

1 Introduction

PART 1

Some assumptions

A set of assumptions lies behind this approach to qualitative analysis, which first will be listed and then briefly discussed.

1. Very diverse materials (interviews, transcripts of meetings, court proceedings; field observations; other documents, like diaries and letters; questionnaire answers; census statistics; etc.) provide indispensable data for social research.
2. As compared with both the quantitative analysis of data and the actual collection of data by qualitative analysts, the methods for qualitatively *analyzing* materials are rudimentary. They need to be developed and transmitted widely and explicitly throughout the social science community.
3. There is need for effective theory – at various levels of generality – based on the qualitative analysis of data.
4. Without grounding in data, that theory will be speculative, hence ineffective.
5. Social phenomena are complex: Thus, they require complex grounded theory. This means conceptually dense theory that accounts for a great deal of variation in the phenomena studied.
6. While there can be no hard and fast rules governing qualitative analysis – given the diversity of social settings, research projects, individual research styles, and unexpected contingencies that affect the research – it is possible to lay out general guidelines and rules of thumb to effective analysis.
7. Such guidelines can be useful to researchers across a broad spectrum of disciplines (sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, public health, nursing, and education) and, regardless of “tradition” or “theoretical approach,” just as long as they believe their work can be furthered by the qualitative examination of materials. Also, such analytic methods can be useful whether researchers are wedded to the idea of social science per se or to more humanistic versions of social research (“understanding,” “enlightenment”).
8. Finally, research is basically work – sets of tasks, both physical and conceptual – carried out by researchers. Development, use, and teaching of qualitative analysis can be enhanced by thinking specifically of analysis in terms of the

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organization and conduct of that work. Thus, what we know about work (from research on that phenomenon) can be applied to the improvement of research methods.

Materials as data

Among social scientists a distinction is commonly drawn between quantitative and qualitative research. The distinction in part has its origins in the history of some disciplines, especially perhaps sociology and social anthropology – in sociology, because so many disciplinary trends since World War II have fostered questionnaires and other survey methods of collecting data and their statistical treatment; and in anthropology, because qualitative analysis of field data is the primary mode, although quantitative methods have lately been more employed, to the distress of many who steadfastly rely on qualitative methods. “Qualitative methods” has generally been used, also, to refer to the work of researchers who work as differently as ethnographers, clinical and organizational psychologists, grounded-theorist sociologists, or macrohistorians/sociologists. *Qualitative* researchers tend to lay considerable emphasis on situational and often structural contexts, in contrast to many *quantitative* researchers, whose work is multivariate but often weak on context. Qualitative researchers tend, however, to be weak on cross-comparisons because they often study only single situations, organizations, and institutions. (See, however, recent discussions and methods pertinent to cross-site qualitative analysis: Miles and Huberman 1983, pp. 151–209; Miles, p. 1284; and see others who are inventing and testing procedures for merging quantitative and qualitative analysis: Louis 1982; Smith and Robbins 1982; Jick 1983; Sieber 1983; McClintock et al. 1983.)

Quite aside from historical considerations, it is our contention that the genuinely useful distinction (which we will touch on further) is in how data are treated *analytically*. (There is neither logical nor any sensible reason for opposing these two general modes of analysis. I do not discuss in this book their use in conjunction with each other because I have had no recent research or teaching experience in combining the two.) In quantitative research, statistics or some other form of mathematical operations are utilized in analyzing data. In qualitative research, mathematical techniques are eschewed or are of minimal use, although assuredly rudimentary or implicit counting and measuring are usually

involved (How many? How often? To what degree?). Qualitative analysis may utilize a variety of specialized nonmathematical techniques, as noted below, or as commonly practiced may use procedures not appreciably different from the pragmatic analytic operations used by everybody in thinking about everyday problems. (Leonard Schatzman terms these *natural analysis*. See Schatzman, forthcoming.) Qualitative researchers, however, when addressing scientific rather than practical or personal problems, are more self-conscious and more “scientifically rigorous” in their use of these common modes of thinking.

