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TWO EARLY STEPS IN ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA: MAKING SUMMARIES AND USING THE CONSTANT COMPARATIVE METHOD

Abstract

Making summaries and using the constant comparative method are helpful first steps when analysing qualitative data, particularly interview data. Both are of great value because they facilitate the identification of themes. Summaries reduce the information available through a transcript and facilitate comparisons between cases. Similarly, while the constant comparative method can eventually lead to more complex analysis, in the early stages it involves a relatively straightforward process of comparing cases and identifying similarities and differences. This article discusses summaries and the constant comparative method in broad terms before demonstrating how both were used to begin to analyse interviews with lecturers at a United Kingdom university.

Introduction

For the new qualitative researcher, being faced with a set of interview transcripts for the first time often raises practical questions about how to begin analysis. Two possible starting points – which can be used together or separately – are making summaries and using the constant comparative method. Both processes will be demonstrated using interviews with lecturers at a case study university in the United Kingdom.

Seven lecturers were interviewed; they are referred to by pseudonyms in this article. The interviews were semi-structured, which meant that the researcher had a guide to follow,

consisting of a list of topics. A topic guide is not a fixed plan for an interview: the topics may be raised in a different order and the researcher will sometimes need to make a judgment as to whether all the required topics have been covered (Roulston, 2010: 14-15). In addition, the interviewer asks follow up questions (known as probes) based on the initial answers of the respondent, which means that the detail with which topics are considered will vary between respondents. However, semi-structured interviews are likely to provide more topics where comparisons can be made between respondents than is the case with unstructured interviews.

Making summaries

It is very important to read and re-read transcripts thoroughly before beginning analysis; this is a simple technique to enhance validity, making it more likely that the findings of the study will accurately reflect the original data. Although reading and re-reading is time consuming, it should ensure that the researcher does not neglect any ideas or sections of the transcripts when conducting their analysis (Schmidt, 2004, p.255). Once the reading is complete, the process of summarising can begin.

Case summary sheets have been used as a data reduction device since the early twentieth century (Fielding and Lee, 1998: 24). Miles and Huberman, (1994: 51) argue that the strength of summarising is that it enables the researcher to focus on the main questions raised by the respondent because ‘it is easy to get lost in a welter of detail’. Paraphrasing the content into a shorter form can eliminate unnecessary features such as repetition (Flick, 2009: 325).

As Miles and Huberman (1994: 51-52) argue, the full transcript should be reduced to a summary that fits onto one sheet of paper and so is easy for the researcher to compare with other summaries. This will clearly mean substantially reducing the amount of material contained in most interview transcripts.

It is often helpful to summarise one section of a transcript at a time. The process of summarising usually involves the following steps:

1. Identify the research objective that the section of the transcript is most relevant to.
2. Decide which pieces of information or opinion are most relevant to this objective and which are detail that do not need to be included in the summary.
3. Decide where (if at all) there is repetition that needs to be eliminated.
4. On the basis of these decisions, write brief notes.

Summarising Interviews: An example

There will now be a demonstration of how I summarised the first section of an interview with a lecturer referred to as Fern. This section, which dealt with how and why the respondent became a lecturer, appears below:

Interviewer: First we're going to look at motivation. How long have you been in this particular job?

Fern: A large number of years now.

Interviewer: Right, okay. Have you had any other previous roles within this university?

Fern: I have progressed from a basic lecturer to a senior position.

Interviewer: Have you taught at any other universities?

Fern: Yes I've taught at one other.

Interviewer: Okay, why did you decide to enter into higher education?

Fern: Never wanted to do anything else.

Interviewer: But what were your reasons for doing that, was it for your own satisfaction, financial reasons, flexible working?

Fern: Because I wanted to research and teach. I wanted to do the job and I didn't think about the money. It wasn't very well paid to start with. It never crossed my mind to do any other job to be perfectly honest.

Interviewer: In the beginning, what were your initial hopes and fears for the job?

Fern: I just wanted to be a good academic and I wanted never to have to leave. I didn't think about getting promoted, I just wanted to be a researcher and a teacher. My worry was perhaps I would have to leave because, like I say, I could never imagine doing anything else.

Step 1 – Identify the research objective that the section of the transcript is most relevant to.

The objectives of this research project were:

1. to identify the motivation of lecturers for their choice of career;
2. to identify feelings about, and practical difficulties associated with, different elements of the job;
3. to discuss different types of students and the experience of teaching them;
4. to identify feelings about reflective practice and methods by which it was put into practice and

5. to discuss changes with time in relation to the above factors.

It was clear that the first of these objectives was most relevant to this section of the transcript.

Step 2 - Decide which pieces of information or opinion are most relevant to this objective and which are details that do not need to be included in the summary.

