

REFERENCES ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS

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VARIETIES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Source: Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis (2nd ed.). London: Sage. (excerpts from pp. 2-11)

Qualitative research may be conducted in dozens of ways, many with long traditions behind them. To do them all justice is impossible here. For our purposes the question is, What do some of the different varieties of qualitative research have to say about analysis? Can we see some common practices, some themes? (p. 5) .

Recurring features of qualitative research

... we suggest some recurring features of “naturalistic” research: Qualitative research is conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with a "field" or life

situation. These situations are typically "banal" or normal ones, reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations.

- The researcher's role is to gain a "holistic" (systemic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study: its logic, its arrangements, its explicit and implicit rules.
- The researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors "from the inside", through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding (Verstehen), and of suspending or "bracketing" preconceptions about the topics under discussion.
- Reading through these materials, the researcher may isolate certain themes and expressions that can be reviewed with informants, but that should be maintained in their original forms throughout the study.
- A main task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations.
- Many interpretations of this material are possible, but some are more compelling for theoretical reasons or on grounds of internal consistency.
- Relatively little standardized instrumentation is used at the outset. The researcher is essentially the main "measurement device" in the study.
- Most analysis is done with words. The words can be assembled, subclustered, broken into semiotic segments. They can be organized to permit the researcher to contrast, compare, analyze, and bestow patterns upon them. (pp. 5-7)

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Source: Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis (2nd ed.). London: Sage. (excerpts from pp. 9-11)

In some senses, all data are qualitative; they refer to essences of people, objects, and situations. ... In this book we focus on data form of words - that is, language in the form of extended text. (Qualitative data also can appear as still or moving images, but we do not deal with these forms.)

The words are based on observation, interviews, or documents (or as Wolcott [1992] puts it, "watching, asking, or examining"). These data collection activities typically are carried out in close proximity to a local setting for a sustained period of time. Finally, such data are not usually immediately accessible for analysis, but require some processing. Raw field notes need to be corrected, edited, typed up; tape recordings need to be transcribed and corrected. (p. 9)

Strengths of Qualitative Data

What is important about well-collected qualitative data? One major feature is that they focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings, so that we have a strong handle on what "real life" is like.

That confidence is buttressed by local groundedness, the fact that the data were collected in close proximity to a specific situation, rather than through the mail or over the phone. The emphasis is on a specific case, a focused and bounded phenomenon embedded in its context. The influences of the local context are not stripped away, but are taken into account. The possibility for understanding latent, underlying, or nonobvious issues is strong.

Another feature of qualitative data is their richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide "thick descriptions" that are vivid, nested in a real context, and have a ring of truth that has strong impact on the reader. Furthermore, the fact that such data are typically collected over a sustained period makes them powerful for studying any process (including history). We can go far beyond "snapshots" of "what?" or "how many?" to just how and why things happen as they do - and even assess causality as it actually plays out in a particular setting. And the inherent flexibility of qualitative studies (data collection times and methods can be varied as a study proceeds) gives further confidence that we've really understood what has been going on.

Qualitative data, with their emphasis on people's "lived experience", as fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives: their "perceptions, assumptions, prejudgements, presuppositions" and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them. (p. 10)

MAIN TYPES OF QUALITATIVE DATA GATHERING METHODS

Interview formats

- Individual
- Small groups
- Focus groups
- Whanau interviews
- Household interviews
- Interview structure
- Informal conversational interview
- General interview guide
- Standardised, open-ended interview

Observation

Styles of observation

- Ethnography
- Observing multiple settings and events
- Observing critical incidents and service delivery
- Noticing "subtle" behaviours
- Writing effective field notes
- Self-completion questionnaires
- client satisfaction surveys
- use of both open-ended & structured questions
- knowledge questions following training
- self-reports of behaviours and attitudes

Other qualitative methods

- case studies
- discourse analysis
- documents, archives and records
- media items (e.g., newspaper, magazine, audio)
- Focus Groups

Composition

- Usually about 5-10 people who have something in common
- A facilitator initiates and guides the discussion
- Special arrangements for recording the discussion
- Need a suitable room
- Usually 1½ - 2 hours long

Advantages

- generates ideas and elicits topics which are unlikely to arise with individual interviews
- can quickly identify a range of issues which are relevant to a research topic

Disadvantages

- generates large amounts of data
- needs a skilled facilitator to obtain good quality data and keep participants on topic

Selected References: Focus groups

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QUALITATIVE DATA GATHERING METHODS: Ethnography

Source: Creswell, J. W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (pp. 58-61)

An ethnography is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. the researcher examines the group's observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and ways of life (Harris, 1968). As both a process and an outcome of research (Agar, 1980), an ethnography is a product of research, typically found in book-length form. As a process, ethnography involves prolonged observation of the group, typically through participant observation in which the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people of through one-on-one interviews with members

of the group. The researcher studies the meanings of behavior, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group.