In any event, moving to the research materials themselves: They occur in a variety of forms, all of which have been utilized by social scientists – as well as by investigators in fields like history, psychology, education, and law – although different disciplines and their specialties have favored one type of material rather than another. For instance, among those primarily utilizing qualitative methods, ethnographers have relied mainly for data on field observations converted into field notes and on interviews. Historians may interview if their work is on contemporary or relatively recent events, but principally they utilize many different kinds of documents, depending on their specific research aims and on the availability and accessibility of materials: records of various types, memoirs, official and personal letters, diaries, newspapers, maps, photographs, and paintings. Researchers in clinical psychology base conclusions primarily on their clinical observations of patients’ nonverbal as well as verbal behavior, and on therapeutic interviews. Many sociologists prefer to analyze written texts rather than engage in field research or interviewing; others generate materials through tape recordings of conversations, transcripts of court trials, and the like. While some materials (data) may be generated by the researcher – as through interviews, field observations, or videotapes – a great deal of it already exists, either in the public domain or in private hands, and can be used by an informed researcher provided that he or she can locate and gain access to the material – or is lucky enough to stumble on it.

These materials, then, are useful for qualitative analysts in all of the social sciences. In some disciplines or their specialties, materials are converted into quantitative data through counting and measuring operations. In others, counting and quantitative measurement are minimal and these operations may even be rejected on reasonable, well-thought-out grounds. Whether qualitative or quantitative analysis predominates is sometimes a matter of ideology (which can be frozen into

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tradition), but more often is a matter of rational choice. At any rate, qualitative analyses are more than merely useful: They are often indispensable.

Of course in daily life everyone engages in some form of qualitative analysis – much as Moliere’s citizen used prose – without thinking twice about the matter since no judgments, no decisions, no actions can be taken in their absence. So, in a genuine sense, both common sense and “researcher” conclusions are based on “qualitative data.” Without denigrating the care, self-awareness, and systematic character of a large proportion of everyday, pragmatic analyses (indeed, researchers themselves would be irate if accused of lacking those virtues in their daily thinking), it is clear enough that researchers are expected by their colleagues to adhere to disciplinary practices associated with the “good researcher,” and will criticize or ignore as incompetently done any research products judged deficient in careful, scrupulous, systematic treatment of reliable data.

More important for our purposes here is that improved qualitative analysis requires more explicitly formulated, reliable, and valid methods than currently exist. *Analysis* is synonymous with *interpretation* of data. It refers to research activity which, as will be detailed later, involves several different but related elements (or operations). (See Miles and Huberman 1983, p. 214, for slightly different emphases.) Qualitative analysis occurs at various levels of explicitness, abstraction, and systematization. At the beginning of a research project, when the researcher reads a sentence or sees an action, the analysis may be quite implicit; but analysis it surely is insofar as perception is selective, mediated by language and experience. Later in the investigation or even during the first days when an observed scene, interview, or perused document challenges the researcher’s analytic sense, the conclusions will be drawn more explicitly and probably more systematically. Depending on the purposes of the investigator, the final conclusions drawn in the course of the research can vary greatly by level of abstraction. At the lowest levels they can be “descriptive,” and at the highest levels, the researcher may aim for the most general of theory. But description itself can be “low level” – perhaps only reproducing the informants’ own words or recording their actions – or can be reported at a much more complex, systematic, and interpretative level. If social theory is aimed for, it can be formulated with more or less systematic treatment and with varying degrees of abstraction. In addition, the theory at any level can be broader or narrower in scope; and it may be linked with other theory which is more or less developed.

Methods for qualitative analysis of data

Social scientists who engage entirely or primarily in qualitative analysis generally would agree that quantitative methodology is much more explicitly presented in standard manuals and during training. As we noted some years ago in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), quantitative analysts since the 1920s have developed relatively rigorous methods for collecting and treating their data, and have written extensively about those methods. By contrast, much of the attention of qualitative researchers is still focused on improving and making explicit their techniques for the collection of data – analytic considerations being at best quite secondary and, such as they are, transmitted on an apprenticeship basis in tacit rather than explicit fashion. However, a number of researchers have developed effective methods for the qualitative analysis of different types of materials. The character of some of these methods is suggested by their respective names: conversational analysis, (qualitative) network analysis, biographical analysis, sociolinguistic analysis, dramaturgical or social drama analysis, textual analysis. These methods, or sets of techniques, have evolved in conjunction with particular lines of research and theoretical interests or commitments.

Grounded theory

The methodological thrust of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data is toward the development of theory, without any particular 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 that includes a number of distinct features, such as theoretical sampling, and certain methodological guidelines, such as the making of constant comparisons and the use of a coding paradigm, to ensure conceptual development and density.

