

Qualitative analysis for social scientists

The teaching of qualitative analysis in the social sciences is rarely undertaken in a structured way. This handbook is designed to remedy that and to present students and researchers with a systematic method for interpreting “qualitative data,” whether derived from interviews, field notes, or documentary materials.

The special emphasis of the book is on how to develop theory through qualitative analysis. The reader is provided with the tools for doing qualitative analysis, such as codes, memos, memo sequences, theoretical sampling and comparative analysis, and diagrams, all of which are abundantly illustrated by actual examples drawn from the author’s own varied qualitative research and research consultations, as well as from his research seminars. Many of the procedural discussions are concluded with rules of thumb that can usefully guide the researchers’ analytic operations. The difficulties that beginners encounter when doing qualitative analysis and the kinds of persistent questions they raise are also discussed, as is the problem of how to integrate analyses. In addition, there is a chapter on the teaching of qualitative analysis and the giving of useful advice during research consultations, and there is a discussion of the preparation of material for publication.

The book has been written not only for sociologists but for all researchers in the social sciences and in such fields as education, public health, nursing, and administration, who employ qualitative methods in their work.

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Preface

This book is a handbook of sorts for the better understanding of social phenomena through a particular style of qualitative analysis of data (*grounded theory*). That mode of doing analysis is only one of many used in qualitative research. It is designed especially for *generating and testing theory*. Although its originators and principal users to date are sociologists, it has been found useful by social scientists from other disciplines, as well as researchers in education, public health, social work, and nursing – found useful because it is a general style of doing analysis that does not depend on particular disciplinary perspectives.

The purpose of this book is to instruct anyone who is interested in learning or improving his or her ability to do qualitative analysis of data. Traditionally, researchers learn such analysis by trial and error, or by working with more experienced people on research projects. Writings on qualitative method, qualitative research, ethnographic method, fieldwork, and interviewing are long on their discussions of data collection and research experiences and short on analysis – how to interpret the data (Miles 1983, pp. 125–6). How often one hears the cry of distress, “What do I do now with all those data I’ve collected?” Or from more experienced researchers, “I should have done much more with all those data – or at least done it faster.”

So in this handbook I have attempted to address the issues of *how* one does theoretically informed interpretations of materials, and does them efficiently and effectively. (I assume experience with or at least knowledge on the part of readers of qualitative data-collecting methods.) To that end, detailed discussions of basic analytic procedures are given, as are rules of thumb for proceeding with them. The illustrative materials are drawn from my research or that of research associates and students, with repeated use of materials from three projects, in order to give a heightened sense of procedural continuity. To these materials, I have added rather specific commentaries to make clearer what is happening analytically in them. Also included are typical

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problems encountered when learning the grounded theory mode of analysis (and probably any mode of qualitative analysis), as well as how to write up findings and interpretations for publication. One chapter is addressed to the teaching of analysis, and throughout the book one can quite literally see it being taught.

In addition, how qualitative analysis is *actually* done is made vivid by showing through illustration various researchers working together as teachers, learners, and research teammates. The realities of doing analysis – whether one does it as a solo researcher or is fortunate enough to have working colleagues – are particularly difficult to convey, except by showing researchers *at work*. Discussions of how to do analysis, even descriptions of how it should be done, are not enough unless supplemented by visualization of researchers engaged in their work, whether seen in person or shown in the printed form attempted in this book.

A word more about the illustrative materials. In assembling them, a decision had to be made about which ones to use. Originally I had thought of drawing on materials dealing with a relatively wide variety of substantive phenomena. In the end I opted for using those from my own research and teaching, because even with their necessarily restricted scope they would better serve to convey how analysis is taught and learned, as well as to make analytic operations more comprehensible for readers. From considerable experience I have learned that certain operations – particularly the coding, the use of comparative analysis and theoretical sampling, and the integration of findings into a coherent theoretical formulation – are especially difficult to teach and carry out with ease. While my own research interests are reflected in the illustrations (particularly the sociology of health and illness, and the sociology of work/professions), the grounded theory mode of analysis has been used successfully in other substantive areas, including sociological studies of scientists' work (Gerson 1983; Star 1983, 1984, 1985; Star and Gerson, forthcoming; Volberg 1983; Clarke 1984), drug addiction (Biernacki 1986; Rosenbaum 1981), house construction (Glaser 1976), negotiation (Strauss 1977), social support of the elderly (Bowers 1983), the alcoholic policy arena (Wiener 1981), organizational contraction and shifts in the division of labor (Hazan 1985), remarriages of middle-aged divorcees (Cauhape 1983), inheritance (Glaser, forthcoming), biographies (Schuetze 1981; Rieman, forthcoming), abortion (Hoffman-Riem 1984), adult socialization (Broadhead 1983), organization (Gerson 1986), and so forth. In short, grounded theory analysis is a general style of research, not at all restricted in range of analyzable data.

I suggest that readers handle this rather sizable book in the following way. First, it will perhaps be most sensible to read the entire book very quickly, indeed only scanning the illustrative materials. Second, then reread it, carefully. Third, study selected chapters, especially those concerned specifically with techniques: notably those pertaining to coding, memoing, integrative procedures, and the detailed analytic commentaries. In general, think of the book as a smorgasbord: Run your eye down the table of edibles, then move to the essential foods, then return repeatedly to those you especially need – or *still* need. You may find that what you get from this book at one phase of your research (or one stage of your research development) will change as you move from one to another phase or stage. Presumably the book may also function from time to time as a reference volume.

