

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

[Adapted from a presentation by Jan Anderson,
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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- ✘ There have been many debates around what actually constitutes qualitative research whether it can be defined and what its relationship to quantitative should be.
- ✘ Qualitative research allows a deeper understanding of the meanings and values related to the topic of research than quantitative data, however it has been criticised for this very understanding.

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- ✘ Positivists, (those who believe facts are out there to be found, it's just a case of finding them) argue that qualitative research is less valid than quantitative research because it relies upon the researcher's own subjective interpretation of the data.
 - ✘ It is this debate that has added to the increased polarisation of quantitative and qualitative methods
 - ✘ In contrast, qualitative researchers argue that quantitative data only gives a surface view of any given phenomenon that is not adequate to describe in any depth the meanings that lie behind the majority of social research

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- ✘ The aim of qualitative research is to *‘provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order and patterns found among a set of participants’* (Lofland 1971). The term ‘qualitative research’ is an umbrella term under which a host of different methods of data collection fall, and many methods can be used for either qualitative or quantitative analysis.
- ✘ The easiest way of remembering the distinction between the different categories of analysis is that qualitative analysis is concerned with some form of words or images, while quantitative analysis is concerned with numbers.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- ✘ Grounded theory was developed in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss. The theory has been subsequently revised over the last three decades, however its basic structure remains the same. Strauss (1987) explains:
- ✘ *“The methodological thrust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data is towards the development of theory, without any specific commitment to specific kinds of data, lines of research or theoretical interests. So, it is not really a specific method or technique. Rather, it is a style of doing qualitative analysis.”*

GROUNDED THEORY

- ✘ Until the groundbreaking work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and their development of grounded theory, qualitative research was analysed purely on the ‘hunches’ of the researchers. Analysis was very much down to the individual researcher, as Kvale (1996) highlights:
- ✘ *“Analysis took place through listening to repeated replaying of the tapes, or by cutting and pasting selections from the transcribed pages. The analyses more often terminated because of time limits or exhaustion, rather than a feeling of having analysed the material to have worked out its main structures and meanings.”*

GROUNDED THEORY

- ✘ It is called grounded theory because it aims to develop a coherent *theory* that is *grounded* in the data. In this sense, the theory emerges through the analysis while never losing hold of the original data. It is based on a ‘concept-indicator’ model
- ✘ Despite the discovery of grounded theory there remain few textbooks that explain the structural approaches needed to analyse qualitative data effectively and efficiently, and grounded theory remains the most comprehensive description of qualitative analysis with many computer software packages are based upon this model of analysis

QUALITATIVE DATA

- ✘ Qualitative data can be derived from many sources some of which may also generate quantitative data for example interviews, historical documents, written text, photographic or cinematic sources
- ✘ Interviews are generally recorded using an audio and/or video recorder, advances in technology are improving the quality that is obtained. It is important to remember that transcription of interviews is a very long process – it will take a fast typist around four hours to transcribe one hour of tape and this is only if the quality is good. In practice it cuts into researchers time to a significant degree and the level of detail required in the transcription can lengthen this process even further.

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

- ✘ To describe the processes involved in the analysis of qualitative data, Robson (1993) offers some basic principles that should be followed. These are relevant regardless of the qualitative method used:
- ✘ *1. Analysis of some form should start as soon as the data is collected. Don't allow data to accumulate without preliminary analysis.*
- ✘ *2. Make sure you keep tabs on what you have collected (literally – get it indexed)*

DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

- ✘ *3. Generate themes, categories, codes, etc. as you go along. Start by including rather than excluding; you can combine and modify as you go on.*
- ✘ *4. Dealing with data should not be a routine or mechanical task; think, reflect! Use analytical notes (memos) to help to get from the data to a conceptual level.*
- ✘ *5. Use some form of filing system to sort your data. Be prepared to re-sort. Play with the data.*

DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

- ✘ *6. There is no-one 'right' way to analyze these data – which places even more emphasis on your being systematic, organised and persevering.*
- ✘ *7. You are seeking to take apart your data in various ways and then trying to put them together to form some consolidated picture. Your main tool is comparison.*
- ✘ Before moving on principle number six must be re-emphasised - that there is 'no-one right way' to analyse qualitative data. In this sense, the only rule that should be followed when analysing qualitative research is that *'there are no rules'!*

DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

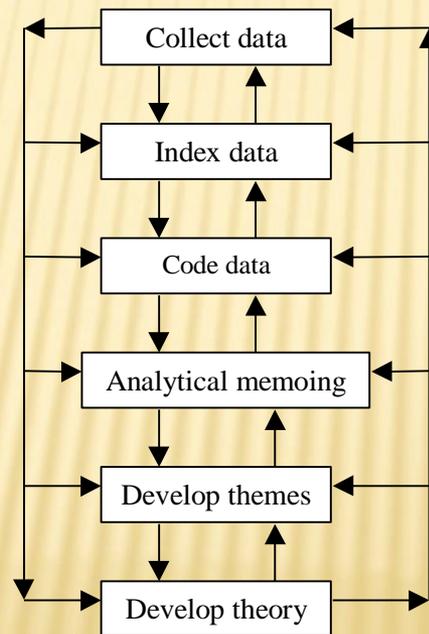
- ✘ As Plummer (1990) explains:

- + *“In many ways this is the truly creative part of the work – it entails brooding and reflecting upon mounds of data for long periods of time, until it ‘makes sense’ and ‘feels right’ and key issues and themes flow from it. It is also the hardest process to describe. The standard technique is to read and take notes, leave and ponder, reread without notes, make notes, match notes up, ponder, reread and so on.”*

- ✘ This may sound difficult and confusing, however on the plus side – because there is no one right way of analysing qualitative research this also means that there is no wrong way!

DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

- ✘ However, even though there are no rules there are basic principles that can aid you in your analysis and a basic model can be suggested:



Although the arrows look rather complex for a basic model, these are used to demonstrate that qualitative analysis is an interactive on-going process rather than moving through linear stages.

INDEXING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- ✘ Any given piece of qualitative research is likely to generate large amounts of data, and it is necessary to organise this in a way that allows you to quickly retrieve relevant parts. This is called indexing and works in a similar way as an index in a book whereby you need to be able to quickly locate any given piece of datum. For example, you may have 'chapters' which encapsulate broad thematic areas.
- ✘ You should then develop an index for your 'chapters' which specifies exactly what is included, and, like in an index some parts may be repeated in several different sections and your index will allow cross-referencing. It may be either computer based (cutting and pasting different sections into folders and sub-folders) or paper based (literally cutting with scissors and putting into different paper folders and subfolders).

CODING QUALITATIVE DATA

- ✘ Alongside the development of themes the coding of data must begin. It is rare for researchers conducting unstructured forms of qualitative research to wait until they have collected all their data before starting the coding process. This is because themes often emerge through coding (and vice versa), and as the theory building process begins the research may change focus or discover new areas that were not previously considered before beginning the research that warrant detailed study.

WRITING ANALYTICAL MEMOS

- ✘ Analytical memos are basically ideas that come into the researchers mind while reading the transcripts.
- ✘ The use of memos can not be understated as they play an essential role in theory building.
- ✘ Memos are incredibly personalised and any two researchers are extremely unlikely to pick up on the same pieces of text to write memos
- ✘ The most important rule of memoing is **never rely on your memory – write it down!** You may think of a fantastic theory and be sure that you will never forget it, but this idea is likely to be superseded by another one and memories are rarely as clear as written memos.

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- ✘ Codes and memos are then conceptualised and developed into themes.
 - ✘ A theme is a collection of similar statements which, by definition, follow the same general theme. They are often used as the development of a theory
 - ✘ any given piece of research may have several themes although it is not uncommon for one theme to dominate the work.
 - ✘ Once themes have been established they assist in the development of inductive reasoning and hence theory.

