purpose:** To discuss a translation method, which is drawn from a qualitative study, for managing sensitive qualitative data and enhancing research transparency. **Method:** Translation approach in qualitative research. **Findings:** The use of this translation method was revealed in this study to (1) enhance the researcher's prolonged engagement with the data and intimate understanding of the meanings underlying participants' experience, (2) to increase the transparency of qualitative data interpretation and analysis, (3) to facilitate sensitizing cultural nuances and finding meaning and concept equivalence during the process of data translation and analysis, and (4) to handle data more sensitively. **Implications:** This article has implications for the understanding of how researchers can work as an analyst and translator to develop research findings without the loss of meaning, to enhance transparency during the translation process, and to manage data more sensitively.

Keywords

qualitative research, translation, meaning, analysis, sensitive data

Introduction

The incentive structure in academic science rewards the dissemination of research findings and relies on publication system for knowledge transfer and circulation (Paasi, 2005). English is recognized as a global language, and international publication spaces are mainly from English-speaking countries (Crystal, 2012; Paasi, 2005). In an attempt to share scientific knowledge globally, translation of research findings from one language to another becomes inevitable in non-English or cross-cultural research. Nonetheless, a very few qualitative studies could transparently report the process of how the translated findings were developed. The lack of transparent translation and analytic process could compromise the credibility of the research findings. In qualitative research, when seeking to understand human behavior, social phenomenon, or social processes, the emphasis is placed on conveying the meanings of participants' experiences. Meaning should be kept constant, even when the form of source language changes as it is turned into the form of target language (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010).

The existing body of literature recognizes that translators in qualitative research play an important role in bringing the translated data as close to the meanings of the original data as possible during translation (Chen & Boore, 2009; Esposito, 2001; Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, & Maliski, 2008; Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010). To execute translation in qualitative research, translators must be able to detect differences in the equivalence of the meanings across languages (Chen & Boore, 2009; Esposito, 2001; Squires, 2009; Temple, 1997; Temple & Young, 2004; Twinn, 1997). As meaning is conveyed through language and is mediated by sociocultural context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bühler, 2002), translators need to be particularly sensitive to the influence of social context in their expressions (Wong & Poon, 2010).

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However, translation methods in qualitative research remain inconsistent (Chen & Boore, 2009; Temple, 1997). When involving translators in qualitative research, issues have been raised about the background of translators and the transparency of translation process (Squires, 2009; Temple, 1997). Of particular concern, in qualitative research containing sensitive data, the involvement of translators outside the research team poses ethical issues around participants' confidentiality and the exposure of participants to potential harms. Taking these into account, this article introduces a meaning-based translation method that can be used by the researcher working as an analyst and translator in an attempt to deal with sensitive data.

This article begins by discussing the nature of experience and reality within qualitative research situated within a constructivist paradigm. Against this philosophical backdrop, this article will then go on to critique the options of translation methods in qualitative research and discuss one translation method involving the researcher working as a translator. This method was drawn from a qualitative study of HIV-positive drug users' experience of taking antiretroviral medications, which is discussed in the later sections.

Background

Studying an Individual's Experience in Qualitative Research Within a Constructivist Paradigm

Social constructionism is rooted in symbolic interactionism and started to have its hold after Berger and Luckman (1966) published *The Social Construction of Reality* (Hibberd, 2005). In their book, experience is contextually situated and socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and the use of quantitative research is inadequate to capture the richness and fullness of an individual's experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead, the experience of an individual is often the area that qualitative research is designed to study (Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverman, 2016). However, the interpretive nature of experience means that it is internal not visible to the other except through interaction (Laing, 1967). Experience is most commonly visible through narrative means; people create and express their experience by constructing them in a narrative form (Gee, 1991; Riessman, 1993). Thus, researchers studying individual experience gather self-report data often using interviews (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2005; Silverman, 2016).

However, the meaning within interview data also requires interpretation, both during the interview where meaning is negotiated and co-constructed and then at the point of analysis. Within the text of the interview transcript, meaning can be understood as contextually dependent rather than dictionary meanings (Bakhtin, 1935; Clarke, 2005; Gee, 1991; Polkinghorne, 2005). As participants tell their stories, they draw on their language resources available to them through the different discourses they inhabit (Gee, 1991). Discourses are context specific, reflecting an individual's interactions with society, shaping the meaning of individual's experience (Blumer,

1986; Clarke, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mishler, 1986; Silverman, 2016). Thus, the individual's narratives are told from a particular position within social structures. Such interconnections and complex relations and layers of personal experience presented in the data are an ongoing flow, not rigidly ordered, and are eternally incomplete (James, 1975). Due to the ongoing flow of experience and meaning-making, researchers can but capture it as a reflection, as a memory of what was (Schutz, 1967).

