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Presenting Qualitative Data

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Abstract

After all the data have been collected and the analysis has been completed, the next major task for qualitative researchers is to re-present the study in the form of a paper or a lecture. The challenge of converting mounds of data and analysis can be quite overwhelming even for the experienced researcher. To help you with your efforts at presenting qualitative research in your papers and in your talks, I ask you to consider the following ideas: Openness, Data as Star, Juxtaposition, and Data Presentation Strategies.

Keywords

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After all the data have been collected and the analysis has been completed, the next major task for qualitative researchers is to re-present the study in the form of a paper or a lecture. The challenge of converting mounds of data and analysis can be quite overwhelming even for the experienced researcher. To help you with your efforts at presenting qualitative research in your papers and in your talks, I ask you to consider the following ideas: Openness, Data as Star, Juxtaposition, and Data Presentation Strategies.

1. Openness

In 1993, Marc Constas wrote a very helpful article for those qualitative researchers who process, analyze, organize, and present their qualitative data in categories. In his paper, "Qualitative analysis as a public event: The documentation of category development procedures," Constas presented a simple chart which can help qualitative researchers make overt their assumptions, logics, and choices when conducting a research study. Constas wrote his article for a number of reasons. First, he was concerned that qualitative researchers make all sorts of choices in creating our research studies and methods, and that for the most part, we are not very good at sharing these decisions, and the rationales for these choices in our presentations of our work. He pointed out that quantitative researchers are also guilty of this oversight, but Constas also argued that qualitative researchers are especially vulnerable to this method-reporting-deficit. Unlike their quantitative brothers and sisters, qualitative researchers often create new methods for their particular studies, or they improvise and modify current, extant approaches.

Given this idiosyncratic leaning with their methods, qualitative researchers can be easily criticized for leaving the reader "in the dark" when it comes to describing the method-creation process. One irony to this whole situation is that for researchers who pride themselves on their skills at description, explanation, and interpretation, qualitative researchers are often woeful on applying these abilities in their presentations of their methods.

To address these shortcomings, Constas advocated a spirit of openness in the presentation of qualitative research methods. He asked researchers to focus their descriptive and narrative skills on themselves and their researching activities, and to present the story of their method construction in their qualitative research presentations.

When I talk about this point, I usually paraphrase the anthropologist Gregory Bateson (Harries-Jones, 1995) and say that it takes two studies to present one in qualitative research. One study is the "official" research project and the other study is the study about that study. In a well-done qualitative research study, in addition to seeing the results of the labor, the reader should have ample opportunities to examine the particulars of the inquiry: What choices were made by the

researcher in the construction of the study, what were the steps in the process of forming the research questions, selecting a site, generating and collecting the data, processing and analyzing the data, and selecting the data exemplars for the paper or presentation.

It is in this spirit of openness that trust is built between the researcher and the reader. It is not a matter of the researcher simply telling the reader that a study is valid or reliable for that qualitative research study to be valid or reliable. Rather, the process of establishing the trustworthiness of any study comes down to the quality of the relationship built between the researcher and the community of readers and critics who examine the study (Atkinson, Heath, & Chenail, 1991). As with any important relationship, for example, husband and wife, parent and child, friend and friend, or researcher and reader, openness is an extremely important factor in the value and quality of that interaction.

A way to maintain this posture is to consider the other in the process at all times and make it a priority that you present as much of the "back stage" information of your research as possible. By back stage I mean that you communicate as clearly as you can what it was that you did to create your project, what were your choices along the way, what else did you consider doing in the project but chose not to do. Get clear with yourself what it is that you are doing at every point along the way of doing your project. Note it and present it to your readers. Even if what you were doing was intuitive guessing, let the reader in on it (Chenail, 1994).

Openness also entails involving "the other" in your research. The other can be the participants in your study and they can also be your colleagues who comment on and who read your work. In presenting your study, tell the reader what it is that you are planning to do in your study and then ends with you doing it. Someone who is reliable is someone whom you can depend on in a certain situation. They are consistent: They do it the same way all of the time, and they let you know if they had to change their plans. The same would hold for reliability in qualitative research: Be open with what it is you are going to do, give the details of your design and process as best you can, and then follow the plan each and every time you collect data, or transcribe, or categorize, and so forth. If through the process you decide that it would make sense to adjust what it is you are doing, note the change, describe it in detail, and follow through with the new plan. Throughout this process, you invite the reader and\or co-participants in the study to dialogue with you as to how you are doing with your description of what it is you are doing and the actual carrying out of the plan (Chenail, 1994).

