LYN RICHARDS

HANDLING QUALITATIVE DATA

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

SAGE

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Preface

Methodologists may decry it, and experienced researchers normally deny it, but researchers approaching qualitative research are highly likely to meet data before they meet method.

This book is designed to assist when qualitative data have to be handled. In decades of helping researchers worldwide, I have learned that those who come to qualitative research 'data first' rather than 'methods first' are often the most motivated and critical. But they are also held back by lack of preparation in ways to handle data records, and by messages about the mystique and difficulty of doing, or even thinking about doing, qualitative research. So too, often, are those who have had some training in the study of the theory of methods – methodology. However adequate their understanding of the philosophy behind what they are trying to do, they may have no practical idea of how they would handle data if they ever had some.

This book starts there. It is, therefore, very different from the existing texts on qualitative methods.

First, the book is about *handling data* – working with data in order to produce adequate and useful outcomes. It's amazing how little of the methodological literature is in this area. Even texts with titles about 'analysing' or 'doing' qualitative research spend considerably more time on ways of making data than on what you would do with such data if you ever actually had any. And from the perspective of those who have to do it, texts addressing the critical issues of relation between researcher and record are often inaccessibly high up in the misty mountains of academic discourse.

Secondly, this book steers a cautious course around those mountains, while urging that the researcher must be aware that they are there. An irony of our time is that just as qualitative research has become acceptable and required across most areas of research practice in social enquiry, it has been shrouded in clouds of debate about reality and its representation. These debates enthral and entice those of us with time and training to engage in them, but send a strong message to practitioners that qualitative research is possibly a futile endeavour from the start. It seems to me that, since the world undoubtedly needs good qualitative research (and does not need bad), all researchers require assistance in designing projects and handling data thoughtfully and successfully. This book is for the many (out of and inside academia) who have neither access to courses on methodological issues nor time to do them, yet are confronted with a project and wish to learn how they can best deal with it. My work with researchers across areas of practice and disciplines has convinced me that the majority of highly principled and motivated practitioners are bypassed by a literature embedded in the requirement that they understand and confront the detail of academic debates before

they make a move. They need practical, accessible *and* informed advice on how to do their task well, reflecting on what would be a credible account and producing one.

Thirdly, the book covers neither the range of qualitative methods nor how different methods derive from different epistemological positions. Instead, it assumes that handling data well and producing a good research outcome does not *require* knowing the range and rules of particular methods. Most texts start with the assumption that qualitative data are accessible only via a researched understanding of all or some methodologies, and that a project must be located within a coherent methodology. I started there too and I retain a commitment to what I term methodological fit, the ways in which question, data, ways of handling data, ways of constructing an outcome and ways of justifying it *fit* together. In this book I aim to convey this to researchers who may not have the time or opportunity to learn from or engage in methodological debates but do want to do justice to data.

Fourthly, you will find here no specification of the rules for working in any particular method. Texts that do address the tasks of data handling usually do so from within one method, providing detailed rules for the processes associated with, for example, a particular version of discourse analysis, grounded theory or phenomenology or preparation for an ethnography. Such learning will of course provide a firm basis for research, and as a teacher and writer I have set it as a goal for students. This book consistently urges the reader who can do so to pursue literature within the appropriate method for their study. But it also assumes that there is much to be learned for any study from many methods. Methodological ghettoism serves neither those outside nor those working inside the closed world of a particular method. And moreover it assumes that *all* qualitative researchers need basic skills for handling data, and these skills are used across methods. Methodological fit and skills for handling data can be learned by those working in any particular method or by those who are not steeped in the literature particular to one method. All novice researchers need pragmatic, informed and understandable assistance in the processes of making useful data records, in handling and working with the data on the road to a good analysis, and in showing that it is good.

And finally, this book assumes that you will use computer software when handling qualitative data. Most researchers use computers in at least some context and those who do not are clearly restricted. For methods texts to treat computer handling of qualitative data as an optional extra (most do) makes it far harder to discuss practically what they can now do with data. That's because qualitative software has transformed the tasks of handling qualitative data. This book advises on techniques that can be done on paper alongside ones that can be undertaken only by using software. It warns of and tackles the challenges of computer-assisted handling of data, and issues to be considered. But it assumes you will use software. It does not teach any particular software – learning software is another task. Nor does the text assume that any particular software package is to be used. But, of course, my own work in software development and teaching is reflected in the advice given, since it's in that context that I have developed many of the strategies in this book. And, of course, the software I have helped develop reflects the methods I teach and the approaches I take to data. You can use this book with no computer software (if you must!) or with any specialist software. Where the techniques described require software, this is noted, as are the few places where the techniques suggested are particular to one software package. Where challenges

are greater, or risks higher, because of what you can do with software, this too is discussed.