This approach to qualitative analysis was developed by Glaser and Strauss in the early 1960s during a field observational study of hospital staffs' handling of dying patients (1965, 1968). Contributing to its development were two streams of work and thought: first, the general thrust of American Pragmatism (especially the writings of John Dewey, but also those of George H. Mead and Charles Peirce) and including its emphases on action and the problematic situation, and the necessity for conceiving of method in the context of problem solving; second,

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the tradition in Chicago Sociology at the University of Chicago from the 1920s through the mid-1950s, which extensively utilized field observations and intensive interviews as data-collecting techniques, and furthered much research on the sociology of work. Both the philosophical and the sociological traditions assumed that change is a constant feature of social life but that its specific directions need to be accounted for; they also placed social interaction and social processes at the center of their attention. In addition, Chicago Sociology almost from its inception emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors' viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change. The study of dying by Glaser and Strauss, with its initial use of the grounded theory style of analysis, drew from both of those philosophical and sociological traditions. (For a fuller historical understanding of the background of grounded theory, it would be useful to read John Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, 1937, and Everett C. Hughes's papers on occupations and work and on fieldwork in *The Sociological Eye*, 1971.¹)

Of course, theory is generated and tested even by researchers whose analytic methods remain relatively implicit, but the grounded theory style of analysis is based on the premise that theory at various levels of generality is indispensable for deeper knowledge of social phenomena (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). We also argued that such theory ought to be developed in intimate relationship with data, with researchers fully aware of themselves as instruments for developing that grounded theory. This is true whether they generate the data themselves or ground their theoretical work in data collected by others. When we advocated that position in 1967 there was perhaps more need to remind social scientists of that necessity for grounding their theory than now.

Complex theory

One of our deepest convictions is that social phenomena are complex phenomena. Much social research seems to be based on quite the opposite assumption; either that, or researchers working in various research traditions describe or analyze the phenomena they study in relatively uncomplex terms, having given up on the possibility of ordering the "buzzing, blooming confusion" of experience except by

¹ Barney Glaser had studied with Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia University, and so brought to the development of the grounded theory approach some of Lazarsfeld's emphasis on multivariate analysis. The Chicago tradition similarly emphasizes variation.

ignoring “for a time” its complexity. Their assumption apparently is that later generations will build on current endeavors – a kind of accumulation premise that seems reasonable, since one cannot study everything at the same time. Nevertheless much more complexity can be handled than is often done by quite competent or even gifted researchers. This is why grounded theory methodology emphasizes the need for developing many concepts and their linkages in order to capture a great deal of the variation that characterizes the central phenomena studied during any particular research project. We shall have much to say about this issue of complexity throughout this book.

Guidelines and rules of thumb, not rules

Affected by a mistaken imagery (based on speculative philosophy) of effective scientific research – exact, precise, explicit about its technology – students of social life often assume that it should be possible to lay down rules (later if not right now) for carrying out social investigations. We do not believe this is an accurate characterization of how any kind of work is carried out; and it is not likely ever to be true for researchers who aspire to developing new theory or to extending extant theory. Even in the more precise scientific investigations of physicists or chemists, contingency is inevitable; thus, discretion is advisable and often essential. Moreover, the best opinion among philosophers these days holds that such codification of investigation is impossible anyhow.

We shall not argue the point further except to repeat that several structural conditions mitigate against a neat codification of methodological rules for social research. These include the diversity of social settings and their attendant contingencies which affect not merely the collection of data but how they are to be, and can be, analyzed – quite aside from researchers’ often different aims in doing their analyses. Researchers also have quite different investigatory styles, let alone different talents and gifts, so that a standardization of methods (swallowed whole, taken seriously) would only constrain and even stifle social researchers’ best efforts.

Hence we take the stand about our own suggested methods that they are by no means to be regarded as hard and fixed rules for converting data into effective theory. They constitute guidelines that should help most researchers in their enterprises. For that – as we shall attempt to show – researchers need to be alive not only to the constraints and challenges of research settings and research aims, but to the nature of

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their data. They must also be alert to the temporal aspects or phasing of their researches, the open-ended character of the “best research” in any discipline, the immense significance of their own experiences as researchers, and the local contexts in which the researches are conducted.

Our guidelines for developing theory are not merely a kind of laundry list of suggestions, however: they are stronger than that, for they emphasize that certain operations must be carried out. Coding must be done, and generally done early and continually. Analytic memos must be done early and continually in conjunction with the coding. And a few concepts, loosely strung together, cannot satisfy the requirements for formulating social theory. Yet, we emphasize also that personal pacing and experiences can be ignored only to the detriment of effective and analytic work. We do not believe that strict instructions can be given for how to proceed in detail with all kinds of materials, by everyone, holding for all kinds of research, at all phases of the research project. Methods, too, are developed and change in response to changing work contexts. However, we have throughout this book included lists of rules of thumb. These are to be thought of as operational aids, of proven usefulness in our research. *Study* them, *use* them, but *modify* them in accordance with the requirements of your own research. Methods, after all, are developed and changed in response to changing work contexts.

