Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis:
Qualitative Data Analysis as a Metaphoric Process

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In the second of a series of "how-to" essays on conducting qualitative data analysis, Ron Chenail argues the process can best be understood as a metaphoric process. From this orientation he suggests researchers follow Kenneth Burke's notion of metaphor and see qualitative data analysis as the analyst systematically considering the "this-ness" of the data from the "that-ness" of the qualitative abstraction drawn about the data. To make this metaphoric pronouncement a convincing case to judges as to the veracity of the juxtaposition of the code to that which is coded, the analyst must employ a recursive process by showing the presence of the qualities of the unit of analysis in the product of the qualitative analysis as evidence of the quality of the analysis itself. This evidentially recursive act must be made overtly because in qualitative data analysis, the data do not speak for themselves. Key Words: Qualitative Data Analysis, Metaphor, Evidence, Unit of Analysis, Recursion, and Qualitative Research.

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) as a form of knowledge management is a matter of managing analytical processes to transform data into information and information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). In this fashion QDA combines both scientific rigor and artistic aplomb to produce a systematic and creative product. It also entails you as the researcher must manage yourself throughout the entire enterprise as you perfrom as the primary analytical instrument (Patton, 2002). It further means you need to concentrate on intricate and fine detail and at the same time, not lose sight of the big picture of the research project. Needless to say, QDA demands a wide range of skills and knowledge on your part, including the ability to write well when presenting the results of your QDA.

In the simplest terms, QDA involves collecting quality talk, observations, and/or documents, and being able to talk about the talk, make observations about the observations, and/or document the documents along with the ability to talk about the talk about the talk, make observations about the observations about the observations, and/or document the documents about the documents. From this perspective QDA can be understood as both the analysis of the data and the analysis of the analysis of the data. Because of this study within a study structure, you must be able to manage your study, your study of your study, and yourself very well and you must also be able to re-present both processes efficiently and effectively in your presentations and publications.

To become a competent qualitative data analyst, be it in the practice of basic descriptive (Sandelowski, 2000) or interpretive (Thorne, 2008) approaches; or designer approaches such as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), ethnography (Murchison, 2010), or phenomenology (Finlay, 2011), you will spend considerable amounts of your time learning how to work through transcripts and field notes noting undivided units of qualitative significance, naming these qualitative differences that make a difference,

reflecting upon the relationships between these bits of coded information until you can make some sort of evidence-based pronouncement of what you think you have learned from these observations and conversations. These steps are relevant whether you take the opportunity to conduct these analyses in hi-tech (i.e., using software applications, Richards, 2009) and lo-tech forms (i.e., using paper, pens, and post-it notes, Heitzman, 2002). So, as you work through the theory and practice of QDA, you will also develop personal insights to being successful at this approach to inquiry. To help you with this reflective development, I suggest you start by considering QDA, at its core, as a metaphoric process.

In order to understand this assertion I first need to define how I understand metaphor. To me, Kenneth Burke (1945/1969), in *A Grammar of Motives*, gave one of the best and most useful definitions of metaphor: "Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this" (p. 503). Burke's definition suggests metaphors include four elements: (a) the this, (b) the that, (c) the juxtaposition-ing of the this and the that, and (d) the suggested meanings that arise from the relating juxtaposition of the this to the that and vice versa. Burke's definition also accepts that the two things being compared are different yet connectable; if they were the same, then there would be no perspective of difference between them for "seeing something in terms of something else."

In a metaphoric relationship the first two parts of the metaphor (Think Neil Young's well-known song, "Love is a rose") have to be different from each other but connectable so they bring out meaningful aspects of the other through the lens each provides on the other. For example, thinking of "love" from the perspective of "rose" can lead you to write of notions such as love being beautiful, aromatic, fragile, thorny, temporal (i.e., the "rose-ness" of love); and thinking of "rose" from the perspective of "love" can mean giving flowers to show our love for others (i.e., the "love-ness" of roses).

In QDA, the process is sometimes not as abstract as a literary metaphor, but the basic elements remain the same. So even though some types of qualitative coding such as in vivo or descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2009) may be less abstract in relationship to the units being coded when compared to imported or more interpretive or conceptual codes (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003), but at both ends of the coding abstraction spectrum, the code has to be slightly apart from the concrete data to epitomize the qualitative differences being suggested via the qualitative code. In other words, the code provides a perspective on that which is being coded.

The notion of "seeing something in terms of something else" is the abstracting quality of QDA. If there is no abstraction, there is no analysis in QDA. Qualitative analysis means the analyst has created or recognized an abstract relationship between the qualities of a "that" in the data and a "this" in the form of a qualitative declaration or pronouncement of a quality (i.e., the coding, categorizing, theme-ing, essence-ing, or theorizing) about the "that's" qualities in order to abstract the something (i.e., the unit of analysis) in terms of something else (i.e., the results of the abstraction).

Qualitative Data Analysis	
The This	The That
Code, Category, Concept, Theory	Unit of Analysis

In this approach to QDA, simply repeating what the interviewees' said is not QDA. Merely paraphrasing what the interviewees' said is not QDA. Only presenting the frequencies of what interviewees said is not QDA. Qualitative data analysis to be QDA must involve the results from an abstracting process that allows the analyst to see something in terms of a qualitative something else.

