Chapter 8

Qualitative Data Analysis: An Overview

Throughout this book we have cited the work of qualitative researchers who share a common goal: to understand more about a phenomenon of interest. Among them, William Perry (1970) wanted to understand how men's thinking changes as they experience a high quality college education. Mary Belenky and her associates set out to explore how women experience their own learning and describe their ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986). Edwin Farrell and his young collaborators wanted to understand more about the lives of students who were at-risk for dropping out of high school (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey and White, 1988). Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) embarked on a five year 'journey of discovery' by listening to what girls had to say about their thoughts and feelings about themselves and their relationships with others as they grew to adolescence.

Did these qualitative researchers have hunches about what they might discover? Certainly. These researchers are among the experts in their disciplines, and they bring to the research enterprise long histories of education and experience. But in carrying out their qualitative research studies, their hunches were not embodied in hypotheses that they sought to confirm or disconfirm. This distinction in research practice is critical and leads to a substantially different approach to analyzing one's data and arriving at one's findings. The process of qualitative data analysis takes many forms, but it is fundamentally a nonmathematical analytical procedure that involves examining the meaning of people's words and actions. Qualitative research findings are inductively derived from this data.

Each of the researchers described above were seeking understanding of the phenomenon they studied, but each used a somewhat different approach to analyzing their data. Their approaches varied in the level of interpretation they applied to the data and in the actual hands-on procedures they used to conduct their analysis. In an effort to characterize these differences, the well-known qualitative researcher

Anselm Strauss and his colleague Juliet Corbin (1990) describe three approaches to analyzing qualitative data that are instructive for researchers and readers of qualitative research. These three approaches to analysis can be thought of as varying along a continuum ranging from a low level of interpretation and abstraction engaged in by the researcher, to a high level of interpretation and abstraction required for theory building. The first approach, which they compare to the work of a journalist, is that taken by the researcher who intends to present the data without any analysis. The goal is to let the research participants speak for themselves as much as possible, to tell their stories without interpretation. A collection of personal journal entries or autobiographical stories, organized for a coherent reading but not systematically analyzed, would be examples of such an approach (see, for example, Culley, 1985).

The second approach to data analysis Strauss and Corbin identify is that of the researcher who is primarily concerned with accurately describing what she or he has understood, reconstructing the data into a 'recognizable reality' for the people who have participated in the study. This second approach requires some selection and interpretation of the data, and the skilled researcher using this approach becomes adept at 'weaving descriptions, speaker's words, fieldnote quotations, and their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative' (1990: 22). Most of the studies described at the beginning of this chapter fit most closely with this descriptive approach to data analysis, although it is sometimes difficult to tell this from their published reports. In more recent discussions of their research, Belenky (1992) and her colleagues have referred to their research approach as 'interpretive-descriptive'. Although description is the primary aim of this second approach to the data, some of the interpretations found in descriptive research suggest an interest in theory building, the third approach to data analysis identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Anselm Strauss draws upon a long history of building theory in the discussion of this third approach to data analysis. Bernard Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the notion of grounded theory, or theory that is 'inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 23). This third approach to data analysis, the development of theory, requires the highest level of interpretation and abstraction from the data in order to arrive at the organizing concepts and tenets of a theory to explain the phenomenon of interest (see, for example, Hancock, 1989; Levinson, 1978).

Our approach to data analysis is Strauss and Corbin's second approach: description, recognizing that some interpretation is necessarily involved in the data analysis process and in selecting the research outcomes that eventually will be reported. We think the term 'interpretative-descriptive' research, used by Belenky accurately characterizes what we do as qualitative researchers and the procedures for data analysis we will describe in the next chapter.

The Qualitative Researcher's Perspective

In qualitative studies, data analysis is best conducted as an early and ongoing research activity. This concomitant action on the part of the researcher allows the research design to emerge over time, suggesting the direction for subsequent data collection efforts. Prior to beginning analysis, however, we want to be especially tuned-in to the human instrument: ourselves. Patton (1990) and others suggest a process called *Epoche* as an initial step in data analysis (Ihde, 1977; Katz, 1987; Moustakas, 1990). According to Katz,

> *Epoche* is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. *Epoche* helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open view without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon. This suspension in judgement is critical in phenomenological investigation and requires the setting aside of the researcher's personal viewpoint in order to see the experience for itself.
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> (Katz 1987: 36–7)

Thus the qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others — to indwell — and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand.

What can a qualitative researcher understand that cannot be discovered by people looking in on their own settings, examining their own conversations, or exploring their own diaries? What can the astute researcher understand about these insiders that they cannot see for themselves? Rosalie Wax provides an answer to these questions:

> Obtaining something of the understanding of an insider is, for most researchers, only a first step. They expect, in time, to

become capable of thinking and acting within the perspective of two quite different groups, the one in which they were reared and — to some degree — the one they are studying. They will also, at times, be able to *assume a mental position peripheral to both*, a position from which they will be able to perceive and, hopefully, describe the relationships, systems, and patterns of which an inextricably involved insider is not likely to be consciously aware. For what the social scientist realizes is that while the outsider simply does not know the meanings or the patterns, the insider is so immersed that he may be oblivious to the fact that patterns exist at all [italics added].

(Wax, 1991: 3)

The perspective that the skilled researcher brings to data collection and data analysis described by Wax should be instructive to critics who are quick to describe qualitative research as highly subjective. In fact, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that the objective–subjective dichotomy used to differentiate research approaches is more aptly viewed as *perspectival*. Insiders, outsiders and researchers each bring a perspective to that which is being studied. What distinguishes the qualitative researcher from the others is disciplined analysis, the topic of the next chapter. We complete this section with a chapter on how to go about communicating the outcomes of a qualitative research study.

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