The learning of particular software tools is integrated with each chapter via an associated website: www.sagepub.co.uk/richards. On that website are chapter overviews of the software functions for the tasks discussed in that chapter, and stepped instructions to tackle those tasks, using a particular software package. This software is NVivo, one of the two for which I have been part of the development team and for which I have been in charge of developing training. Because software is never static, and the needs of researchers are dynamic and varied, that website will be regularly updated. You can use this book without the website, following 'To do' instructions at the end of each chapter that do not require software.

This book is written in the conviction that handling qualitative data well beats handling them badly, and that it can be done. If you are approaching qualitative methods via data, you will not be burdened with a message that this is morally bad or practically unwise. By using good tools and by learning simple skills, novices can handle qualitative data well and achieve new understanding from the data. Some readers may wish to do no more than this. Some may go on to learn the varieties and rules of different qualitative methods and to participate in the discussions of what they represent. Others will go on to approach positively the puzzles of qualitative data, to meet the challenge of sensitively managing larger bodies of more complex data records, and to enjoy the accessible achievement of making sense of a 'real' project. On finishing this book, your data records will not be fully accessible and analysed. But the goal is to end this book, and the first stage of a real project, with the knowledge that access and analysis are achievable.

Lyn Richards

Acknowledgements

I wrote this book for all the researchers I have tried to help during twenty years of teaching qualitative methods in academia and outside, across countries and disciplines, levels of seniority and experience. I learned from them all and my first thanks are to them. The experiences taught me to set aside assumptions about research goals and experience that make sense only in academia (and possibly, now, not there). I also learned ways of tackling the myths and monsters of qualitative method, and discovered or invented techniques that worked for those confronted with data and the task of doing justice to messy records.

I kept thinking, as the acceptability of qualitative research grew, that a straightforward text would appear to help researchers to handle data, but as I waited both teaching and literature increasingly shifted away from such purposes, to theoretical discussions about representations of reality. With few books advising what one would do with data if one ever got any, the need for balance increasingly concerned me, as did the continuing irrelevance of texts to those normally using software. Can you think of another profession in which the majority of practitioners are untrained, and the majority of texts and teachers teach methods long overtaken by technology?

So this book appears six years after it was first contracted to Sage. My thanks to Steven Barr, who urged me to write it, and then forgave me the contract when other books and software development overtook the intention. One of those books was *Readme First*, written with Jan Morse to address another need: that of researchers who meet methodological choice without any training and have to find their way to an understanding of methodological congruence. With *Readme First* available to assist those who meet methods unprepared, this book could be written for those who meet qualitative methods 'data first'.

I've been much helped during the writing of this book by the encouragement and critical input of others who teach in academia or train researchers in the 'real' world or who are students with special interest in teaching and training. They confirmed my sense of what was needed and advised on my attempts to provide it. As the book took shape, I asked many of these colleagues to read full early drafts, and was overwhelmed by their generosity with time and ideas. Very thoughtful and encouraging responses came from Patsy Clarke, Dan Kaczinski, Helen Marshall, Naomi Richards, Donna Richter, Christina Silver, Supriya Singh, Clare Tagg and Chris Thorn. Four others devoted extraordinary time to providing detailed commentary and feedback and I owe very special thanks to them – Pat Bazeley, Kakali Bhattacharya, Jens Hansen and Tom Richards.

It's to Tom that this book is dedicated. His immediate contribution was to read several of the many drafts and design and create the diagrams that introduce each chapter and show its relations to the others. He supported me through a period of huge work pressures as I struggled to see the book clearly and find the time to complete it. But his major contribution to it goes back over twenty years. This book is a small by-product of our shared belief in the importance of research and of helping people to do good research, of the shared adventure of exploring the possibilities of software tools, and of Tom's ability to design and create tools that would remove barriers to research and create entirely new ways of doing it, first for my work, and then for the research of many thousands of others. With deepest thanks.