...the ethnographer begins the study by looking at people in interaction in ordinary settings and by attempting to discern pervasive patterns such as life cycles, events, and cultural themes.... Culture is an amorphous term, not something "lying about" ... but rather something the researcher attributes to a group as he or she looks for patterns of daily living. It is inferred from the words and actions of members of the group and is assigned to this group by the researcher. It consists of looking for what people do (behaviors), what they say (language), and some tension between what they really do and what they ought to do as well as what they make and use (artifacts) (Spradley, 1980). Thus, the ethnographer gathers artifacts and physical trace evidence; finds stories, rituals, and myths; and/or uncovers cultural themes.

...the themes of structure and function guide research of social organizations. Structure refers to the social structure or configuration of the group, such as the kinship or political structure of the social-cultural group. Function refers to patterns of the social relations among members of the group that help regulate behavior. To establish these patterns, the ethnographer engages in extensive work in the field, called fieldwork, gathering information through observation, interviews, and materials helpful in developing a portrait and establishing "cultural rules" of the culture-sharing group. As Wolcott (1996) comments, "They (researchers) establish what a stranger would have to know in order to understand what is going on here, or, more challenging still, what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to participate in a meaningful way" (p. 6). The ethnographer is sensitive to fieldwork issues ... such as gaining access to the group through gatekeepers, individuals who can provide entrance to a research site. the ethnographer locates key informants, individuals who provide useful insights into the group and can steer the researcher to information and contacts.

... the procedures in ethnography call for a detailed description of the culture-sharing group or individual, an analysis of the culture-sharing group by themes or perspectives, and some interpretation of the culture-sharing group for meanings of social interaction and generalizations about human social life (Wolcott, 1994b). The final product of this effort is a holistic cultural portrait of the social group that incorporates both the views of the actors in the group (emic) and the researcher's interpretation of views about human social life in a social science perspective (etic).

The ethnography is challenging to use for the following reasons: Grounded Theory

Source: Creswell, J. W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (pp. 55

- The researcher needs to have a grounding in cultural anthropology and the meaning of a social-cultural system as well as the concepts typically explored by ethnographers.
- The time to collect data is extensive, involving prolonged time in the field.
- In many ethnographies, the narratives are written in a literary, almost storytelling approach, an approach that may limit the audience for the work and may be challenging for authors accustomed to traditional approaches to writing social and human science research.

- There is a possibility that the researcher will "go native" and be unable to complete the study or be compromised in the study. This is but one issue in the complex array of fieldwork issues facing ethnographers who venture into an unfamiliar cultural group of system.-58)

... the intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation. This situation is one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon. To study how people act and react to this phenomenon, the researcher collects primarily interview data, makes multiple visits to the field, develops and interrelates categories of information, and writes theoretical propositions or hypotheses or presents a visual picture of the theory.

The centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied. Strauss and Corbin (1994), for example, mention that a theory is a plausible relationship among concepts and sets of concepts. This theory, developed by the researcher, is articulated toward the end of a study and can assume the form of a narrative statement (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a visual picture (Morrow & Smith, 1995), or a series of hypotheses or propositions (Creswell & Brown, 1992).

The researcher typically conducts 20-30 interviews based on several visits "to the field" to collect interview data to saturate (or find information that continues to add until no more can be found) the categories. A category represents a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher also collects and analyzes observations and documents, but these data forms are atypical. While the researcher collects data, she or he begins analysis. In fact, my image for data collection in a grounded theory study is a "zigzag" process - out to the fields to gather information, analyze the data, back to the field to gather more information, analyze the data, and so forth. The participants interviewed are theoretically chosen - in theoretical sampling - to help the researcher best form the theory. How many passes one makes to the field depends on whether the categories of information become saturated and whether the theory is elaborated in all of its complexity. This process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories is called the constant comparative method of data analysis.