The analytic mode introduced here is perfectly learnable by any competent social researcher who wishes to interpret data using this mode (either without quantitative methods or in conjunction with them). It takes no special genius to do that analysis effectively. True, when students are first learning it, they often listen in awe to their teacher–researcher and mutter about his or her genius at this kind of work, but despair of their own capacities for doing it. They never could! (I shall touch on this psychological problem later in the book.) Inevitably, students get over this phase, if unhappily they have been in it, as they gain increasing competence as well as confidence in that competence. Of course they do not believe they can do it until their first major piece of research – usually a thesis – has actually been completed.

But let us not dwell on students: The point is simply that learning this mode of qualitative analysis is entirely feasible. Like any set of skills, the learning involves hard work, persistence, and some not always entirely pleasurable experience. Furthermore, the latter is requisite to discovering one's own adaptations of any methodology (any technology), a composite of situational context, a personal biography, astuteness, theoretical and social sensitivity, a bit of luck – and courage.

This leads me to a second – though less primary – purpose for writing this book. As mentioned earlier, the literature on qualitative analysis is sparse, and even the ethnographic monographs generally give little clue as to the authors' analytic processes. I would predict, though, that this long era of flying by the seat of one's pants and direct-apprenticeship socialization and relative lack of public communication about analytic techniques, styles, and experiences is about to be supplemented by books like mine or the recent *Source Book of New Methods* by Miles and Huberman (1984). So, my second reason for writing this

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book was to further the systematic, detailed, and lengthy reporting–illustrating of *analytic* styles: modes, techniques, and experiences.

One last comment: My colleague and co-developer of the grounded theory style of qualitative analysis, Barney Glaser, teaches and uses that style in research essentially as I do. There are some differences in his specific teaching tactics and perhaps in his actual carrying out of research, but the differences are minor. I am very much indebted to him, of course, for his crucial part in the evolution of this analytic style, for continued vital discussions over the years about teaching and doing analysis, and in this book for permission to quote extensively in Chapter 1 from his *Theoretical Sensitivity* (1978). Indeed, the second half of that chapter is essentially his except for some amplification. The quotations from his book and some from our co-authored volume, *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), are distinguishable insofar as they are separated from the main text by quotation marks, and occasionally slightly edited or rephrased to suit present purposes. I recommend both books as supplementary reading to this one: *Discovery* for the general background to this approach to qualitative analysis, and *Theoretical Sensitivity* for its greater detail concerning some procedures and further discussion of what lies behind their use (see also Charmaz 1983).

I wish also to express appreciation to many other colleagues for their direct and indirect contributions to this book, for in a genuine sense it is truly a collaborative enterprise. Leigh Star (Tremont Research Institute, San Francisco), Juliet Corbin (University of California, San Francisco), and Joseph Schneider (Drake University) wrote immensely detailed critiques of the initial draft, and I have followed closely many of their suggestions in its revision. Peter Conrad (Brandeis University), Adele Clarke and Nan Chico (Tremont Research Institute and University of California, San Francisco), and Paul Atkinson (University of Cardiff, Wales) also made many useful suggestions. Over the years, I have learned a great deal from students in research seminars and from consulting with them on their research: They will know my indebtedness to them if they read this book, even if they or their materials do not appear in it by name. The same is true of my friends and colleagues, Elihu Gerson (Director, Tremont Research Institute), Leonard Schatzman (University of California, San Francisco), and Fritz Schuetze (University of Kassel, West Germany) with whom I have had countless discussions of methodological issues for many years; and of course there are also my research teammates who appear in these pages – Shizuko Fagerhaugh, Barbara Suczek, Carolyn Wiener, and, again,

Juliet Corbin (University of California, San Francisco) – who furthered and greatly sharpened my teaching and doing of analysis just by working closely with me on research projects. Among the European contributors to my thinking about analysis and its teaching–consultation, I need especially to single out Richard Grathoff (University of Bielefeld, West Germany) and the members of his research teams – particularly Bruno Hildebrand (University of Marburg and University of Frankfurt); Hans-Georg Soeffner and his research teams (Fern Universitaet, Hagen, West Germany); also, for the same reasons, four visiting fellows from overseas – Herman Coenen (University of Tillburg, The Netherlands), Gerhard Rieman (University of Kassel), Christa Hoffman-Riem (University of Hamburg), and Wolfram Fischer (The J-Liebig University). And thanks also to Malcolm Johnson (Open University, England) for suggesting I send this book to Cambridge University Press, a most fortunate suggestion. The prominence in the book of explicit rules of thumb have their source in Leigh Star’s insistence that these needed to be spelled out clearly. Also, I have quoted, often extensively, from transcripts and materials in which various colleagues and students have either appeared or which they have written. I am especially grateful to them since their contributions, collectively speaking, form the illustrative heart of this book. These people are Ritch Adison, Barbara Bowers, Nan Chico, Juliet Corbin, Adele Clarke, Shizuko Fagerhaugh, Elihu Gerson, Anna Hazan, Gail Hornstein, Katarin Jurich, F. Raymond Marks, Misty MacCready, Evelyn Peterson, Aaron Smith, Leigh Star, Barbara Suczek, Steve Wallace, and Carolyn Wiener. Most of these people were students in my research seminars, but I wish also to thank their colleagues; after all, it was they who taught me, indirectly but sometimes directly, how to teach qualitative research more effectively. Last in this listing – but not in fact – are two other collaborators. They typed portions of the manuscript and subjected it to most helpful editorial comments: my secretary, Sally Maeth, and my wife, Frances Strauss.