If you are successful in carrying out this plan of being open in your presentation of your study, other researchers should be able to come along after you, and be able to step into your shoes. This is very important for two reasons: One, this will allow your readers to judge the validity of your efforts. After having been presented both the process and the results of the analysis, readers are in a much better position to see if they can see what you were seeing or at least accept that your take on the data was a valid one. Two, by re-presenting plenty of the data, you will also allow the reader to see what they can see in the data. It is a way to "share the wealth" and to invite another to continue the inquiry and conversation (Chenail, 1994).

2. Data as Star

I believe that the data, which have been painfully collected, should "be the star" in the relationship. By this I mean, the main focus in qualitative research is the data itself, in all its richness, breadth, and depth. When all is said and done, the "quality" in a qualitative research project is based upon how well you have done at collecting quality data. So, it only seems natural that when it comes time to present "the fruits of your labor," you should make every effort to feature the data in your presentations.

In addition to the considerations stated in the earlier section on Openness, there are still other ways to embrace this aspect in your work, especially when it comes to data. Present as much of the data you collected as is physically possible in your papers and presentations. Store your data and make it available for others to view and re-view. Of course in doing this you will have to notify the other participants in your study that this is your intention and secure their permission. A good example of this trend in qualitative research is Waitzkin's (1991) recent work. Not only did he present lengthy excerpts in his book from the transcripts he collected and analyzed, but he also made the complete transcripts available to the reader by storing them with a national clearinghouse. In this way, anyone who wanted to study the complete transcripts could do so.

Another factor in this data-rich notion of presenting qualitative research is the "just one thing" rule. In order to give your data its due in your conference presentations and in your writings, you have to concentrate on one aspect of your study. For instance, if you have been studying doctor-patient interaction by examining transcripts and audio recordings of doctors talking with patients during routine visits to the clinic, you will have to select one aspect of this wonderfully rich interpersonal communication, say "taking the patient's personal history," and concentrate your efforts on re-presenting just this one feature of the talk.

Of course, there are other ways to present more and different aspects of your analysis, but this effort to fit more themes, categories, or features in your time-limited talks or word-limited papers will require you to do a number of things. One, you will have to reduce your data in order to present more of it. This can be done by using quantitative techniques like structuring your data into central tendencies and ranges, or frequency guided shapes. Two, you may have to greatly limit the number of examples you can present per category. And three, you may have to do more "summarizing talk" in which you talk about your data or above your data instead of presenting the data in the juxtaposing style described below.

As data analysis turns to data presentation it can be easy for the researcher and reader alike to loose a sense of place for the data. As the process of winnowing the data begins, the emphasis becomes one of selecting one poignant exemplar after another as all of the significant "wheat" (i.e., that data which is deemed significant or exemplary) gets separated from all of the non-significant "chaf" (i.e., that data which is determined to be non-significant or redundant) (Hopper, 1986). To balance this tendency towards data separation and data isolation, researchers have to take great care to situate their data so readers can have an appreciation of "from whence the data came" and can begin to evaluate the meaning of the data in context.

Acknowledging that there is always a degree of reduction in qualitative research, researchers must still endeavor to give the readers an impression of where the data was found, how was it generated and collected, and what was its context prior to its being separated in analysis and

isolated in the re-presentation process? Although this task of "grounding the data" may sound daunting, there are a number of ways that the data selected for analysis and presentation in a paper can be contextualized and "placed" for the readers.

One way to do this is to begin to think like a novelist, someone who must create a setting in which to place their characters. For without a setting, it would be quite difficult for readers to have a sense of just who these fictional folks are. "I always begin a novel with place," writes Shelby Hearon (1992, p. 17) in her article, "Where Fiction Lives'...Placing Fiction." For her place is synonymous with plot, but not the plot taken to mean a series of events in a story. In contrast, Shelby follows her Oxford dictionary and considers plot to be "a small portion of any surface differing in character and aspect from the rest" (p. 17). To her, "this seems...to be a fine way to think about where fiction begins: with that plot, that parcel of land, that place that you make yours and no one else's" (p. 17).

I think the same holds for researchers when they write their case studies and ethnographies. The studies started in some place. The data was collected at some local. The text started with some context. For their studies to then have situational validity when finally appearing in print, researchers must re-construct the data's setting and allow us to return to the place where the data once lived. This is the artistry that is writing qualitative research.