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Introduction

Researchers meet qualitative data in a wide range of contexts and for a very wide range of reasons. Some come fully prepared by courses in qualitative methodology, so that data are met only when the philosophies and techniques of one or more methods have been thoroughly understood, choices have been made in the context of careful research design, and skills have been acquired for ways of working with data that fit those methods and designs. Most don't.

This book is for those who don't.

Starting points

The majority of those first meeting qualitative data are unprepared by training to handle such data. This problem is encountered at all levels and locations of research practice, by policy analysts, postgraduate students, evaluators, research assistants, contract researchers, consultants, undergraduates, senior colleagues and supervisors. Meeting data without training can happen for any of several perfectly good reasons.

This may be your first meeting with qualitative data because you are being taught the method by first working with data. Some teachers prefer to show students the richness and interest of qualitative data, and to introduce the challenges of handling data, before they tackle the philosophical basis for methodologies. Early in a course about research, the emphasis may be on what social researchers do to record social interaction. The student is immediately making data records, and needs to know both that records must be handled in order to be analysed and that *they* could handle such data. Later, if they go on to a more advanced level, distinctions between different methods may be explored, and detailed instructions may be given in a particular method.

Or it may be that you are unprepared with data-handling skills because you simply didn't *mean* to make qualitative data. Practitioners trained in other methods, or with no research training, may be confronted, in an academic task or a contract research setting, with an issue requiring qualitative data. Such data happen when you ask questions like 'What's going on?' or 'How do they see their situation?' or simply when you leave space for 'write-ins' in a questionnaire. Perhaps the meanings people put on their actions or experiences have to be understood because a statistical analysis has failed to explain the patterns discovered. Answers may then be sought by talking to people or observing them.

You may have happened on qualitative data, even a lot of data, as a result of a project that was not designed to be qualitative. In recent years, the use of qualitative data has spread rapidly, and in areas where qualitative data have not hitherto been used, mixed methods projects are designed to inform researchers needing to understand medical problems 'on the ground', political issues at the grass roots or the needs of local action groups, to advise businesses or inform marketing strategists, to prepare legal evidence or evaluate programmes. Across disciplines, many researchers strive to handle qualitative data records far more numerous (though not, often, as rich) as were handled in traditional small-scale projects. The methodological disadvantages of bulk data are massive, but saying so doesn't help the researcher who has to handle the data. Throughout this book, there are notes on how particular techniques can be adapted to bigger projects.

Or perhaps you did plan to do a qualitative project, and you prepared yourself by reading about methodology, but delayed the challenge of learning how to deal with the material. The graduate student who embarks upon a dissertation without a plan for handling data can be overwhelmed by a sense that the well-honed research design has failed them. Records soon pile up when (amazingly!) everyone wants to talk to you. Just as the material becomes both exciting and informing, it also threatens to get away from your control. Records you could hold in your hand moments ago expand to a massive body of complexity that could knock you over.

In all of these situations, the data may prove splendidly relevant and very exciting, but the challenges of doing justice to these records look formidable. Wasting such material, whose acquisition took time and trust, is not an option. In the field, when researchers are dealing with qualitative data for the first time, or are confronted with data they do not know how to handle, the need is for pragmatic, achievable techniques for data management, data reduction and data analysis. The following chapters offer a basic set of such handling skills, to maximize the chance that qualitative data will be well handled and well used.

Data first: meeting qualitative methods

I am not here debating the disadvantages (or surprisingly, sometimes, advantages) of meeting data before methodology. This book is simply responding to the fact that many researchers do.

If your starting point was to get a glimpse of ways of handling data before gaining an understanding of the *why* of qualitative research, this book will leave you still needing that understanding. *Why* would you locate your study thus, *why* would you have such data, *why* would you seek different sorts of data for another study, *why* is this not a quantitative study? My strong advice is not to avoid those questions. The present book leaves them still to be addressed, in the appropriate way for your research context, at the appropriate time for your project.

Such wider questions are the focus of the methodological map-book I wrote with Janice Morse, *Readme First for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods* (Morse and Richards, 2002), hereafter *Readme First*. Like the present book, it assumes little prior training. *Readme First* is about the *why* questions that apply to method, why

one would use one method rather than another, and why good qualitative research requires a fit of question to method, method to data and data to analysis and outcome. It sketches for different methods what the experience of using them would be like, and offers a wide list of readings for each method and its justification. To inform the choice of methods, and direct the reader who wishes to go there to the relevant literature and to ways of learning methods without mystique, I refer to *Readme First*. And each chapter ends with suggested further readings.

