

Data analysis, coding, themes and events in qualitative research

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Unless more recent, the material in this seminar is mostly taken from Holliday (2016)

This material can be found at <https://adrianholliday.com/handouts/>

Note about approach

Postmodern - recognising and managing intersubjectivity - the implicatedness of the researcher as part of the data (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Holliday & MacDonald 2020)

Constructivist - less about reporting what people do and say - more about **why they do and say** - how they construct their worlds and themselves (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1979)

Ethnographic disciplines - making the familiar strange, **submission** to the **emergence** of unexpected meanings, **phenomenological** positioning

Thinking about writing

Sociologists should surely be concerned with how they construct and convey their arguments: not only in relation to *historical* and theoretical texts, but also in terms of how the 'facts' and 'findings' of sociological research are conveyed in monographs and research papers. For these are not matters of neutral report: the conventions of text and rhetoric are among the ways in which reality is constructed. (Atkinson 1990: 2)

Analysis, coding, themes, events

Lots of methods and technologies with their own communities:

I've been trying to return to literature around coding of data as it still seems a bit like a very nebulous process. ... and I have a little project going on where we have a substantial amount of data from ...- email dialogue between our students. It's a challenge knowing the best way to approach this data and I feel a bit like I'm making it up as I go. (Experienced researcher)

Classic thematic analysis (Thornton 1988)

Note that this is not the popular Braun & Clarke reference

1. Temporarily put aside research questions
2. Put all the data together and treat it holistically
3. Look for themes across all data types — with the added facility of searching electronic text for key words
4. Use the themes and sub-themes to structure the data chapters
5. Use the extracts of data that best demonstrate the themes as the main points of discussion in the data chapters

All the interviews were transcribed, coded and sorted thematically. E-mail data, Field Notes and Critical Incidents from the author's Research Diary were also interpreted thematically and these latter either extended the themes arising from the interview data or were crucial in developing new themes. (Aboshiha 2008: 21)

But fairly common overall aims

To make sense of data

Close reading

Disciplines that manage intersubjectivity - making the familiar strange, allowing meanings and the unexpected to emerge, thick description

Allowing the data to speak independently of research questions

Responding to richness and multiple meaning

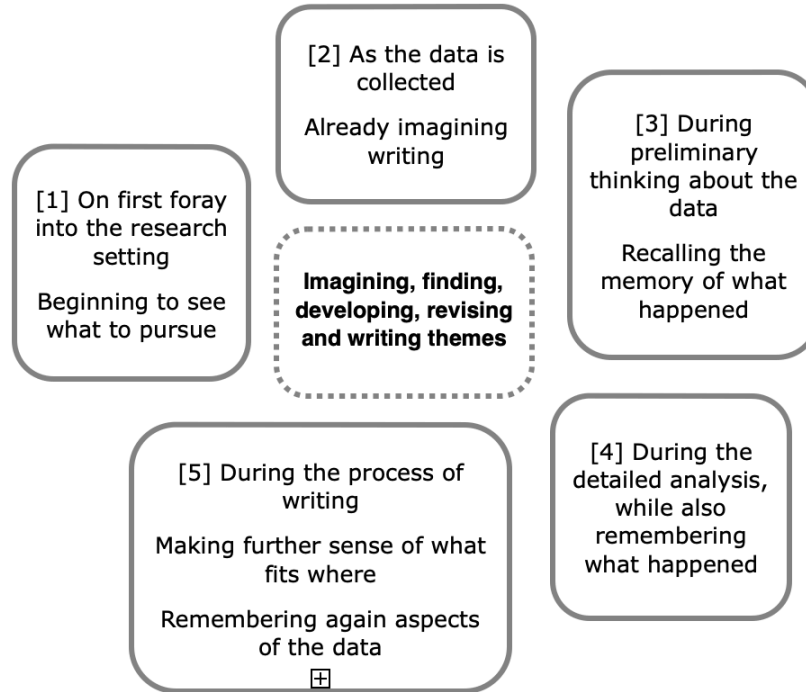
Developing structures within which to write

Specialist areas - e.g. critical discourse analysis, semiotics, conversational analysis

Engaging with multiple data forms (interview, fieldnotes, drawings, photographs, observational data etc.)

