FAQ 35: What are some good approaches to analysing qualitative data?

What's the issue?

A vital element in successful qualitative data analysis is to respect the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. The difference is, as Strauss (1987) puts it, not least in how data are treated analytically. In fact, it all depends on the questions researchers define at the start and on the specific methodologies they choose to obtain the desired data. Qualitative methods comprise a wide variety of ways of collecting data, with distinct implications in terms of analysis. Are these data obtained through interviews and focus groups, or are they the result of participant observation? A distinction is usually made between "naturally occurring data", which correspond to different forms of discourse, texts, and oral expressions that might be observed and registered, and "researcher-provoked data", comprising different methodologies devised by the researcher to address particular issues (Silverman, 2006). Although this distinction shouldn't be taken too rigidly, it stresses the importance of considering the process through which particular discourses and texts are created and obtained and, ultimately, how they may be analysed.

Common practice

Since the most common way of gathering data in qualitative research comes from interviews and focus groups, the transcripts of such interviews (usually recorded) are the basis for textual analysis. The way an interview is conducted (in a more or less "structured" fashion) affects the nature of the verbal exchange taking place, and therefore what you can or may anticipate in terms of analysis.

A common way to approach qualitative data analysis in this case is the construction of themes. Sometimes these have already been decided when designing the study, or if the data collection is structured around these predefined themes. In other cases the themes are constructed afterwards. When themes are not constructed beforehand (as is the case with grounded theory research), it is usual that the data analysis actually starts before the data collection is over, and data collection and data analysis are often conducted in parallel, the preliminary analysis being used to decide which areas should be examined in more detail. Coding is an important part of qualitative data analysis and is the process of grouping interviewees' responses into categories that bring together the similar ideas, concepts, or themes that have been discovered.

The analysis of qualitative data usually involves the selection of quotes to support the presentation of the findings. Such quotes are usually anonymous but, if the interviewee is identified, it is common practice to let him or her see the quote and the context (the surrounding text). Qualitative analysis is also a prime field for participatory research, by letting respondents review their own transcripts and to comment on them (also using those comments as part of the research material), help to select meaningful areas of analysis and concern, thus promoting the researchers' accountability.

Besides the above method, other types of analysis that rely not only on content but also on form are also common and useful. "What is said" and also "how it is said" is the prime issue for such methods. Discourse analysis provides a considerable range of techniques for studying different textual formats (for an overview, see Silverman, 2006: 223–240).

Questions to consider

When designing a qualitative study it is worthwhile to think thoroughly about how the data is to be analysed.

Good planning can save a lot of time and energy and, as a rule of thumb, the looser the structure is at the data collection stage, the more time you can expect to spend on the data analysis.

The use of software for qualitative data analysis has increased rapidly over the past few years. Researchers are, however, not quite agreed on whether it improves the quality of the analysis. Also, some software packages tend to, by their own design, skew the analysis into more qualitative details of categorizing the data.

Advanced methods of discourse analysis require further training and are time-demanding, although they have a great potential in the exploring of the cognitive, social, moral, and emotional processes at work in the act of communicating.

Although, in general, interview transcripts constituted the basic materials for the above suggestions of analysis, other textual data – such as field notes, documents, etc. – may be also subjected to the same methodologies.

Other forms of data collecting, such as visual data gathered through video recording or photography, require additional qualitative methodologies of analysis, with particular epistemological implications in terms of the evidence provided.

Pitfalls to avoid

- The issue of confidentiality: it is important to respect the privacy of the interviewees and ensure that whatever information they give to you as a researcher does not backfire on them in any way. This is extremely important when working with data from children. You should therefore have the data under good control:

  - Do not leave transcripts, pictures, videotapes, or whatever you are working with lying about in public.

  - Do not make unnecessary copies, and keep a good track of the location of all copies (in both electronic and other formats).

  - Do not hand your material to anyone without going over the handling procedures.
- The issue of status: despite the fact that qualitative research has a long history within the social sciences, it is still quite common to see a tendency to impose the ideas of quantitative analysis on qualitative data. An example of this is when increasing the number of interviews or focus groups is thought to improve the generalizability of the findings. If generalizability is what you want, use quantitative methods.
- The issue of qualitative data analysis as common sense: everyone engages in some form of qualitative analysis in daily life. This leads some people to the erroneous conclusion that no special training is needed to analyse qualitative data except good common sense. Hopefully, though, the vastly increased use of qualitative techniques in marketing research in recent years has done much to correct these misunderstandings.
- The issue of condensation: invariably, qualitative data analysis is a process of condensation in which a vast amount of data has to be condensed in a meaningful way, both theoretically and generally. This relates to at least three different problems:

  - Drifting: the results are poorly rooted in the original data.

  - Dumping: the results are simply not based on the data and at best present an oversimplified picture.

  - Data drowning: too much data has been collected and the researcher fails to get any meaningful grip on the data.

An example of qualitative data analysis

In a research project on digital inclusion and participation, a specific questionnaire adapting several questions of the EU Kids Online survey was applied to a sample of socially disadvantaged children (aged 9–16) in Portugal. The analysis compared the perceptions of Portuguese children, based on an open-ended question about online risk from the EU Kids Online survey and two open-ended questions about online safety from a purposive survey of disadvantaged children (see Ponte, Simões, and Jorge, 2013).

Considering children's answers to the open-ended questions as texts, we conducted a textual analysis of the open-ended answers, following Fairclough's (2003) methodology. As we have noticed, different wording of questions may lead to different response processes and to distinctive places in which children position themselves, from apparently excluded of the risk situations to keen advisers of their peers on online safety, while also reflecting their social and cultural contexts. This process of comparing and exploring children's answers to the open-ended questions led us to acknowledge the relevance of the different ways of wording the issue of online risk and safety. Unexpected answers stressed the need to listen to children expressing their internet experience in their own terms. (Cristina Ponte, José Simões, and Ana Jorge, Portugal)

References and further resources

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