Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data

Analysis of qualitative interview data typically begins with a set of transcripts of the interviews conducted. Obtaining said transcripts requires having either taken exceptionally good notes during an interview or, preferably, recorded the interview and then transcribed it. Transcribing interviews is usually the first step toward analyzing qualitative interview data. To **transcribe** an interview means that you create, or someone whom you've hired creates, a complete, written copy of the recorded interview by playing the recording back and typing in each word that is spoken on the recording, noting who spoke which words. In general, it is best to aim for a verbatim transcription, one that reports word for word exactly what was said in the recorded interview. If possible, it is also best to include nonverbals in an interview's written transcription. Gestures made by respondents should be noted, as should the tone of voice and notes about when, where, and how spoken words may have been emphasized by respondents.

If you have the time (or if you lack the resources to hire others), I think it is best to transcribe your interviews yourself. I never cease to be amazed by the things I recall from an interview when I transcribe it myself. If the researcher who conducted the interview transcribes it himself or herself, that person will also be able to make a note of nonverbal behaviors and interactions that may be relevant to analysis but that could not be picked up by audio recording. I've seen interviewees roll their eyes, wipe tears from their face, and even make obscene gestures that spoke volumes about their feelings but that could not have been recorded had I not remembered to include these details in their transcribed interviews.

The goal of **analysis** is to reach some inferences, lessons, or conclusions by condensing large amounts of data into relatively smaller, more manageable bits of understandable information. Analysis of qualitative interview data often works inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006).For an additional reminder about what an inductive approach to analysis means, see Chapter 2 "Linking Methods With Theory". If you would like to learn more about inductive qualitative data analysis, I recommend two titles: Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. To move from the specific observations an interviewer collects to identifying patterns across those observations, qualitative interviewers will often begin by reading through transcripts of their interviews and trying to identify codes. A **code** is a shorthand representation of some more complex set of issues or ideas. In this usage, the word *code* is a noun. But it can also be a verb. The process of identifying codes in one's qualitative data is often referred to as *coding*. Coding involves identifying themes across interview data by reading and rereading (and rereading again) interview transcripts until the researcher has a clear idea about what sorts of themes come up across the interviews.

Qualitative researcher and textbook author Kristin Esterberg (2002)Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. describes coding as a multistage process. Esterberg suggests that

there are two types of coding: open coding and focused coding. To analyze qualitative interview data, one can begin by **open coding** transcripts. This means that you read through each transcript, line by line, and make a note of whatever categories or themes seem to jump out to you. At this stage, it is important that you not let your original research question or expectations about what you *think* you might find cloud your ability to see categories or themes. It's called *open* coding for a reason—keep an open mind. Open coding will probably require multiple go-rounds. As you read through your transcripts, it is likely that you'll begin to see some commonalities across the categories or themes that you've jotted down. Once you do, you might begin focused coding.

Focused coding involves collapsing or narrowing themes and categories identified in open coding by reading through the notes you made while conducting open coding. Identify themes or categories that seem to be related, perhaps merging some. Then give each collapsed/merged theme or category a name (or code), and identify passages of data that fit each named category or theme. To identify passages of data that represent your emerging codes, you'll need to read through your transcripts yet again (and probably again). You might also write up brief definitions or descriptions of each code. Defining codes is a way of making meaning of your data and of developing a way to talk about your findings and what your data mean. Guess what? You are officially analyzing data!

As tedious and laborious as it might seem to read through hundreds of pages of transcripts multiple times, sometimes getting started with the coding process is actually the hardest part. If you find yourself struggling to identify themes at the open coding stage, ask yourself some questions about your data. The answers should give you a clue about what sorts of themes or categories you are reading. In their text on analyzing qualitative data, Lofland and Lofland (1995)Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. identify a set of questions that I find very useful when coding qualitative data. They suggest asking the following:

1. Of what topic, unit, or aspect is this an instance?
2. What question about a topic does this item of data suggest?
3. What sort of answer to a question about a topic does this item of data suggest (i.e., what proposition is suggested)?

Asking yourself these questions about the passages of data that you're reading can help you begin to identify and name potential themes and categories.

Still feeling uncertain about how this process works? Sometimes it helps to see how interview passages translate into codes. In Table 9.1 "Interview Coding Example", I present two codes that emerged from the inductive analysis of transcripts from my interviews with child-free adults. I also include a brief description of each code and a few (of many) interview excerpts from which each code was developed.