The process of data analysis in grounded theory research is systematic and follows a standard format:

In open coding, the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information. Within each category, the investigator finds several properties, or subcategories, and looks for data to dimensionalize, or show the extreme possibilities on a continuum of, the property. In axial coding, the investigator assembles the data in new ways after open coding. This is presented using a coding paradigm or logic diagram in which the researcher identifies a central phenomenon (i.e., a central category about the phenomenon), explores causal conditions (i.e., categories of conditions that influence the phenomenon), specifies strategies (i.e., the actions or interactions that result from the central phenomenon), identifies the context and intervening conditions (i.e., the narrow and broad conditions that influence the strategies), and delineates the consequences (i.e., the outcomes of the strategies) for this phenomenon.

A grounded theory study challenges researchers for the following reasons:

- The investigator needs to set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge.
- Despite the evolving, inductive nature of this form of qualitative inquiry, the researcher must recognize that this is a systematic approach to research with specific steps in data analysis.
- The researcher faces the difficulty of determining when categories are saturated or when the theory is sufficiently detailed.
- The researcher needs to recognize that the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences. These are prescribed categories of information in the theory.

References: Grounded Theory

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QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS: Phenomenological Analysis

Source: Creswell, J. W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 51-55.

A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon.

Phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings.

The researcher also sets aside all prejudgements, bracketing his or her experiences and relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience.

The researcher needs to understand the philosophical perspectives behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon.

The investigator writes research questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals and asks individuals to describe their everyday lived experiences.

The investigator then collects data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation.

The phenomenological data analysis steps are generally similar for all psychological phenomenologists who discuss the methods. The original protocols are divided into statements or horizontalization. Then, the units are transformed into clusters of meanings expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts. Finally, these transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience, the textural description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced.

The phenomenological report ends with the reader understanding better the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists.

Example using phenomenology

Parsons, K. (1997). The male experience of caregiving for a family member with Alzheimer's disease. Qualitative Health Research, 7(3), 391-407.

Methodology (p. 393)

In keeping with one of the identified needs in caregiving research, “to hear from even more of the participating voices than we currently do” and “to turn directly to lived experience and the related and diverse situations and working local discourses of caregiving” ... , the researcher used the phenomenological method as described by Van Manen (1990).

The aim of phenomenology is to explicate the meaning of human phenomena and to understand the lived structures of meanings of everyday experience. Going beyond the actual state of affairs, such as the how, where, what, when, or why something happened, phenomenology is concerned with the essence or nature of the lived experience for a particular individual. It is concerned with interpreting the meaning of the lived experience, our lifeworld (Van Manen, 1990). (p. 393)

Data analysis (p. 395)

Following the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the tapes. This transcription process helped immerse the researcher in the data and helped the researcher to think about what the interviewees were saying and how they were saying it. Each written transcript was read several times while listening to the corresponding audio tape to ensure accuracy of the transcribed tape and to come to a better overall understanding of each participant's experience. This process of transcribing and listening also prompted additional questions for a subsequent interview.

The specific approach used to uncover the thematic aspects of the caregiving experience was the selective or highlighting approach outlined by Van Manen (1990). In the selective reading approach, the text was read several times and statements that appear to be revealing about the phenomenon were underlined or highlighted. Themes were identified by highlighting material in the interview text that spoke to each man's experience. Next, the researcher selected each of these highlighted phrases or sentences and tried to capture as fully as possible what meaning the highlighted material conveyed.

Following the initial readings and preliminary identification of themes in each of the interviews, the researcher met with three other researchers to discuss the themes and any areas that required more investigation. These meetings helped to ensure that the researcher's “decision trail” ... could be followed and the themes refined. The researcher next compared the themes in each interview, looked for commonalities and differences, and identified the overall themes that best described the experiences of these men as caregivers.

With the themes identified, the researcher then began the process of writing the themes and describing how they were interrelated. Rewriting continued until the researcher felt the themes (parts) and the relationship between the themes (whole) captured as accurately as possible the way these men experienced caregiving. (p. 395)

References: Phenomenology

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