One of the beauties of this qualitative research is how qualitative researchers seek out these places of character and aspect and attempt to make the events and happenings of these parcels of data come alive for the reader. To this artistic end, qualitative researchers have to think how to create "round" informants instead of "flat" ones in their papers. Researchers have to work hard at developing the details of these plots so that their readers can have a sense of where the data was naturally occurring when it was originally encountered by the researcher. The readers have to have a clear picture of the data's setting so that they can begin to have a perspective from which to judge the observations being made by the researcher regarding the data. Without the setting, without the developed characterization, there can be no context and with no context for the data, there can be no significant meaning in the analysis.

Robert Hopper (1986) in his paper, "Speech, for Instance. The Exemplar in Studies of Conversation," presents another good way qualitative researchers can create context in their data re-presentations. His technique, which I call "letting the tape recorder run," is a very simple process to accomplish a context building goal. In doing a conversation analysis, one major step is to select exemplary pieces of talk for commentary and review. Within a conversation there may be many moments of interaction which pique a conversation analyst's curiosity. After repeated listenings and transcribing, the researcher is ready to say something about this bit of winnowed data.

Instead of re-presenting just the slice of talk which is the focus of the analysis, Hopper suggests that researchers should display their data with ample preceding and following talk so that the readers can get a sense of flow and be able to see the data in its natural setting. In this way, readers can have a better perspective to judge the merits of the researcher's claims regarding the data.

By providing this "bigger picture" through this context building, researchers can give their data its "star treatment." In addition, readers are provided a good view of the proceedings and are given a solid vantage point to render their critiques of the show.

3. Juxtaposition, Juxtaposition, Juxtaposition

When Bob Costas was the host of the late night talk show, *Later*, he asked Mel Brooks, "What is your definition of comedy?" Mel answered, "Juxtaposition, Juxtaposition, Juxtaposition!" By this he meant that his approach to comedy was a matter of juxtaposing things which would produce a funny reaction on the part of the audience. For instance, having the Monster in *Young Frankenstein* doing a soft shoe routine while singing the sophisticated song, "Putting on the Ritz," was a comedic juxtaposition for Mel, and his audience too!

In qualitative research, juxtaposition is also the key to producing a quality presentation or paper. To do so, you have to juxtapose data excerpts with your talk about the data. Be it in the presentation of categories, themes, taxonomies, typologies, pictures, or drawings, the essence of presenting qualitative research comes down to how well you are able to juxtapose the data with your descriptions, explanations, analysis, or commentaries.

Also involved in this juxtaposition of data and talk about the data is how you choose to use "the literature" in this weave. Do you annotate the data by citing relevant previous studies or theoretical pieces? Do you contrast the data you have collected with what has been previously said in the literature about similar data? Do you use the data to guide you to areas in the literature you had not previously considered? Do you triangulate your data with the literature as way of validating your observations? In all of these choices, juxtaposition is still the central concern!

In this process of juxtaposition, your emphasis should be on staying close to the data. The true art of presenting qualitative research is to be restrained by your data. Don't overstate the data and don't understate it as well. Keep the whole process as simple as possible: Look at the data and record that what you see-- Report nothing more and nothing less! If you keep to that aesthetic, your data will help to support the validity of your analysis and your analysis will help to feature the richness of your data.

An important concept to keep in mind as you juxtapose your data and your talk about the data is that of rhythm. By rhythm, I mean for you to create a template for re-presenting your data so that there is a recognizable pattern throughout the Analysis or Findings section of your paper. In this way, the readers can begin to read in a rhythm.

To accomplish this rhythm, you need to structure each phase of your data re-presentation in a similar pattern. For example, the following is a common way in which your findings can be displayed:

Section Heading
Present the Distinction or Finding
Introduce the First Data Exemplar of this Distinction
Display the First Data Exemplar of this Distinction

Comment Further on the First Data Exemplar
of this Distinction
Make Transition to Second Data Exemplar
of this Distinction
Display the Second Data Exemplar
of this Distinction
Comment Further on the Second Data Exemplar
of this Distinction
Make Transition to the Next Data Exemplar
of this Distinction and Repeat the Pattern
Until the Closing of this Section

As you write (and re-write) your Findings or Analysis section, having a pattern to structure your text will greatly improve your ability to lay out the data upon which you want to comment and then for you to weave your comments throughout the narrative.

As a matter of fact, that is exactly how I construct my Findings sections. After I have selected my data exemplars (e.g., quotes from a transcript), I arrange them out in the word processing file (see the next section on Data Presentation Strategies for different ideas as to how to do this step). Then, I go from exemplar to exemplar adding my comments. Sometime I call these steps the "Tarzan Process," because I think of the quotes as vines in the jungle. As I maneuver myself from one quote to the next, I imagine myself as Tarzan swinging from one vine to another. It's a great way to travel and a fun way to conceptualize the data re-presentation process.