Therefore, if we understand knowing the experience of the other as a process infused with interpretation, where meaning is understood to be contextually dependent, and related to wider discourses within which the participant occupies, and therefore narrates from, particular positions, then this has implications for preservation of participant meaning during any translation process.

Translation Between Languages

Individuals are living their stories on an ongoing basis and are telling their stories in words or texts as they reflect on life, translating that sensory data into linguistic data (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In that sense, language itself in its essence is already a translation of participants' experiences (Merriam et al., 2001; Polkinghorne, 2005; Riessman, 1993). For the researchers, we understand the meaning of participant's experience through their language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). When engaging in the narrative inquiry and analysis process to understand the meaning of the data, such interpretation can be influenced by the researcher's beliefs, values, positions, and previous experiences. In this account, the researcher becomes part of the process where meanings are shared and co-constructed by both the researcher and researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; King & Horrocks, 2010).

Translation between two different languages also involves interpretation (van Nes et al., 2010). The difference in language can generate additional challenges that could hinder the transfer of meanings and might cause loss of meanings and the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (van Nes et al., 2010). Translation from one language to another can be complicated due to the influence of cultural differences on meaning construction through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Bühler, 2002). To express the richness of an individual's experience, narratives and metaphors are often used (van Nes et al., 2010). However, the way a language is structured and metaphors are used varies widely from culture to culture. For example, in an exploratory study of comparing the original data in Mandarin and the translated data in English by Twinn (1997), two issues were identified. Firstly, the author found the challenge of finding the equivalent concepts between two different languages during the translation. Secondly, the difference in sentence structures and grammatical styles between the two languages could also increase the difficulty in conveying the meanings constructed by participants. In addition to these, the reality of everyday life within a social context is perceived differently by individuals (Berger & Luckmann,

1966), and thus, an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences should also be greatly emphasized when translating data from one language into another. This is particularly challenging when involving translators in the translation process. The challenges of involving translators are discussed in the next section.

Translators in Qualitative Research

A review study by Squires (2009) reported that methods relating to the involvement of translators in qualitative research have been widely employed. Nonetheless, very few studies could transparently report the translation process, including the background of translators and how translation is done. Translators play a mediating role in ensuring the representation of the meanings constructed by participants. It is through translators that participants' experiences are accessed and their voices are heard (van Nes et al., 2010; Wong & Poon, 2010). The use of translation and back translation method, involvement of two to three translators, prolonged engagement with translators during data analysis, and a delay in translation as long as possible have been recommended in the current literature (Chen & Boore, 2009; Esposito, 2001; Larkin, Dierckx De Casterlé, & Schotsmans, 2007; Lopez et al., 2008; Temple & Young, 2004; van Nes et al., 2010).

However, there are concerns regarding (1) the cost and time spent on involving translators in qualitative research, (2) researchers' dependence on translators' interpretation of data not just for words but perspectives, and (3) translators' ability to acknowledge and understand cultural nuances, (4) professional terminology, and (5) participants' perception during translation (Chen & Boore, 2009; Regmi, Naidoo, & Pilkington, 2010). Apart from the aforementioned concerns, studies that focus on sensitive topics should pay a particular attention to ethical issues when involving translators in research. These include the anonymization of research data in the transcripts, participants' permission of accessing data, careful consideration of translators' backgrounds, and a legal contract with translators. As a result, in order to manage sensitive data and protect participants' confidentiality, the involvement of translators outside the research team could even complicate the research process.

In addition to the involvement of translators, the researcher working as a translator is another option. However, the dual roles as an analyst and translator could raise a question surrounding researchers' subjectivity in data analysis and its impact on dependability of the research findings. Despite the limitations, there are some advantages. Firstly, the researcher's engagement in data translation could enhance an intimate understanding of individual experience and its underlying meanings. Secondly, in qualitative research, findings are already considered as being constructed by the researcher and the researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; King & Horrocks, 2010). By the same token, translation is a form of interpretation and analysis (van Nes et al., 2010). Having the full engagement in qualitative research, the researcher can make the analytic and

translation process more transparent and minimize the risk of misinterpretation during translation (e.g., memoing). Thirdly, the dual roles of being a researcher and a translator can facilitate sensitizing cultural nuances, bringing the researcher closer to the problems of meaning and concept equivalence when translating and analyzing data (Temple & Young, 2004). Finally yet importantly, when it comes to the management of sensitive data, the dual roles as an analyst and translator can minimize the risk of exposing vulnerable participants' personal information.

