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Introduction

Chapter outline

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This book was written largely because I have worked with many students, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, who have wanted guidance as to how to analyse qualitative data. Being confronted with a set of transcripts from interviews, or the record of one or more focus groups, can create great uncertainty as to what to do next. While acknowledging that there are no 'correct' answers, this book will make suggestions as to how the analysis can be undertaken, using real data to provide examples and exercises.

Structure of the book

Data analysis is never the first task of any research project, so Chapter 2 discusses briefly many of the factors and decisions that affect the earlier stages of the research process. The researcher must decide, for example, whether to use a primarily inductive or a primarily deductive approach, how to collect data and how to ensure that the research is conducted in an ethical manner.

Not all qualitative research involves collecting data directly from humans; some important studies use documents or other materials (such as television programmes) as their data. However, most qualitative studies involve a large element of interaction with people; interviews and focus groups are the most popular methods by which data is collected. Accordingly, Chapter 3 discusses these two forms of data collection, identifying the opportunities that each provides and some of the skills that are required by the researcher in each case.

Chapters 4–6 demonstrate the process of analysing interview data, from the moment when the researcher first looks at their transcripts to the point at which they can identify the key findings of the research. Each of these chapters discusses techniques that may be helpful at different stages of the analysis, shows how I put these techniques into practice with some of my data and presents exercises in which you are invited to do the same. Chapter 7 discusses a range of alternative approaches that could have been taken.

Some of the skills and techniques used to analyse focus group data are the same as those that can be employed in the case of interviews, but the interaction that takes place between focus group members provides extra opportunities for analysis to explore further the views of individuals and of the group. Chapter 8 shows how these opportunities were exploited in the case of one focus group discussion.

Once the analysis is complete and the researcher has identified the findings from the interviews or the focus group(s), the final stage of most research projects is to communicate these findings in the form of written output. The output is the subject matter of the last two chapters. Chapter 9 demonstrates how the researcher can write about their methods and findings, covering questions such as when to include quotations. Chapter 10 considers how to write about the existing literature and how to tie together the findings and the literature in a conclusion.

The interviews and the focus group

The interviews which are analysed in Chapters 4–7, and the focus group discussion which is the subject of Chapter 8, require some introduction. The interview data was collected by an interviewer, under my supervision, in the Faculty of Social Sciences at a case study university. This was primarily an inductive piece of research, which meant, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, that there was no theory to test and no research questions to answer. However, there were a number of research objectives that arose from my experience of working in higher education and of current debates within the field. These objectives were:

- 1 to identify the motivation of lecturers for their choice of career;
- 2 to identify feelings about, and practical difficulties associated with, different elements of the job;
- 3 to discuss different types of students and the experience of teaching them;
- 4 to identify feelings about reflective practice and methods by which it was put into practice; and
- 5 to discuss changes with time in relation to the above factors.

Confidentiality is normally a key ethical requirement of any research project, but in this case the interviewees agreed that material could be included that would enable them to be identified. However, I have sought to avoid this and so, in addition to referring to each lecturer by a pseudonym, have taken out of the transcripts some of the more specific details that would have made identification possible. All the interviewees have read what has been written about them and agree that it reflects fairly the comments that they made. A brief description of each of them appears below:

- Fern was a senior member of staff who had been employed continuously at the case study university for a substantial period of time.
- Susan was a lecturer who had experience of working for other universities before moving to the case study university.
- Rachel was also a lecturer who had experience from other universities; in addition she had worked outside higher education. She had recently moved to the case study university.
- Laura was a lecturer whose previous experience had been in research. She had been at the case study university for a short period of time.
- Lewis had a management position within the Faculty of Social Sciences although he continued to teach and research. He had been employed at the case study university for a substantial period of time.
- Paula was newly appointed to a management role but also retained teaching and research responsibilities. She had been employed at the case study university for a number of years.
- Thomas was a lecturer with previous work experience in industry. He had been employed at the university for a substantial period of time.

Introduction to data analysis

Discussions of the process of qualitative data analysis can sometimes be confusing. Trying to characterise the process discussed in Chapters 4–6 proved surprisingly difficult. As Boeije (2010: 76–77) notes, qualitative analysis consists of cutting data up in order to put it together again in a manner that seems relevant and meaningful. However, Bryman and Burgess (1994: 6) point out that many discussions of qualitative methods fail to address the choices that are available to the researcher in terms of how exactly such analysis can be conducted. Indeed, books on qualitative methods often launch into the process of analysis without discussing the options that are available. To make matters more difficult, where books discuss possible approaches, the terms used can vary quite widely. The most helpful list of options for the new researcher to choose from is, in my opinion, the one provided by Dawson (2009: 119–125):

- Thematic analysis, which is particularly associated with inductive approaches (see Chapter 2) and involves identifying themes that emerge from the data.
- Comparative analysis, which involves comparing and contrasting data collected from different respondents until no more new themes or issues arise.
- Content analysis, where the researcher works systematically through each transcript, looking to see how often certain factors (which are recorded by codes) arise. A similar process of content analysis is associated with the analysis of documents, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.
- Discourse analysis, which focuses on patterns of speech and the way that language is used to convey meaning.