Viva question: 'What did you do to ensure that the unexpected could emerge from your data?'

Developing analysis throughout the research process



Using post-its, walls and office doors, bits of paper

The picture from Ayesha Kamal (2012) shows the beginnings of data chapter formation



Working with multiple data types

Collins (2016: 154ff):

The first data corpus to be considered was my set of field notes which at the time consisted of approximately 15,000 words of raw data and included empirical data from the research setting. While a number of entries in the field notes were deemed to be largely insignificant after coding the data, thirty-six entries were considered to be suggestive of nine broad themes that could tentatively be considered. Some of these themes, i.e. 'naming', were ones that I had become aware of during the initial data collection phase and it was also clear that there were themes which overlapped substantially and needed greater clarification. These nine large themes were then tentatively arranged into the three following working groups.

There were also a number of sub-themes within each of these three groups:

- Group 1: Small Cultures; Disciplines and Structures; Teacher/Researcher Beliefs; Teacher/Research Identity; Naming;
- Group 2: Globalisation; Internationalisation; Discursive constructions of students and staff
- Group 3: Institutionalisation; Marketisation; Employability

...

These groups were not considered as final, but were placed to one side so that other data could be analysed and to allow for thick description and the emergence of additional themes.

...

The initial analysis in March allowed me to tentatively identify which data I judged to be of greatest relevance. I analysed the interview data to further establish emerging themes.

I elected not to use special software programmes such as N-vivo for this analysis, but instead read through the data and used a colour coding system which eventually resulted in physical cuttings of extracts of data placed into categories and arranged in a spare room within my home.

I expected there to be substantial overlap between the themes emerging from the field notes and those emerging from the interviews, particularly given that some of the field note entries were comments on particular aspects of the interviews, but I was cautious against forcing data into previously existing categories because I believed that other previously unidentified themes would emerge from what I considered to be a much richer data corpus.

Selecting field note samples

Behind the scenes of Collins (2021)

14/07/17: Interestingly saw a university lecturer swimming in a lane with a few swimmers behind swearing at him. They clearly thought he was swimming in the wrong lane but he seemed fairly oblivious to any of this.

17/07/17: Un-laned area looking fairly chaotic. Young boy swimming around fairly haphazardly. Abandoned float in the middle. No one seemed to be bothered at all. Man lying on side of pool almost like sunbathing. Looks like he is trying to go to sleep. Life guard has a word but not sure what was said. Things generally very chilled.

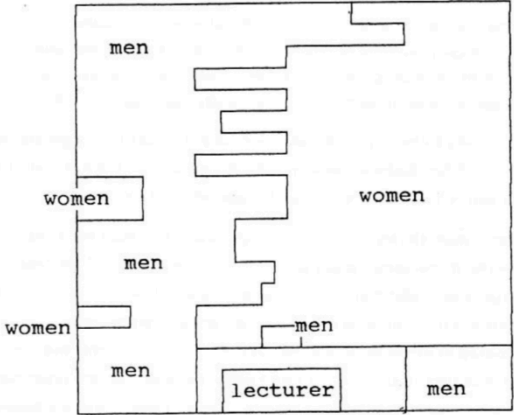
19/07/17: Lots happening today. Not particularly busy but an incident with a fairly elderly man swimming in the fast lane. The other swimmer in the lane was obviously annoyed, but was not a particularly fast swimmer himself. At one point he let out an audible, 'for f**k's sake' when he reached the block and the elderly man started off. A few minutes later the elderly man, while half way down the lane, ducked under the lane ropes into the lane I was sharing. I moved into the lane from where he had come. The previously annoyed swimmer seemed happier and even volunteered to let me pass on the block when I caught up with him. Later when I entered the sauna, there was a discussion between 4 people about the man who had apparently annoyed each of them in some way.