By and large, there are pros and cons of involving/not involving translators in qualitative research, whereas it is recommended that the researcher should play a role as a translator when research involves vulnerable groups and sensitive topics. To enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research, the researcher, working as a translator, should make the decision-making process of translation and data analysis more transparent through memo writing (van Nes et al., 2010).

Aim

To discuss a translation method that is drawn from a qualitative study of HIV-positive drug users' experience of taking antiretroviral medications. This method was used in the study to help to enhance the transparency of translation and analytic process and manage data more sensitively.

The Dual Roles of Working as an Analyst and Translator in Qualitative Research

Translation and back translation method and the involvement of more than one translators have been suggested in the existing literature. This section discusses the method of translating data by the first author (Szu-Szu Ho, SSH). Examples are provided and derived from a qualitative study that aims to explore HIV-positive drug users' experiences of taking antiretroviral medications. Due to the involvement of sensitive topics in this study, including HIV, illegal drug use, and unprotected sex, SSH worked as an analyst and translator to analyze the data. The translation method in the study involves six steps: (1) analyzing data in the original language, Mandarin, (2) developing subcategories and categories in Mandarin, (3) translating the coded data from Mandarin to English, (4) coding the translated data in English, (5) developing subcategories and categories in English, (6) comparing the two versions of codes, subcategories, and categories, and developing meaning-based translated findings (Figure 1).

In reference to current literature, it was suggested to analyze data in an original language as long and as much as possible to avoid potential limitations of understanding the meaning underlying participant's experience (Chen & Boore, 2009; van Nes et al., 2010). Taking this advice into account, verbatim transcription of content in Mandarin was analyzed initially. The analysis started with line-by-line coding but sometimes directly moved to segment-by-segment coding or incident-by-incident coding depending on the content participants provided. A big
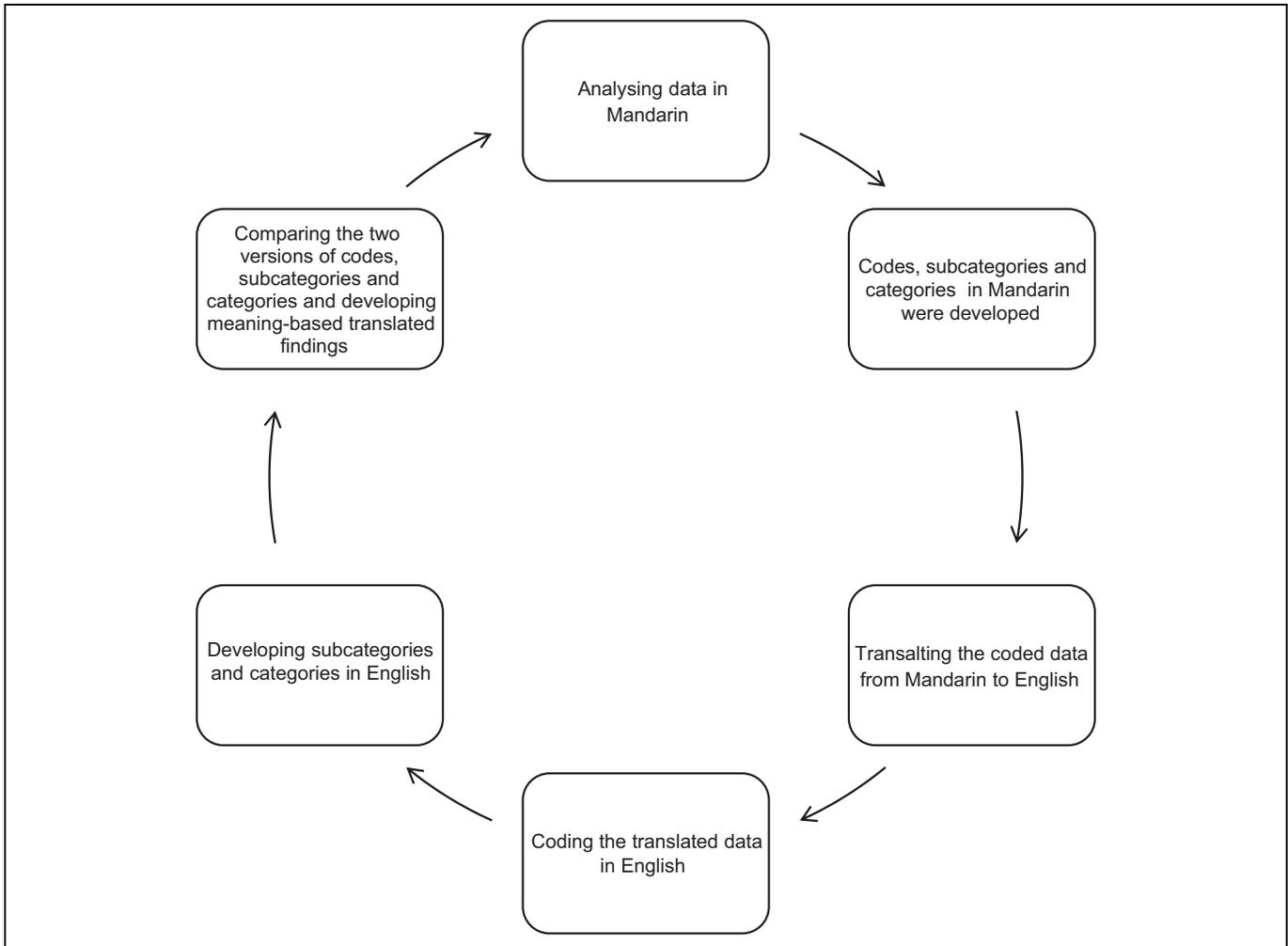
Figure 1. Procedure of translating and analyzing data between Mandarin and English.