Of course a discussion on abstracting can come across as a bit abstract unless a concrete example of QDA is shared. So to help make the metaphoric aspect of QDA a bit more literal please consider the following excerpt from a psychotherapist's progress note (Gehart, 2010) on a clinical session regarding a client's self-observation:

Client came in with anxiety...

To code this unit, I decided to operate from a qualitative description posture (Sandelowski, 2000, 2010) so I wanted to describe the qualities I observed in this excerpt from the therapist's progress note. To document my descriptive analysis, I created codes for each textual unit I found to be qualitatively significant and then I described the meaning of the code and its relationship to the text I coded in a memo. The following is the code and memo I created from this unit:

Qualitative Data Analysis	
The This	The That
Descriptive Code	Unit of Analysis
Clinical Problem: The therapist noted the client reported coming into therapy because she shared having anxiety as her clinical problem, that is, a reason for which someone seeks psychotherapy.	*Client came in with anxiety...*

As can be seen from this memo, I coded the unit, "Client came in with anxiety…," as "Clinical Problem." This juxtaposition creates a metaphoric relationship. By this code I am asserting that in the "that-ness" of "Client came in with anxiety…" I am seeing the "this-ness" of a "Clinical Problem." I abstracted the qualities of "Client came in with anxiety…" into "Clinical Problem" because I wanted to make it clear via my memo I understood "anxiety" as a problem for which a client comes to therapy for treatment. To evidence my code, I used words from the textual unit (e.g., client, coming in/came in, and anxiety) in my memo to make a strong case for my "Clinical Problem" code by drawing evidence directly from the text and explaining the relationship between those words and my words about those words.

Even if I had used an in vivo code (i.e., using words found in the textual unit to code the unit itself, Saldaña, 2009) such as "Anxiety" to code "Client came in with anxiety…," I would still need to explain the relationship between "anxiety" in the text and "Anxiety" in my code. For instance, in my memo I would make note that by "Anxiety" I mean the therapist recorded the client's sharing that anxiety was an aspect of the presenting situation:

Qualitative Data Analysis	
The This	The That
In Vivo Code	Unit of Analysis
Anxiety: The therapist noted the client reported coming into therapy with anxiety.	*Client came in with anxiety...*

My code and analytical memo are basically a re-working of the unit of analysis itself in order to stay close to the text because that is how in vivo codes are constructed. I don't provide a dictionary definition of "anxiety," but rather one constructed based upon the qualitative distinction within the context of the original data source. In an interesting way, qualitative data analysis codes are both denotative and connotative. We attempt to define the unit of analysis how it is "literally" used in the data (i.e., denotation) by creating our code based upon the associations we observe between the object of our code and the other data around it (i.e., connotation). In other words, when we encounter data such as text, we can bring all of the dictionary definitions we care to evoke, but we always need to restrict the analysis based upon the contextual relationships we draw among the unit's text and its context.

With both the descriptive code, "Clinical Problem," and the in vivo code, "Anxiety," I needed to share not only the name of the code, but also a description of the code's qualitative essence with supporting evidence from the unit of text being coded in order to show the credibility of my juxtaposition of two elements qualitatively different, but also qualitatively connected. To me, this makes qualitative data analysis metaphoric and by embracing such a perspective, it reminds me that I have to convince the reader that my qualitative codes (i.e., the "this") bring out a quality in the unit (i.e., the "that").

If we merely list codes or category names without providing supporting evidence and testimony explaining the relationship between the "this" (e.g., the category) and its evidence (i.e., excerpts from the "that"), then we make a weak and unconvincing argument, or in metaphoric terms, producing a list of "that's" under headings consisting of "this's" without sharing how we are to see the "that's" in terms of their respective "this's". As qualitative data analysts, we need to make overt and transparent what we hold to be metaphorically evident in the data because in qualitative data analysis, the data do not speak for themselves, but they should always have something to say in the analysis! And, for that to occur, we must embrace recursion in our coding.

From this perspective, coding in qualitative data analysis is a recursive function in that each qualitatively distinct code must draw upon and include the distinct qualities of that which is being coded in order to create a meaningful code. Think of the recipe for sourdough bread. To make sourdough bread you need to start with some starter sourdough. In other words, you cannot make sourdough bread without drawing upon and including some starter sourdough (Ricochet, 2010). The same relationship holds for a qualitative code – you need to include some qualities of the unit of analysis as your "starter dough" to create the qualitative coding and analysis of the qualitative unit of analysis. [It's interesting to observe that defining and explaining recursion usually requires a recursive form to explain and define recursion like this recursive note explaining recursion.]

As you can see in my two examples of coding the unit, "Client came in with anxiety…," I could not create the codes without including some of the "starter code" in my code (See starter code in red):

Starter Code: "Client came in with anxiety…,"

Descriptive Code: Clinical Problem: The therapist noted the client reported coming into therapy because she shared having anxiety as her clinical problem, that is, a reason for which someone seeks psychotherapy.

In Vivo Code: Anxiety: The therapist noted the client reported coming into therapy with anxiety.

My descriptive code includes more abstracting than my in vivo code, but both codes begin with, and always include, starter words from the words of the unit I started to code. In other words, working from a recursive orientation, the evidence to support the credibility of my findings should be evident in the findings and the only way to do that is to make sure the qualities of the unit of analysis are transparent in the results of the qualitative analysis of the qualities and vice versa. So, in this metaphorical recursive process, we should always be able to find some "that" in the "this-ness" and some "this" in the "that-ness" because it would not recursive otherwise.

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