Selecting extracts from classroom observation data

Raw data from Holliday (1991: 319)

Lesson 39 Interaction: *[There was an awful crush as students coming out met students trying to get in. [p.207] [Several students were carrying flowers. One of the men gives a flower to AH, which s/he takes and keeps during part of the lesson - evidence of a profound integration with their culture - s/he holds it as they do. [p.337] [It took ten minutes for the class to settle down. [p.207] I sat on the left amongst the standing men. [Some of the students did not have notes; however, those who did seemed to have useful data in their hands which helped them cope with the poor mike. [p.313] There were many serious students sitting at the back. There was some choral repetition for which the students certainly seemed to have prepared in previous group work sessions. Some of the men standing at the front seemed a little flippant, though the majority seemed to be concentrating, interested and learning. [When students went to the front to write something on the blackboard, even those who hadn't seemed to be concentrating showed that they had been all the time (cf. obs.28) [p.222]. The words on the audio recording were unclear, but the intonation was clear; and the students repeated, anxious for any sound they could get hold of. [The procedure seemed to be working, but largely because the lecturer appeared confident and clear about what s/he was doing. [p.313] I felt s/he could have managed without the mike.*

Empty columns awaiting codes

		
<p>The students are blocked (cf. the American lecturer at site 8 reporting that at times of tension in Palestine, the blocking becomes Palestinians and the rest rather than men and women). As common in many classes, the women tended to be the majority in the front rows. There are classes where the women sit in the front half and the men sit in the back; but I have not seen the reverse situation.</p>		

Coding email interview transcripts (Holliday 2017)

<p>2. What do you think about the dominant view in some areas that doing a PhD in Britain is a particularly Western activity which might not have sufficient recognition of other backgrounds?</p>		
<p>Of the two questions, I think I'm struggling even more with this one. Does this question suggest that the way in which PhDs are structured in the UK is 'Western' and somehow doesn't recognize the backgrounds or talents of 'non-Westerners'? Or, is it suggesting that there is something unique about a 'British PhD'? Or is it suggesting possibly that 'the West' has a certain hegemony or monopoly on 'the business' of doing a PhD so that many 'non-Westerners' come to the UK to do a PhD? I'm not quite sure here.... I guess what I can say is that in my job I encounter a number of students who come to the UK with the idea of doing a PhD, but to many of these students, the whole PhD process is somewhat of a mystery. And yet, I felt exactly the same way when I thought about undertaking one. I didn't really know where to start and toyed with the idea for years. But it all seemed a bit of a mystery even though I was a relative 'insider' working within a university. I was able to get some advice and various people helped me navigate by talking about the process and work etc. But, I think for many people, a PhD is somewhat of a mystery. Now whether that is something that is unique to the UK, I couldn't even hazard a guess, but I wouldn't think so. And I think the element of 'mystery' can affect people regardless of any particular</p>	<p>More difficult The PhD is a mystery for everyone Also for insiders to the university</p>	<p>Different for everyone</p>
<p>The other thing that I have noticed is that there is no single way to do a PhD in Britain and I would guess in other places as well. I hear stories about students doing PhDs in, for example, Mechanical Engineering and while there is some overlap, a lot of what these students do is quite different to what is required of me. Even in other Schools (like Education) where one would expect significant similarities, I hear stories about their processes which leave me slightly surprised or where there appears to be significant differences – not necessarily a value judgment here. So, this is just at 1 university! I can't imagine how many various practices there are across the</p>	<p>Many types in Britain, universities, schools</p>	
<p>I'm aware of some particular differences in different countries or particular universities through talking to students, but these differences seem no more significant than the differences between practices even in just one university such as my own. People do PhDs all over the world.</p>	<p>Also countries</p>	

Finding events instead of themes

This perception of the creatively co-constructed interview leads us to depart from the more established presentation of data through themes that emerge from coding. Instead, as with Amadasi and Holliday (2017), we have selected events that we feel best demonstrate the interplay of narratives, especially where the student leads us, the researchers, to contribute our own personal and occasionally grand narratives with our own agendas. They demonstrate how our own knowledge of particular grand narratives enables us both to analyse the data and to take part in the interviews. ...