chunk of data provided the context, which enabled the essence of what was being said in the data and to understand what the underlying issues were. Each chunk of data was examined closely and could contain more than one codes. By looking at a chunk of data, it not only provided the context but allowed sense-making of the meanings participants constructed, to see the interrelationship between codes, and how the codes interactively to influence participants' medication-taking behavior.

Memos were written throughout the research process. While coding and mapping the codes, SSH constantly compared data with data, data with codes, data with memos, one incident with another, and one interview with another. This prompted continuous interaction with data, making sense of participants' experiences. The analysis was not structured or static but rather moved back and forth between data, codes, subcategories, categories, memos, and sociodemographic information (Charmaz, 2014).

Once subcategories and categories in Mandarin were developed, it was noticed that translating the developed categories to English remained complex due to a lack of equivalent concepts. In an attempt to develop meaning-based translation, SSH

(1) went back to check the coded data, (2) translated these data into English, (3) coded the translated data in English, (4) developed subcategories and categories in English, (5) compared the translated codes, subcategories, and categories with the ones in Mandarin version, and developed meaning-based translated findings. The translated data and findings were compared with the original data and findings in Mandarin in an attempt to capture the cultural nuances and ensure the meaning is not lost. By looking at the data in both languages, it allowed for consideration of context and a more meaning-based interpretation and translation of the findings that are as close to participants' experience as possible. Congruently, translation of research findings using a contextualized approach is suggested by Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch (2014) to help achieve the transfer of meaning during translation.

While analyzing and interpreting translated data, SSH would think in English and explain in English. On the other hand, while analyzing the data in Mandarin, SSH would think in Mandarin. In doing so, it assisted in a better understanding of subtle meaning differences and coming to the English wordings that are close to the data in Mandarin. To help find the best wording,

dictionaries were used to understand terms. In addition, this study involved research associates, whose first language is English, during the analytic process to discuss the suitable terms for naming the codes, subcategories, and categories. In doing so, it decreased the negative influence of the researcher's subjectivity on data translation and meaning transfer.

