

Writeup of Bauer and Aarts (2000)

Bauer, M. W., & Aarts, B. (2000). Corpus construction: A principle for qualitative data collection. In M. W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound* (pp. 19-37). London, UK: Sage.

Summary

Bauer and Aarts (2000) presented the idea of “corpus construction,” drawn from linguistics, as a replacement in qualitative research for representative sampling (p. 19). They started by reviewing the role of sampling in quantitative research, noting it has problems when sampling frames are not complete, some participants cannot be included, or the population is “unknowable” (p. 22); “the rationale of representative sampling is useful ... [but] does not fit all research situations” (p. 22). They instead used the concept of *corpus* from linguistics, “a finite collection of materials, which is determined in advance by the analyst, with (inevitable) arbitrariness” (Barthes, 1967, p. 96, as cited in Bauer & Aarts, 2000, p. 23). Bauer and Aarts divide corpora into two categories: “general-purpose” corpora, intended to help with “a broad range of research questions” (paralleling censuses and general social surveys; p. 30); and “topical” corpora, “designed for ... narrowly defined research purpose[s]” (p. 30). They stressed that such corpora should be composed of “relevant” materials that are “as homogenous as possible” (p. 31) and are “synchronous” in time with each other (p. 32). For constructing a topical corpora, they presented four rules as follows:

1. “Proceed stepwise: select; analyse; select again” (p. 31); this rule is based on the inductive and “cyclical process” (p. 29) that linguists undertake.
2. “In qualitative research, [social] strata and function variety precedes variety of representations” (p. 33).
3. “Characterizing variety of representations has priority over anchoring them in existing categories of people” (p. 33).
4. “Maximize the variety of representations by extending the range of strata / functions considered” (p. 33).

In rules 2-4, the variety of “social strata, functions, and categories” (p. 32) is knowable, but the latter is unknown. Selection of people and sources” is based on existing categories, but “maximiz[ing] the variety of the unknown phenomenon” (p. 33) is the focus of the research,

selection stopping when saturation is reached. They concluded with another set of more detailed steps for constructing a corpus (pp. 35-36), drawing on these rules.

Analysis

Bauer and Aarts's presentation of corpus construction as an alternative to sampling is certainly interesting, and echoes many of the approaches of qualitative researchers to data collection. Their chapter is practical in nature, focusing in its latter stages on the rules and processes for constructing a corpus. As such, some scholars and researchers may feel they were too prescriptive in defining how to collect data in a qualitative research study. I feel their proposed rules and process for corpus construction should be seen as only one possibility; other sets of rules and steps certainly could be as or more useful than what they suggested.

Nevertheless, their conception of corpora and the process they suggest for constructing them would be of practical aid to qualitative researchers, particularly those unsure whether they should collect data using a form of random sampling, convenience sampling, purposive sampling, or some other technique. I would thus recommend it to those looking for such practical advice, albeit with a caution that it is only one possible approach of many that are equally valid and useful for qualitative research.

Keywords: corpus construction, corpus, linguistics, sampling, data collection, inductive research process, representations, social strata, social categories, representativeness

Writeup of Bong (2002)

Bong, S. A. (2002). Debunking myths in qualitative data analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/viewArticle/849/1844>

Summary

Bong's (2002) article was broken into two major parts, based on her exploration of various qualitative analysis tools, methods, and techniques. In the first, she focused on her modification of the grounded theory methodology to analyze 27 interview transcripts. She argued that "the rigour of data collection ... and analysis (constant comparative method) in a grounded theory approach constitutes good practice" (Methodology section, para. 3), but departed from it in two major ways. First, she did not begin "with a blank slate," but instead by "presuppos[ing] an integral relationship among [three] categories" prior to collecting and analyzing data (Methodology section, para. 7). Second, she did not continue sampling and data collection until saturation—as required by the theoretical sampling method used in grounded theory—and instead simply increased her sample size from 10 to 27 based on the results of a pilot interview. She claimed these modifications were necessary to better meet what she termed "the criteria of sound qualitative research": validity, reliability, and generalizability (Method section, para. 1). In the second part, Bong focused on the coding process, noting it has much "merit in organising and interpreting data" (Method section, para. 6) but is not "an end in itself" (Method section, para. 9); "it is the research that drives the analysis" rather than the method of coding or coding tools such as ATLAS.ti (Method section, para. 9). She argued researchers need to, when coding, consider their data in both parts and as a whole simultaneously, and that coding software can improve the rigor, thoroughness, creativeness, and enjoyment of coding but only if used correctly by researchers. Bong concluded with an "audit trail," the set of steps she went through in preparing her data for analysis and then analyzing it (Method section, para. 19).