Here, the emphasis is on *how* to do the data handling. With class exercise data or 'real' projects, the first hurdle is often to gain understanding that such data *can* be handled – and that data handling is the first step to analysis. The next hurdle is seeing that being able to deal with qualitative data does not require interminable time or sophisticated skills. Once these hurdles are cleared, researchers can immerse themselves in their rich records and seek subtle understanding and adequate explanations of the situation studied.

The handling is also done, hands-on, with computers. Working without computers is no longer an option for qualitative (or indeed any) researchers. Handwritten records like diaries or letters may stay on paper, but any typed text will be in electronic format, as will your report. Researchers now use software to handle such records, because, once software is learned, they can achieve much more in considerably less time and at far less risk if they do. If you or someone with power over you still prefers to work with coloured pens and copied extracts, most of the advice about the goals of handling data in this book will still be relevant to your work, but the goals will be much harder to achieve. As mentioned in the preface, where software is necessary for techniques discussed, this is noted.

Handling data

Handling data? There are books and workshops on *collecting* data and *analysing* data – ways of making and doing things to data. The emphasis here is more on the craft of creating and working with data records and the book is intended for those doing such work, hands-on. Like any craft it has guidelines for setting up and working skilfully with the materials.

Using those guidelines, a researcher can rapidly build a live, changing body of material from which new understanding can be created. To get there requires that the ideas and the data records are not just managed but *handled*, and handled skilfully.

Qualitative researchers deal with, and revel in, confusing, contradictory, multi-faceted data records, rich accounts of experience and interaction. The researcher confronted by such data records almost always talks in terms of dilemmas. How to tame the data without losing their excitement, get order without trivializing the accounts, or losing the reflections about the researcher's role in making them happen? How to exert control without losing vivid recall? How to show a pattern that respects the data without prematurely reducing vivid words to numbers?

So think in terms of handling the records of data that you collaboratively create in interaction with those you study. We use 'handler' to refer to interaction with animals we respect, and with whom we expect to form a relationship – whoever

heard of a fish handler? The verb indicates understanding and control, or lack of it ('I have to learn to handle change better'). It is about coming to grips with a challenge. (The slang phrase 'I can handle that' means it's good.) The goal of the rest of this book is that the reader will finish it confident that they can handle qualitative data and that the experience is good.

Real data?

This book can be read without data, or used with provided data, classroom exercise data or the first stages of data for a 'real' project. The instructions on the website carry steps to handling the data that will work for any of those situations: www.sagepub.co.uk/richards.

If you are not working in a 'real' project, consider finding or making a very small body of your own data, by observing and taking notes, by talking to people and recording recollections or by taping and transcribing interviews. Learning about techniques and achieving competence in them is easier if you are genuinely interested in the data being handled.

You need also to know real projects, ones that work and ones that don't. If you can work alongside an experienced researcher, you may gain strong training fast. Like any craft, qualitative research is well learned in apprenticeship. But apprenticeship is not a necessary condition of skill. If mentors are not available or generous with sharing participation in a project, you can learn much by reading and critically evaluating published reports of projects. (Nor is apprenticeship a sufficient condition; always be critical of the projects you are able to observe in practice.)

Each chapter has a running 'example' of a research project. There are no references to publications on these projects, because I made them up. You will find extended examples of real projects in many of the texts in the suggested reading lists at the end of each chapter, and these can illuminate the processes they illustrate. Here, I use suggestive running examples rather than real examples for two reasons. First, the goal of this book is to present a closely packed kit of techniques for handling data, and illustrating with extended examples would load the text with detail, making it harder to see the technique groups. And secondly, no real project will use all of these methods, so any extended example would favour just some. Like a play or a novel, a 'made-up' example can get *up* from the detail of real projects and simplify, bringing the core processes together. (This is not a hundred miles away from some of the processes of seeing qualitative data – read on!)

The shape of this book

The following chapters take the reader through ten research processes involved in qualitative data handling. Although the ten chapters describe processes that are not required in a linear order, they are steps that lead to each other and can be taught in this sequence. Each of the ten chapters has a main message, and the overall message is that this can be done, and done well. For convenience they are grouped in three parts: on setting up, on working with the data and on making sense.