Table 9.1 Interview Coding Example

Code	Code description	Interview excerpts
Reify gender	Participants *reinforce* heteronormative ideals in two ways: (a) by calling up stereotypical images of gender and family and (b) by citing their own "failure" to achieve those ideals.	"The woman is more involved with taking care of the child. [As a woman] I'd be the one waking up more often to feed the baby and more involved in the personal care of the child, much more involved. I would have more responsibilities than my partner. I know I would feel that burden more than if I were a man."
		"I don't have that maternal instinct."
		"I look at all my high school friends on Facebook, and I'm the only one who isn't married and doesn't have kids. I question myself, like if there's something wrong with me that I don't have that."
		"I feel badly that I'm not providing my parents with grandchildren."
Resist Gender	Participants *resist* gender norms in two ways: (a) by pushing back against negative social responses and (b) by redefining family for themselves in a way that challenges normative notions of family.	"Am I less of a woman because I don't have kids? I don't think so!"
		"I think if they're gonna put their thoughts on me, I'm putting it back on them. When they tell me, 'Oh, Janet, you won't have lived until you've had children. It's the most fulfilling thing a woman can do!' then I just name off the 10 fulfilling things I did in the past week that they didn't get to do because they have kids."
		"Family is the group of people that you want to be with. That's it."
		"The whole institution of marriage as a transfer of property from one family to another and the supposition that the whole purpose in life is to create babies is pretty ugly. My definition of family has nothing to do with that. It's about creating a better life for ourselves."

As you might imagine, wading through all these data is quite a process. Just as quantitative researchers rely on the assistance of special computer programs designed to help with sorting through and analyzing their data, so, too, do qualitative researchers. Where quantitative researchers have SPSS and MicroCase (and many others), qualitative researchers have programs such as NVivo (http://www.qsrinternational.com) and Atlasti (http://www.atlasti.com). These are programs specifically designed to assist qualitative researchers with organizing, managing, sorting, and analyzing large amounts of qualitative data. The programs work by allowing researchers to import interview transcripts contained in an electronic file and then label or code passages, cut and paste passages, search for various words or phrases, and organize complex interrelationships among passages and codes.

In sum, the following excerpt, from a paper analyzing the workplace sexual harassment interview data I have mentioned previously, summarizes how the process of analyzing qualitative interview data often works:

All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed and imported into the computer program NVivo. NVivo is designed to assist researchers with organizing, managing, interpreting, and analyzing non-numerical, qualitative data. Once the transcripts, ranging from 20 to 60 pages each, were imported into NVivo, we first coded the data according to the themes outlined in our interview guide. We then closely reviewed each transcript again, looking for common themes across interviews and coding like categories of data together. These passages, referred to as codes or "meaning units" (Weiss, 2004),Weiss, R. S. (2004). In their own words: Making the most of qualitative interviews. *Contexts, 3*, 44–51. were then labeled and given a name intended to succinctly portray the themes present in the code. For this paper, we coded every quote that had something to do with the labeling of harassment. After reviewing passages within the "labeling" code, we placed quotes that seemed related together, creating several sub-codes. These sub-codes were named and are represented by the three subtitles within the findings section of this paper.Our three subcodes were the following: (a) "It's different because you're in high school": Sociability and socialization at work; (b) Looking back: "It was sexual harassment; I just didn't know it at the time"; and (c) Looking ahead: New images of self as worker and of workplace interactions. Once our sub-codes were labeled, we re-examined the interview transcripts, coding additional quotes that fit the theme of each sub-code. (Blackstone, Houle, & Uggen, 2006)Blackstone, A., Houle, J., & Uggen, C. "At the time, I thought it was great": Age, experience, and workers' perceptions of sexual harassment. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, QC, August 2006. Currently under review.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Interviews

As the preceding sections have suggested, qualitative interviews are an excellent way to gather detailed information. Whatever topic is of interest to the researcher employing this method can be explored in much more depth than with almost any other method. Not only are participants given the opportunity to elaborate in a way that is not possible with other methods such as survey research, but they also are able share information with researchers in their own words and from their own perspectives rather than being asked to fit those perspectives into the perhaps limited response options provided by the researcher. And because qualitative interviews are designed to elicit detailed information, they are especially useful when a researcher's aim is to study social processes, or the "how" of various phenomena. Yet another, and sometimes overlooked, benefit of qualitative interviews that occurs in person is that researchers can make observations beyond those that a respondent is orally reporting. A respondent's body language, and even her or his choice of time and location for the interview, might provide a researcher with useful data.

Of course, all these benefits do not come without some drawbacks. As with quantitative survey research, qualitative interviews rely on respondents' ability to accurately and honestly recall whatever details about their lives, circumstances, thoughts, opinions, or behaviors are being asked about. As Esterberg (2002) puts it, "If you want to

know about what people actually do, rather than what they say they do, you should probably use observation [instead of interviews]."Esterberg, K. G. (2002). *Qualitative methods in social research*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. Further, as you may have already guessed, qualitative interviewing is time intensive and can be quite expensive. Creating an interview guide, identifying a sample, and conducting interviews are just the beginning. Transcribing interviews is labor intensive—and that's before coding even begins. It is also not uncommon to offer respondents some monetary incentive or thank-you for participating. Keep in mind that you are asking for more of participants' time than if you'd simply mailed them a questionnaire containing closed-ended questions. Conducting qualitative interviews is not only labor intensive but also emotionally taxing. When I interviewed young workers about their sexual harassment experiences, I heard stories that were shocking, infuriating, and sad. Seeing and hearing the impact that harassment had had on respondents was difficult. Researchers embarking on a qualitative interview project should keep in mind their own abilities to hear stories that may be difficult to hear.