Analysis

Bong's article occasionally lacked in focus, as she made many smaller points not recounted above throughout which at times detracted from her main arguments. Her points on grounded theory are well-intentioned, but the sampling issue in particular is not especially well-explained: why she could not conduct further interviews beyond the 27 that did occur and why restricting the number to that amount better met the criteria of validity, reliability, and

generalizability were not made clear. Her discussion of coding and coding software is better organized and more persuasive; her argument that such tools are to guide researchers' analysis, not act as the sole method of generating grounded theory, is particularly well stressed. Her statement of the use of coding software being highly useful (if used correctly) but not a cure-all is also prescient. I am not sure I would highly recommend her article to a fellow colleague wishing to learn about qualitative data analysis and coding, however; while her arguments and points are certainly important in many ways they echo common sense and the work of other scholars and researchers, many of whom are easier to read and understand.

Keywords: grounded theory, constant comparative method, rigor, sampling, theoretical sampling, saturation, validity, reliability, generalizability, coding, coding software, ATLAS.ti, methodology, method, audit trail

Writeup of Gibbs, Friese, and Mangabeira (2002)

Gibbs, G. R., Friese, S., & Mangabeira, W. C. (2002). The use of new technology in qualitative research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/847>

Summary

Gibbs, Friese, and Mangabeira (2002) provided an overview of the use of new technology to both gather qualitative data and to analyze it. New technology is both “more available to researchers” and more familiar to study participants, but “naturally ... [faces] issues of interpretation, impact and validity” (Data Gathering section, para. 1). They gave examples from the special issue which their article introduced of technology being used to collect data, including digital photos and video, interviews conducted via e-mail, and videoconference transcripts. They discussed the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to support “a variety of analytic styles in qualitative work” (“Computer Assisted” section, para. 1), starting with database and word-processing software for simpler analyses and “initial, broad-brush examination of the data” (“Computer Assisted” section, para. 2). However, more specialized programs provide greater capabilities, be they “second generation” programs that aid coding and searching (“Computer Assisted” section, para. 3) or “third generation” programs that can also assist in the developing of theories and testing of hypotheses (“Computer Assisted” section, para. 4). Gibbs et al. discussed articles in the special issue that covered aspects of and issues relating to CAQDAS. They also related the concerns and skepticism of some (including Bong, 2002) about the use of CAQDAS, typically philosophical or epistemological in nature. Gibbs et al. also mentioned how the use of new technology could produce better quality research, yet still required the researcher to maintain their role in analysis; there are also threats to such quality such as “biased transcription and interpretation,” over- or under-emphasizing certain cases, and vague or inconsistent concepts. Gibbs et al. concluded by discussing the future of technology for data collection and analysis, focusing primarily on the latter.

Analysis

Gibbs et al.’s article has one major weakness: it focuses primarily on the articles that were published alongside it in a special issue of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. As such, a good portion of the literature they cite is from that issue, and while other literature is mentioned at the beginning of each section, their article cannot be considered a complete literature review of

the use of new technology for data collection and analysis. Despite this flaw, they still provide an extremely useful and readable overview of how technology has been used, rich in references (albeit most within the special issue) that help the reader explore particular areas and issues further. Most of their takeaway points echo those of other scholars, particularly in noting that technology can help provide better analysis but cannot replace the careful consideration of data by trained qualitative researcher(s). I would recommend their article to others looking to learn about the use of technology in collecting and analyzing qualitative data, but feel it would be most useful in the context of (a) more general readings about qualitative methods; (b) further readings on qualitative data analysis, particularly using CAQDAS; and (c) hands-on training in such analysis.

Keywords: technology, qualitative data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation, impact, validity, computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), coding, theory development, skepticism of CAQDAS, quality of analysis

Writeup of Mason (2005)

Mason, P. (2005). Visual data in applied qualitative research: Lessons from experience. *Qualitative Research*, 5(3), 325-346. doi:10.1177/1468794105054458

Summary

Mason (2005) discussed an evaluative (i.e. applied) qualitative research project which “sought to use visual (still and video) images to evaluate community-based health projects” (p. 325). After providing background on the project, its goals, and its planned evaluation, he provided a thorough literature review of issues surrounding the use of images and video in qualitative research. Such research was limited, Prosser having argued that “the disparate and fragmented instances of image-based research” will only be part of “the mainstream” with increased use and discussion of images and video (Prosser, 1998, as cited in Mason, 2005, p. 329). Four crucial issues were identified by Mason in the literature: (a) the need to maintain the “realism” of images and video, accurately portraying events as they happened without bias or any element of “staging” (pp. 329-330); (b) the context an image was recorded and is viewed in; (c) narrative, both as produced and as “read by the viewer” (p. 331); and (d) “translation from image to meaning to text” (p. 331). In Mason’s project, many images and videos—and the process used to collect them from participants—took a “media” approach rather than a “research” approach, thus losing needed realism and context (p. 338); documentary and story-telling methods also affected the narrative. A lack of contextual log information and other metadata further stymied analysis. Mason concluded that the use of visual data in evaluative qualitative research was promising, but that lessons to learn included (a) the use of staff with “both media and research skills” (p. 340); (b) “ongoing collaboration between the media and research workers ... sustained throughout the project” (p. 341); (c) the need to “achieve as full an understanding [i.e. context] as possible of events, supplementing visual information wherever required” (p. 341); and (d) better engagement with the community through more understandable informed consent and self-documentation via digital still and video cameras.