During the process of translating data, the challenge encountered in the study was to convey meanings using equivalent terminology rather than word-for-word translation. Congruently, as noted by Chen and Boore (2009), Esposito (2001), Twinn (1997), and van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg (2010), not all concepts and expressions are universal and translatable due to cultural nuances attending the use of translation. One example is presented below.
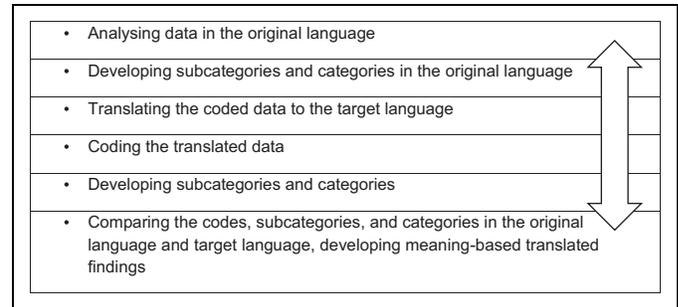
> In the past, I needed to take 4-5 pills at one time. It was **painful**. (P9, MSM, 35 years)

The direct translation of the Mandarin word, "痛 (Tong)," into an English word is "painful." However, "painful" used in Mandarin by P9 implicitly meant his feeling of suffering while taking many pills. In that sense, it indicated that word-for-word translation could potentially lead to loss of meaning. Without making sense of the data in both Mandarin and English, the direct translation of codes, subcategories, and categories from Mandarin to English may not completely convey the meaning of participant's experience. With this in mind, SSH in the study translated the coded data, and deeply looked into the data again, and then developed subcategories and categories. This allowed SSH to think about the data differently by making sense of the data in both Mandarin and English, developing analytical thinking, and naming the codes, subcategories, and categories more appropriately.

Another challenge was to translate concepts for which culturally bound words were used by participants. For example, idioms in Mandarin are often unintelligible without explanation. At school in Taiwan, idioms are learned through the understandings of the historical context from which idioms were born, which are used frequently in a daily life. Without understanding the context, meanings of the idioms cannot be understood by simply looking at the words because meanings were developed through the context not the words. One example presented below is derived from P9.

> Those friends from the drug circle are just nodding acquaintances. You know. One who mixes with vermilion will turn red, one who touches pitch shall be defiled therewith. As long as I can control myself well, I would try to avoid those friends as much as possible. (P9, MSM, 35 years)

"One who mixes with vermilion will turn red, one who touches pitch shall be defiled therewith." is a Chinese idiom, meaning good companions have good influence while bad ones have a bad influence. This idiom was derived from an ancient story where a mother who moved to many places in an attempt to find a better learning environment for her son. By directly

- Analysing data in the original language
- Developing subcategories and categories in the original language
- Translating the coded data to the target language
- Coding the translated data
- Developing subcategories and categories
- Comparing the codes, subcategories, and categories in the original language and target language, developing meaning-based translated findings

Figure 2. The process of the translation method.

translating the words of the idiom, it could not convey the meaning explicitly. Therefore, this study placed an emphasis on conveying the meanings represented in the texts rather than marks in the transcripts (Polkinghorne, 2005). Having a proficient understanding of Mandarin and intimate knowledge of social context can facilitate capturing the meanings of participants' experiences of taking antiretroviral medications.

Limitations

The limitation of the translation method introduced in this article lies in the fact that the interpretation of the data during translation and analytic process can be biased. Therefore, in an attempt to ensure the credibility of research findings, the emphasis should be placed on the transparency of decision-making process throughout the analytic and translation journey. The involvement of more than one researchers can help to minimize the likelihood of misinterpreting research findings.

This article discusses a translation approach using an example from a qualitative study with the topic of HIV. Uncertainty remains as to the extent to which this approach can be used in other contexts. Further work needs to be done to establish whether this method can be applied to other research topics/contexts.

Conclusion

This article discusses a translation method that was conducted by SSH when dealing with sensitive data. In qualitative research, the focus is to learn the meanings that participants hold about a social phenomenon they experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When involving translation between two languages in qualitative research, meaning should be kept constant. In the current evidence base, a very few qualitative researchers account for translation decisions in their reporting. Transparent reporting of translation decisions in qualitative research can help to improve research transparency and trustworthiness. The translation method used, in part, depends on the researcher's epistemological position (Temple & Young, 2004). This article focuses on social constructivism where knowledge is socially situated and constructed and is not value free (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). With the root of social constructivism, a translation method that the researcher works as an analyst and translator was introduced and discussed in this

article for dealing with sensitive and non-English qualitative data. This method provides a translation process (Figure 2) that can be drawn from to guide and inform qualitative researchers who deal with sensitive data and/or have difficulty in involving translators outside the research team.

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