Dawson (2009: 120) acknowledges that these approaches are related and may be used within the same research project. Discourse analysis is not used in the process of analysis which is covered in Chapters 4–6, but is discussed as one of a number of alternative approaches in Chapter 7. However, elements of all the other three approaches are used in Chapters 4–6. Comparative analysis is particularly important when discussing the constant comparative method in Chapter 4 and there are elements throughout of counting the occurrences of different factors, as required by content analysis. However, the approach used draws most heavily on thematic analysis, as the search for themes is a central concern of these chapters.

Thematic analysis has been criticised on the grounds that, by looking for broad areas of similarity and difference, it removes much of the detail and produces accounts that can be quite distant from the experience of any one individual (Gibson and Brown, 2009: 129). However, Gibson and Brown (2009: 129) reject these criticisms on the grounds that thematic analysis:

... provides a way of linking diverse experiences or ideas together, and of juxtaposing and interrelating different examples and features of the data. The themes do re-present and re-contextualise the data to which they relate, but this can be of value in creating new readings and renderings of that data.

Gibson and Brown (2009: 128–129) suggest that there are three sets of aims of thematic analysis:

- 1 Examining commonality – pooling together all the material across a dataset that has something in common. Commonalities which are discovered can then be analysed further, which may mean that subdivisions are found within them.
- 2 Examining differences – the researcher should also identify differences across the dataset and examine the relevance of them to the issues and themes that are being examined.
- 3 Examining relationships – the researcher should examine how different parts of their analysis fit together and contribute to an understanding of different issues and themes.

A commonality can be any feature that two or more cases have in common, including

- a common characteristic such as being female;
- a common experience such as enjoying giving lectures; or
- a common opinion such as believing that the costs of higher education are causing difficulties to students.

The focus group data discussed in Chapter 8 again involved social science lecturers, one of whom (Nick) was in a senior position while the others – Amy, Eric, Evan, Ian, Kevin, Leanne, Melissa, Neil and Yvette – were lecturers or senior lecturers. I moderated the focus group discussion, which was part of a broader educational project where one objective was to 'Research, identify and disseminate good practice in the organisation and delivery of seminars'. It took place alongside a focus group of students, who also considered the characteristics of effective seminars, and was followed by a joint event where a good practice guide was agreed.

Validity

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003: 32) argue that there is no single 'right way' to analyse a dataset and that the decisions taken are inevitably subjective. This point is made frequently in the forthcoming chapters, particularly where I set exercises and then show you how I would have completed them: it should not be assumed that my way is the only useful or correct way, or that your outcome is not valuable simply because it differs from mine.

However, this does not mean that the qualitative researcher has a free reign to analyse in any manner that they choose; they should be guided by the key principle of validity. Validity is defined by Jupp (2006a: 311) as:

The extent to which conclusions drawn from research provide an accurate description of what happened or a correct explanation of what happens and why.

Quantitative studies have some widely agreed methods of measuring validity – for example, to establish the validity of measures used for different phenomena (De Vaus, 2002: 53–54) – but there is no such consensus with regard to qualitative

approaches (Steinke, 2004). However, as Steinke (2004: 185) notes, to decide that the quality of qualitative research cannot be assessed would mean that such research was conducted in random and arbitrary fashion. There are some simple techniques that can be used to enhance the validity of qualitative studies, such as reading thoroughly through interview transcripts before beginning analysis (Schmidt, 2004: 255). Chapter 9 considers a number of further measures that can be taken when the researcher has produced their findings, but wants to check that they are valid before writing them into their research output.

One particularly important concept associated with enhancing the validity of qualitative research is reflexivity. The following definition is offered by Heaton (2004: 104):

Reflexivity in primary qualitative research generally involves the self-examination of how research findings were produced and, particularly, the role of the researcher(s) in their construction.

It is very important that the researcher is aware of the choices that they make when analysing data; they may keep an account of such decisions in order to later consider the implications of their approach (Jupp, 2006b: 258). Gibson and Brown (2009: 195) suggest that keeping a research diary of thoughts and decisions may be a helpful way of showing how analysis has developed before key decisions are forgotten or the reasons for them become less clear with time. An alternative approach, and the one used in Chapters 4–6, is to record key decisions through methodological memos, which should be referred back to when writing the methodology section of the research output (discussed in Chapter 9).

Definitions

It is important to be aware of the definitions of some of the key terms that are used in later chapters, many of which could easily be confused:

- An issue – a specific question or subject to be examined such as student non-attendance at teaching sessions.
- A theme – an idea that can be seen running through several responses such as the danger of students taking assessments without having attended teaching sessions.
- A concept – an underlying idea that is not necessarily referred to directly by respondents such as responsibility for learning (see Chapter 6).
- A category – a heading under which different sections of data can be placed for the purpose of analysis such as the debate over student employment.
- A respondent – someone who contributes data to a research project by, for example, being interviewed or taking part in a focus group discussion.

It is hoped that, when you have read this book, you will feel more confident to undertake a qualitative research project and, in particular, that the analysis of the data will seem a less daunting task.