Analysis

Mason’s article provides an excellent overview of the use of visual data in evaluative qualitative research, thus fulfilling the promise of its title. By reviewing both the literature and a particular research project, he was able to extract important issues and how they can (hopefully) be solved in future projects, resulting in further use of images and film in research to provide

unique, insightful, and important findings. Much qualitative research in LIS relies on observations, interviews, and content analysis of texts (as noted by Westbrook, 1997); the use of images and videos is rare. While certainly not an easy approach to take, Mason does show how they can be very powerful when applied correctly, and I feel his article would be very useful to any LIS student or researcher looking to conduct applied qualitative research in the field. It may be of somewhat less direct use to more theoretically-minded researchers; however, the issues of realism, context, narrative, translation, and the divide between “media” and “research” approaches have applications to almost all qualitative research, and therefore Mason’s article is highly recommended.

Keywords: evaluation research, applied, visual data, photos, images, video, realism, context, narrative, translation, media, documentary, training, collaborative research, community engagement

Writeup of Whyte (1984)

Whyte, W. F. (1984). Focusing the study and analyzing the data. In *Learning from the field: A guide from experience* (pp. 225-250). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Summary

In this chapter, Whyte (1984) provided an excellent discussion of how to move from the data collection phase to analyzing the data and generating theory. Taking an anthropological perspective, he considered the problem at hand was “how to think about the thinking process,” how to generate theories, models, and “ideas” and how that would lead one “to reexamine existing data or to gather new data” (p. 225); in this way he believed in the grounded theory approach (as he stated on p. 229). He started by examining two issues: depth vs. breadth and description vs. analysis. The former is a choice researchers have to make between focusing on either (a) deep knowledge of a problem in one or a small number of case studies, or (b) broad knowledge of a problem as it applies more widely and generally. (In his conclusion, Whyte stated he personally “lean[s] toward depth”; p. 249). The latter is the point that qualitative analysis is not just description of what goes on in a case, but moving “from [and beyond] description to analysis to theory” (p. 229). Whyte proceeded to discuss three approaches to analysis. The first is to follow the “orienting theory” and associated methods, epistemology, etc. to their theoretical conclusions, based on the data collected (p. 229). Such a theory or framework should loosely guide the researcher’s analysis without requiring the data collection and overall study design to be too focused and inflexible. The second approach applies to analyzing case studies, and is to “formulate questions, pose tentative answers, challenge those answers with more pointed questions, and continue with further questioning and challenging” as needed (p. 234). Whyte presents two relatively lengthy and detailed case study examples to illustrate this point, indicating the inductive and cyclical research process of question asking, data collection, analysis, posing of answers, and challenging of answers with further questions and data. The last approach takes action research as a setting for developing theory, learning from the experience gained and thinking followed in such a project and returning to the literature for added context, developing new insights from the combination.

Analysis

Whyte’s chapter is, as noted, an excellent discussion of moving from data collection to analysis in qualitative studies, particularly if one is using the grounded theory approach. His

chapter is somewhat biased towards that approach and towards ethnographic methods, albeit as probably would be expected by his own use of these. Also, like many (but not all) qualitative researchers Whyte believes in the flexibility of such research and in thick, full description of a small number of cases before attempts to broaden and generalize are made. It is possible a few researchers—beginning and established—may find his chapter less useful due to these built-in biases. However, I do not feel the bias gets in the way of his insightful and helpful comments on analysis; in particular his points on depth vs. breadth, loosely following an orienting theory or framework, and the cyclical and inductive research process are cogent and excellent statements of common concepts in the literature. The chapter both provides practical advice and suggestions and provokes reflective thought on one's own epistemological, methodological, and theoretical viewpoints on qualitative analysis (also see Holloway & Todres, 2003; Mason, 1996). I would personally highly recommend it to any qualitative researcher, especially those inclined towards grounded theory or ethnography.

Keywords: analysis, data analysis, theory generation, theory development, grounded theory, depth, breadth, case study, orienting theory, framework, epistemology, inductive, research process, action research, ethnography