Our guidelines and rules of thumb, then, will be useful to any researcher who shares our concern for achieving better comprehension of social phenomena – through the development of some level of theory – regardless of the substantive character of the materials or of the particular discipline in which he or she has been trained. We believe that the same assertion holds for researchers who are committed to different traditions or theoretical approaches, even within the same discipline; this, provided these traditions and approaches cash in on their strengths – raising important problems or looking at relevant or neglected areas of social life – rather than box their adherents into dogmatic positions which foreclose on the possibility of actually challenging some of what their own traditions currently stand for.

Underlying some contemporary positions are the contrasting assumptions that either a social science is possible or that it is to be eschewed in favor of more humanistic versions of knowledge about human activity. Our own position is somewhere between these extremes, though some practitioners of grounded theory methodology might lean in either direction on that continuum of belief. Nevertheless, we believe

that the methodological guidelines and general procedures can be of service to researchers regardless of where they stand on this particularly divisive and long-standing dispute among social scientists.

Research investigation as work

The last assumption that underlies the grounded theory approach is that research should be understood and analyzed as work. Essentially we are advocating a highly self-conscious approach to the work of research: to how it is and can be actually carried out under a variety of circumstances, during its various phases, by researchers who stand in different relationships to the work of getting and examining and interpreting the information that becomes their data. Consequently, this book is not only based on an explicit sociology-of-work perspective, but is designed to help readers think in those terms about their own research endeavors. We should note also that research work consists of more than sets of tasks or a clear formulation of the goals of those tasks. It involves the organization of work – the articulation of tasks (itself a type of work) including the management of physical, social, and personal resources necessary for getting the research work done, whether working alone, with someone else, or in a team.

Perhaps it is also necessary to add that a sociology-of-work perspective emphasizes temporal features, both of the investigatory process itself and of the phenomena being studied. This constitutes our own bias toward reality, of course. For all that, we believe a sociology-of-work perspective on research activity can be useful even if a reader chooses to ignore for the moment or to downplay or deny temporal considerations when doing his or her research work. Admittedly, however, our approach to analysis, which emphasizes complexity of phenomena and the unexpected contingencies affecting both the phenomena under study and the course of the research itself, tends to bring temporality into focus for the analyst.

We should add that while much research involves routine operations and can at times be boring, assuredly also at its most creative it is exciting, fun, challenging, although sometimes extremely disturbing and painful. This means that researchers, as workers, can and should *care* very deeply about their work – not being simply possessive about its products or jealous of their research reputations, but find deep and satisfying meaning in their work. They and it are immensely interactive in exactly the sense used by John Dewey when writing about artists (he

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did not regard artistic and scientific activity as basically different): An “expression of the self in and through a medium, constituting the work of art, is *itself* a prolonged interaction issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which *both of them* [our italics here] acquire a form and order they did not first possess” (Dewey 1934, p. 65). In short, the researcher, if more than merely competent, will be “in the work” – emotionally as well as intellectually – and often will be profoundly affected by experiences engendered by the research process itself.

Qualitative analysis of data: an introduction

Besides those general assumptions that lie behind our approach to the qualitative analysis of materials, some additional remarks will be useful before the more technical details of grounded theory analysis are discussed.

Complexity

The basic question facing us is how to capture the complexity of reality (phenomena) we study, and how to make convincing sense of it. Part of the capturing of course is through extensive data collection. But making sense of complex data means three things. First, it means that both the complex interpretations and the data collection are guided by successively evolving interpretations made during the course of the study. (The final products are analyses done at a relatively high level of abstraction: that is, *theories*.) The second point is that a theory, to avoid simplistic rendering of the phenomena under study, must be conceptually dense – there are many concepts, and many linkages among them. (Even the best monographs often are rather thin in their conceptual treatment, as betrayed by the monograph’s index, which lists few if any new concepts.) The third point: It is necessary to do detailed, intensive, microscopic examination of the data in order to bring out the amazing complexity of what lies in, behind, and beyond those data. (Later, we shall say much more about complexity and capturing it through analysis.)

Experiential data

To that analysis, as will be seen, analysts bring experiences of various kinds. If not new to the research game, then they bring research skills