LOOKING FOR MEANING – DEVELOPING THEORY

- ✘ In order to develop theory some form of meaning must be sought that will make sense to those reading your research. Miles and Huberman (1994: 245-246) highlight thirteen tactics that can assist researchers in moving from description to explanation and aid the development of theory:
 - Noting patterns and themes
 - Seeing plausibility (does it make sense?)
 - Clustering (seeing what goes with what)
 - Making metaphors (integrating diverse pieces of data)
 - Counting (noting the frequencies of various codes and/or themes)
 - Making contrasts/comparisons(to sharpen understanding)
 - Partitioning variables (differentiation)
 - Subsuming things under the general
 - Factoring
 - Noting relations between variables
 - Finding intervening variables
 - Building a logical chain of evidence
 - Making conceptual/theoretical coherence

DEVELOPING THEORY (CONT.)

- ✘ Researchers use different strategies to use these steps in a move towards explanation, however one of the most frequently used methods without CAQDA uses ‘post-it notes’, sticky labels or scissors and glue!
- ✘ Excerpts from your original data set, be they visual, textual or whatever, need to be integrated into your theory to demonstrate how your theory is supported by your original data. It is important that these are integrated as smoothly as possible to enable easy and enjoyable reading – as Taylor and Bogdan (1984) highlight *‘the purpose of research is not only to increase your own understanding of social life, but also to share that understanding with others’*.

DEVELOPING THEORY (CONT.)

- ✘ Despite common preconceptions, qualitative research is often more time consuming than quantitative research, and it is certainly no easier to analyse.
- ✘ The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research can only be adequately decided upon in reference to any given research topic, in other words what may be seen as an advantage in one piece of research may be seen as a disadvantage in another.

COMPUTER ASSISTED ANALYSIS

- ✘ NUD*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Indexing, Searching and Theory-building)
- ✘ and more recently Ethnograph, ATLAS/ti and HyperResearch,
- ✘ The use of these programmes to analyse data is known as Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA). These software programmes, however, are not essential for the analysing of qualitative data and are more geared towards large-scale studies with numerous interviews. They are particularly useful if more than one researcher has collected the data, however simple word processing packages can be used just as effectively when dealing with small to medium sized studies.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

| <i>Advantages</i> | <i>Disadvantages</i> |
|--|---|
| More suitable for sensitive topics of research. | Can be expensive. |
| End result (i.e. report) is less detached from the original data than in quantitative research. | Time consuming. |
| May be more suitable for research with women. | Can be emotionally tiring/ distressing for the researcher. |
| Enables a deeper knowledge of the subjective meanings that are held by participants. | Is not as highly regarded as quantitative research in certain academic disciplines. |
| Allows more freedom when it comes to analysis. | Is criticised as being 'non-scientific'. |
| Analysis is an ongoing process and this can make it easier to guide the research throughout the whole process. | More difficult to stay detached from the data to provide an 'objective' analysis. |

CONCLUSIONS

- ✘ Due to the lack of literature on ‘how to do it’, qualitative researchers often learn to analyse through trial and error, and indeed this is to some degree also how experienced researchers continue to analyse qualitative data. There are no hard and fast rules, it is often a matter of playing around with the data until a theory is formed that adequately reflects your data – a theory that is grounded. Time spent on indexing and writing memos along with coding will always be time well spent as it will inevitably save you time in the long run.

CONCLUSIONS

- ✘ It is important to conclude by highlighting the fact that qualitative research can be successfully used alongside quantitative research, and that they may prove to be mutually beneficial in the development of a full explanation or theory. As Westmarland (2001) highlights:
- ✘ “there is no need for the dichotomous *"us against them"*, *"quantitative against qualitative"* debates ... their success depends solely upon the researcher employing them.”

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- ✘ Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.
- ✘ Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews – An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*, London: Sage.
- ✘ Westmarland, N. (2001) The Quantitative/Qualitative Debate and Feminist Research: A Subjective View of Objectivity [28 paragraphs] *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal] 2 (1). Available at: <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm>
- ✘ May, T. (1993) *Social Research – issues, methods and process*, Buckingham: Open University Press
- ✘ Plummer, K. (1990) *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*, London: Unwin Hyman.
- ✘ Robson, C. (1993) *Real World Research – A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*, Oxford: Blackwell.