# Analysing and reporting qualitative data   a 'how to...' guide

## Introduction

There are many approaches to collecting qualitative data, however there still remains a lack of guidance as to how to analyse data. The purpose of this guideline is to introduce those unfamiliar with qualitative methods, such as grounded theory, template analysis, content analysis and the like, to the key issues they need to consider when analysing qualitative data. In doing so, this guideline also poses a number of questions that potential researchers will need to address in the reporting of qualitative data.

Due to the subjective, interpretative and creative nature of qualitative research, the data analysis process can often become complex, laborious and time consuming. You must think about your analysis whilst planning your project since every decision made regarding what and how to collect data will have an impact on how the analysis is undertaken. This will ensure that analysis is as straightforward as possible.

## Analysing data

Analysis of qualitative data should be seen as a circular or spiralling process, rather than a linear progression that occurs soon after data collection and before writing the results. There are various ways of analysing interview or focus group data. However, what is important is that you adopt a systematic approach. In most cases, analysis will involve four main stages which are interconnected and repeated. The approach outlined below is based on the assumption that interview/focus group data has been audio/ visually recorded (i.e. taped, mini-disk recorded or videoed) and transcribed. If you have used another method and are wondering how to undertake your analysis please seek advice from a member of the Corporate Research and Consultation Team.

Stages in qualitative analysis

1. **Reading and listening to interviews**
   Read through each transcript or listen to the tape recordings a couple of times, to become familiar with the context of the interview.
2. **Identifying words, phrases or issues that recur**
   Read through the transcript again to identify themes (a theme is an expression that sums up a piece of text). This can be done by either writing in the margins or by using highlighter pens. Your aim here is to take the text and divide it all into themes.
3. **Selection and organisation of themes**
   Write the titles of all the themes down on separate pieces of paper, (a word processor or personal computer is a useful tool for this stage). Then arrange your themes into sections, discarding any that overlap. Write a brief sentence for each theme defining what should be included so that you know exactly where issues identified in the text should go. Then divide up the text from each interview under the appropriate themes. Making a note of the page number, line and transcript number of where the quotes came from, so that you can refer back to the context of the interview at a latter date. Identifiers (see note overleaf) should be attached to each quotation at this stage.

> **Handy tip**: If you are using the paper and pen method you may find it useful to have multiple copies of each transcript so that you can cut up the text and place sections under the appropriate theme. If you are using a computer, have separate word documents for

each theme and copy and paste text from your transcripts into the appropriate document. Whichever way you use, always remember to keep a master copy of each transcript so that you can refer back to the context of the interview.

### 4. Writing up and drawing conclusions

As you divide up the text, add in any thoughts or ideas you have about what you have read or heard. Always do this in a different colour so that you can easily identify your own thoughts and ideas from that of respondents. Continue this process until all the text has been summarised. Then rearrange your points/ideas into a logical order, adding your own notes and ideas throughout this process. Once you have divided up all your text and ordered your themes, you can start writing up your analysis. In order to get the most of your data you will need to discuss the meaning of each theme, the ways in which the themes interact and what the data as a whole tells you about your research area. Verbatim quotes should be used to support your arguments. Your final report needs to be clear, well organised and logical. The content may vary according to particular projects, but as a guide it is useful to include the following sections in a research report:

- Executive Summary
- Introduction/background
- Methods
- Findings
- Conclusions and recommendations
- Appendices (including interview schedule, consent forms)

### Frequently Asked Questions

The remainder of this guide provides answers to some of the most commonly asked questions when planning qualitative analysis. It is important that you read and understand the issues raised, as your own analysis will be guided by the answers to the following questions.

### Is there a difference between a quote and an extract?

The terms 'quotes' or 'extracts' are often used interchangeably to denote a passage taken from an interview or focus group. Quotes are generally short, to the point remarks that allude to or support an interpretation. The term 'extracts' refers to a longer passage or paragraph in which respondents' explanations demonstrate or support an interpretation.