Just as the patterning was helpful for you as you wrote up your findings, it will also serve your readers well as they begin to navigate through your paper. The soon-to-be-familiar rhythm of your presentation style will serve as an involvement strategy as the readers will grow accustomed to your pace of data re-presentation. In addition, it will make it easier for them to go from section to section. Although the data will be changing, the pattern will remain the same. In this manner, cross-section comparisons can be made more readily by the readers, which, in my opinion, helps to make the whole paper reading process much more coherent.

For an excellent example of how this rhythm-making can be accomplished, I suggest taking a look at the recent paper in *Social Science & Medicine* by Margarete Sandelowski and Linda Corson Jones (1996) entitled, "'Healing Fictions': Stories of Choosing in the Aftermath of the Detection of Fetal Anomalies." As you look over the Findings section of this paper, you should be able to see how the authors create an easy to follow pattern and they hold to that rhythm throughout their re-presentation of the data. One last point about this paper is that you should also take notice how Sandelowski and Jones also create simplicity and rhythm in their account by organizing their data re-presentation around the single concept of "choice." Time and time again, they use this complex word (Empson, 1989) to draw wonderful and illuminating distinctions in the stories of these women and couples.

By keeping to this or another similarly rhythmic pattern, you can help to bring some simplicity to the complexity of data re-presentation. Throughout all the steps entailed in conducting a qualitative research study, you must always attempt to build in some sort of simplicity. Without

it, both you and the reader will be overcome and you all will end up drowning in a sea of endless data.

4. Data Presentation Strategies

Constas' second reason for writing his piece was that he wanted to create a taxonomy for the creators of categories to follow, or at the least, his article would be a helpful generator of possibilities for qualitative researchers to ponder and examine as they considered their tact in a particular research project.

In the spirit of Constas' paper, I would like to make a few suggestions which should greatly improve qualitative researchers attempts at presenting their carefully collected data. These strategies should not be taken as the way or as the only way to present data, just some ways with which to play and experiment.

The following are just of the many ways data can be arranged and presented:

Natural - The data are presented in a shape that resembles the phenomenon being studied. For instance, if the data are excerpts from a therapy session, present them in a sequential order or in an order that re-presents the flow of the session itself.

Most Simple to Most Complex - For sake of understanding, start the presentation of data with the simplest example you have found. As the complexity of each example or exemplar presented increases, the reader will have a better chance of following the presentation. Erving Goffman's work is a good example of this style.

First Discovered/Constructed to Last Discovered/Constructed - The data are presented in a chronicle-like fashion, showing the course of the researcher's personal journey in the study. This style is reminiscent of an archeological style of presentation: What was the first "relic" excavated, then the second and so forth.

Quantitative-Informed - In this scheme data are presented according to strategies commonly found in quantitative or statistical studies. Data are arranged along lines of central tendencies and ranges, clusters, and frequencies.

Theory-Guided - Data arrangement is governed by the researcher's theory or theories regarding the phenomenon being re-presented in the study. For instance, a Marxist-informed researcher might present data from a doctor-patient interview in terms of talk which shows who controls the means for producing information in the interaction, talk which illustrates who is being marginalized, and so forth. In clinical qualitative research, this approach is quite prevalent as clinicians organize the data in terms of their understandings of how doctor-patient, or nurse-patient, and therapist-client interact.

Narrative Logic - Data are arranged with an eye for storytelling. Researchers plot out the data in a fashion which allows them to transition from one exemplar to another just as narrators arrange details in order to best relate the particulars of the story.

Most Important to Least Important or From Major to Minor - Like the journalistic style of the inverted pyramid, the most important "findings" are presented first and the minor "discoveries" come last.

Dramatic Presentation - This one is the opposite of the inverted pyramid style. With the dramatic arrangement scheme, researchers order their data presentation so as to save the surprises and unforeseen discoveries for last.

No Particular Order Order - As it sounds, data are arranged with no particular, conscious pattern in mind, or the researcher fails to explain how or why the data are displayed the way they are.

Conclusion

Does it sound simple? Well, that's the idea with qualitative research: Try to keep your method simple because in qualitative research the complexity is in the data. If you get too complex in your method, the reaction between a complex method and complex data will be disastrous. The beauty of qualitative inquiry is that by asking simple questions like "What is care?", "How do physicians and nurses talk with each other?", and "What is the quality of life for our patients?", we can begin to study some of the most wonderfully complex phenomenons in the world. Qualitative research is the practice of asking simple questions and getting complex answers. The art of managing both the simplicity and the complexity is the real secret to being successful at conducting qualitative inquiries. Does it sound exciting? I hope so!

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