Event 1: strategic holding back

In the first event, S tells us about an argument she has had with her 'host mother' about breaking her accommodation contract. Here, she describes how she does not reveal her anger during the confrontation but tells us what she was thinking when told that she can 'never be part of this culture':

(Amadasi & Holliday 2018: 246)

The events include the interviewer and show their intersubjective role

Encourages recall of the wider nature of the event and what led up to it

For example, a key to why S says what she says, and what she means, is how she is encouraged by the researchers and how she responded to the setting up of the interviews

Does this reduce the colonising impact of the interview event?

Conflicting interpretations - researcher bias

The event just before 'the data'

1. In a conference workshop, we were asked to work in groups to analyse English language classroom teacher-student interaction data after seeing a fifteen-minute video sequence of the same event
2. There were five adult students - four women wearing hijab, and one male student. The male student, who seemed to have a similar cultural background to the women talked quite a lot
3. There was a consensus that this was an example of male domination
4. **However**, I had been allowed to see the video of the whole class
5. Before the sequence, the male student hadn't spoken at all; and several of the women had challenged the male British teacher in his interpretation of a newspaper article about plane hijack by a 'Muslim terrorist'
6. The teacher wanted to look at the language; the women students wanted to talk about the discourse politics of the article
7. After I had seen the whole video, thinking that he was imposing a Western agenda, I met the teacher. He told me how hard he tried to understand what his students wanted to talk about.

What sorts of grand and personal narratives can influence how we interpret data?

Reacting to the unexpected - perhaps with new theory

Duan (2007) found in personal diaries of Chinese school children a de-centred hybridity discourse that 'although we work hard for our exams, we are also desperate for personal time away from examinations' and that 'nobody understands who we really are'

This became his initial thesis - in Figure 1 - that their hybridity discourse opposes the dominant discourse that they only work for exams

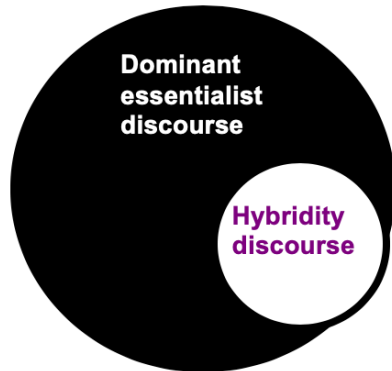


Figure 1

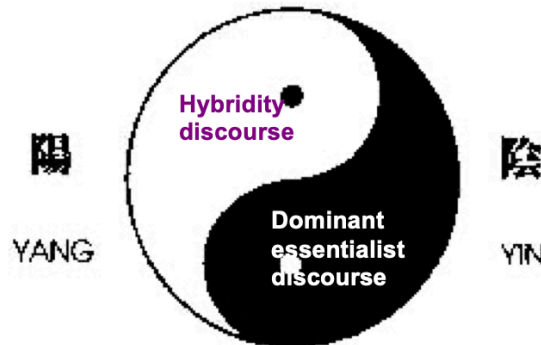


Figure 2

However, when interviewed, the very same school children overwhelmingly told him the opposite - that 'we are only interested in exams', thus confirming the dominant discourse

He therefore had to think again

He found the Taoist concept of yin and yang useful - where competing discourses can operate within the same person - Figure 2

‘Sitting on my data’

What I meant by ‘sitting on my data’ was that if we could forget ... the distinctions of data as ‘them’ and the researcher as the ‘self’, then we may arrive at a better understanding of the issues under scrutiny. I found that the whole data, like a flower bed, may, from a distance, appear to be brown, but when observed close-up, be found to contain vivid whites, reds or yellows. The researcher needs then to identify which colour among the flowers she considers most significant, and to alter her gaze accordingly. (Duan 2007: 71)

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