### Why use quotes and extracts in qualitative reporting?

The main purpose of using quotes and extracts in qualitative research is to demonstrate how the findings and your interpretations have arisen from the data.

### How long should quotes and extracts be and how many should be used?

There are no set rules as to how long quotes or extracts should be, nor how many quotes you should use. What is important is that any quotation or extract used should support your interpretations and explanations. As a general rule of thumb, try and use at least two different quotations from two different people to support each argument.

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### Should quotes and extracts be 'cleaned'?

This is one of the frequently asked questions about qualitative research and a topic which creates much debate amongst researchers.  For example, some researchers would argue that every hesitation, every 'um' and 'er' of a respondent should be reported, since silences and hesitation can be revealing about topics that people are uncomfortable or have difficulty in discussing.  Others would argue that breaks in the text can make participants seem less articulate than they really are and render passages meaningless, making it difficult to follow the flow of the conversation.  As a general rule extracts should be presented in a manner that reflects as accurately as possible the conversation that occurred, whilst omitting unnecessary breaks and pauses in the conversation.

### Is it acceptable to shorten extracts (longer passages of text)?

It is generally acceptable to shorten passages of text as long as you make it clear what you have done. For example text followed by a number of dots (………………) generally denotes where text has been removed or left out.

### Can I count the number of times an issue is raised to help order or to give importance of a theme?

Unless you are following a prescribed methodological approach, such as content analysis, whereby it is acceptable to provide counts you should never attempt to reduce qualitative data to numbers.  Nor should you give greater emphasis to one theme just because more people mentioned it, everyone's opinion, no matter how different, counts equally. Remember what you are trying to capture is an overview of how something is experienced by a particular group or a deeper understanding of a topic area.

### What are identifiers and should they be used when presenting quotes/ extracts?

Identifiers, as the word suggests are way of acknowledging where quotes or extracts have been taken from or who they relate to.  For example, if you were exploring age differences between males and females you may want to make it obvious to the reader which comments were made by men and which by women, and how old the respondent was, who made the comment.  You would do this by including the gender and age of the respondent in brackets after a quote. For example:

> I would not use public transport in the evening because the
> kids go to swimming and football which are miles apart.
> (Male aged 35)

> The bus is an extension of my social club really, all my friends
> are on the bus and we talk a lot, it's also cheaper than getting
> a taxi to and from town you know.
> (Women aged 55)

The length of the identifier required depends on the purpose and topic of the research.  For example, some researchers will provide basic demographic details on all respondents (such as, Amanda, an 18 year-old Irish single parent) while others will only denote which interview the quote came from, (such as, Interview 15).

Essentially what you are doing by providing an identifier is linking the quote or extract back to a source which can be crossed checked if the results are questioned.  It is good practice to include identifiers to any quote or extract used.  However you must be careful that identifiers do not reveal the identity of the respondent and breach respondent confidentially, (see guidance on 'Ethical Issues in Research' for further guidance).

### Should you return your analysis to your respondents?

Many researchers are in favour of doing this as a method of checking their interpretations and confirming their results.  However, it is time consuming and you will need to decide beforehand what you intend to do if respondents disagree with your interpretation, want you to provide further information or wish to withdraw from your study because they don't like the results.  If you want respondents to comment on your analysis then you should allow additional time for your analysis and reporting, (this process can take anything from a couple of weeks to 6 months).

### Is there software that can help with the analysis?

Yes, a range of specialist software is available for undertaking qualitative data analysis, (such as NUD*IST, NVivo, ATLAS/ti, Hypersoft and Ethnograph).  The common misconception about most qualitative software is that the software will somehow do the analysis for you.  It won't, but what it does do, is provide researchers with sophisticated tools to help them organise, structure and theorise about their data.  While software increases the analysis potential, it is unlikely that you will ever need to use such software.  If you require more information about qualitative software please get in touch and we will be happy to answer your questions.

### What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic or any other aspect of research or consultation, please contact any member of the team:

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