Chapter 11

Making Sense of All the Words:
Analyzing Qualitative Data

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an introduction to the process of qualitative analysis and to use step by step examples to provide an idea of how the process of qualitative analysis actually works. Crabtree and Miller, 1992, note that there are many different strategies for analysis, in fact, they suggest there are as many strategies as there are qualitative researchers. This chapter is intended to give the researcher a place to begin and to inspire a deeper dive into this rewarding form of data analysis. Stake, (1995) writes that qualitative data analysis is "a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. Analysis essentially means taking something apart. We take our impressions, our observations, apart… we need to take the new impression apart, giving meaning to the parts"(p. 71). While qualitative data analysis can be time consuming the rewards that come from immersion in the data far outweigh the time spent doing so.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this chapter is to provide an introduction to the process of qualitative analysis and to use step by step examples to provide an idea of how the process of qualitative analysis actually works. Crabtree and Miller, 1992, note that there are many different strategies for analysis, in fact, they suggest there are as many strategies as there are qualitative researchers. This chapter is intended to give the researcher a place to begin and to inspire a deeper dive into this rewarding form of data analysis. Stake, (1995, p. 71) writes that qualitative data analysis is "a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations. Analysis essentially means taking something apart. We take our impressions, our observations, apart… we need to take the new impression apart, giving meaning to the parts". While qualitative data analysis can be time consuming the rewards that come from immersion in the data far outweigh the time spent doing so.

SOURCES OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Before beginning a discussion of qualitative data analysis, we must first discuss sources of qualitative data. This section is a brief overview of qualitative data collection, please further recommendations section at the end of the chapter for a more resources to help with this aspect. Most people naturally think of interviews as the most common source of qualitative data, however, focus groups, field observations, comments on surveys, historical records, and secondary data. The common thread that runs through these forms of qualitative data is words. Words of the interviewee or focus group participant who responds to an open ended question that the interviewer poses. Qualitative data is most commonly words. Patton (2002) reports that frequently the sources of qualitative date includes interviews, documents and documents which provide the researcher with a myriad of WORDS that will need to be analyzed. In quantitative analysis we would say that we are crunching the numbers, however in qualitative data analysis, we cannot crunch the words.

Normally the interviewer audio records the session, whether it be a one on one interview or a focus group of 6 to 8 people who are united by a common experience whether it be work, trauma, or illness, to name a few examples. Someone will then transcribe the session and prepare a document that has the questions asked along with the responses of the participant (See sample at end of chapter). This is a very labor intensive step of the process and if the researcher is fortunate to have grant money or other source of funding available to pay a transcriptionist they are lucky. Otherwise it is the researcher's job to listen intently to the recording and type carefully to capture each spoken word accurately. If audio recording is not possible the researcher will write down the responses that the participants have to his or her questions. If handwriting responses, it helps tremendously to prepare ahead of time with a document that is formatted with two columns, one for the actual verbatim responses and two with a place for the researcher to provide memos to him or herself, recording thoughts, feelings and/or observations (see sample at end of the chapter).

It is also necessary to transcribe the field notes that a researcher has taken which would include the researchers thoughts, feelings and observations of occurrences such as body language of participants or other nonverbal cues that can be seen during the interview or focus group but not seen or heard on a transcribed document (Yin, 2016). Many times a researcher will carry a special notebook specifically for field notes. These field notes can be documented by the researcher at the end of the interview, during a quiet period of reflection. Yin (2016) also discusses the importance of field notes and the importance of a researcher developing a kind of "transcribing language" (p. 170) where the researcher uses a common code such as a shorthand as it were to speed up your field note taking process. Consistency will be the key here, for example, one might use a large letter A to indicate anger. Or a large letter L for laughter. These field note images of laughter or anger will help the researcher better remember the context that is surrounding the participant's experience. Yin (2016) also describes the importance of processing the field notes as soon as possible after the interview or focus group experience as memories fade or blend together and as researchers we want the richest and most accurate data possible. Field notes are important but should not be confused with field observations.

Field observations are observations made in the field by the researcher of, for example, a classroom where the researcher is purposefully observing behavior of a student or the teacher as they go about their day. A researcher making field observations will record the observation and perhaps even count the number of times, for example, the teacher says "open your books". Data that might be recorded along with the number of times the teachers says "open your books" might be tone of voice, inflection, facial

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