Demystifying Qualitative Data Analysis for Novice Qualitative Researchers

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Qualitative research is a rich and diverse discipline, yet novice qualitative researchers may struggle with figuring out how to approach their qualitative data analysis among the plethora of possibilities. After years of teaching qualitative research to undergraduate students, we have consistently seen their confusion, frustration, and even fear about how to approach their data. In an effort to help novice qualitative researchers come to grips with the “craft” of qualitative research, this paper presents a foundational model that facilitates a comprehensive yet manageable approach to qualitative data analysis. Based on an exhaustive review of expert qualitative methodologists, along with our own experience of teaching qualitative research, this model synthesises commonly-used analytic tactics that are likewise applicable to novice qualitative researchers. This foundational model consists of four iterative cycles: The Inspection Cycle, Coding Cycle, Categorisation Cycle, and Modelling Cycle, and memo-writing is inherent to the entire analysis process. Analysis begins with basic quantitative inspection of the data, followed by multiple coding cycles that begin with inductive approaches and move towards deductive strategies. Codes are then grouped and categories are drawn out. A final conceptual framework can thus be elaborated to synthesise and corroborate previous knowledge from the literature review with the findings that emerged from the data analysis. This model can also facilitate the development of reflexive and critical thinking skills: we often find that students are unsure and hesitant about engaging in interpretative thinking, so we foster their confidence and skills by emphasising memo-writing throughout the entire research process. In order to provide guidelines for novice researchers, we suggest three types of memos that can be applied to most qualitative research projects: the research diary, the methodological memo, and the analytical memo. The qualitative data analysis model presented in this paper can be used to analyse diverse types of qualitative data and it can be used with a variety of methodologies; if students are interested in exploring different qualitative data analysis methods, they can look to the references cited in the present analysis method for a good starting point. This qualitative data analysis method offers a solid foundation from which novice qualitative researchers may “get their hands dirty” with qualitative data analysis and develop their qualitative sensibility. The next time they embark upon a qualitative study, they will already have a clearer idea of how to go about the research and can thus make better-informed methodological and analytic decisions. For the novice qualitative researcher seeking to learn the craft of qualitative data analysis, the model outlined in this paper offers a structured way to familiarise yourself with some of the most common qualitative data analysis techniques while offering enough flexibility to be adapted within a wide range of qualitative methodologies and research areas.

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