The first three questions of the interview were included in order to provide some context and to establish rapport between the interviewer and the respondent; the responses did not need to appear in the summary because they were not central to the relevant research objective. Similarly, the discussion of the factors that did not motivate Fern – i.e. money and promotion – were eliminated because they were elements of detail; it seemed clear that the point that was central to the research objective was what did attract Fern to the job, i.e. the desire to research and teach.

Step 3 - Decide where (if at all) there is repetition that needs to be eliminated

The fourth, fifth and sixth questions addressed motivation. There was repetition that could be eliminated because Fern made three very similar points in response to these questions: 'Never wanted to do anything else', 'It never crossed my mind to do any other job' and 'I could never imagine doing anything else.'

Step 4 - On the basis of these decisions, write brief notes

Having made the decisions above, it was possible to write brief notes to appear in the summary of the interview, which looked like this:

- Intrinsic motivation, wanted to research and teach.
- No interest in any other career.

By continuing to summarise the rest of the interview in this fashion, I reduced a twelve page interview with Fern to a one page summary. This summary was very useful for making comparisons with other lecturers. For example, the first section of an interview with another lecturer, referred to as Susan, was summarised in the following manner:

- Pragmatic choice to enter higher education.
- Attracted by the belief that academic job was flexible.
- Excited by subject and wanted others to be excited.

So it was possible to see from these summaries that the two respondents had very different initial reasons for working in higher education. Summaries are, therefore, a helpful tool for identifying broad areas of similarity and difference between respondents. However, more systematic comparisons can be made using the constant comparative method.

The constant comparative method

The constant comparative method was originally advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as part of their grounded theory approach, which is a specific type of inductive method. The relationship between data analysis, theory building and sampling is critical when using a

grounded theory approach. Theory building should begin as soon as there is sufficient data to analyse and cases should be chosen to add to the sample on the basis that they can contribute to the emerging theory (Harding, 2006: 131-132). Given this emphasis on analysing data at the earliest possible stage it is clear why the constant comparative method – which can begin with as few as two cases – is particularly valuable when using a grounded theory approach.

However, Barbour (2008: 217) argues that the constant comparative method is at the heart of all qualitative data analysis, which relies on constantly comparing and contrasting. It is described by Charmaz (2006: 54) in the following manner:

> At first you compare data with data to find similarities and differences. For example, compare interview statements and incidents within the same interview and compare statements and incidents in different interviews.

Later stages of the process can become more complex, leading to the building of theory (Flick, 2009: 407), but it is comparisons between cases that this article will concentrate on.

The key reason for using the constant comparative method is identified by Dey (1993: 88): 'Comparison is the engine through which we can generate insights, by identifying patterns of similarity or difference within the data'. Barbour (2008: 217) also discusses the importance of identifying patterns when using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method can help to achieve the three aims of thematic qualitative data analysis identified by Gibson and Brown (2009: 128-129): examining commonality, examining difference and examining relationships.

A helpful approach to using the constant comparative method, and one which is demonstrated below, is to divide the process into three steps:

1. Make a list of similarities and differences between the first two cases to be considered.
2. Amend this list as further cases are added to the analysis.
3. Identify research findings once all the cases have been included in the analysis.

Using the Constant Comparative Method: an Example

The use of these three steps will now be demonstrated. The constant comparative method is frequently discussed alongside the process of coding (see, for example, Boeije, 2010: 83-86) but here, for the sake of simplicity, codes will not be used.

Step 1 – Make a list of similarities and differences between the first two cases

This is a fairly simple first step and one that may help to build the confidence of the researcher who is worried about using the constant comparative method, or about qualitative data analysis more generally. It is illustrated here using transcripts of the interviews of Fern and Susan. The sections of the transcripts used are those that concern reflective practice, i.e. the process of looking back on teaching and considering how it could be improved:

Interviewer: Okay we're going to move on to reflective practice now. What's your understanding of that?

Fern: It's about reflecting on how I do my teaching, how I practice my trade. Reflection is something that is required in every area of work these days.

Interviewer: And how important to you is reflecting on your own practice?

Fern: Oh I've always been interested in student feedback. I always want to know how it's gone and I don't like if I feel I haven't been on top form or I haven't explained things right: that really annoys me. So I do think, I do feel it over in my mind what I've done and how I've done; how I've answered questions and that kind of thing. I think I do it almost all the time, I don't think 'another lecture over, on with the next', I always want to feel it's gone well and if it hasn't gone well then why hasn't it gone well? And so if I'm understanding what reflective practice actually does, then it's my natural condition.

Interviewer: And what is your motivation to be reflective of your practice?

Fern: Pride.

Interviewer: Pride?

Fern: Yes I want to do a good job, I would not wish to produce poor research or produce poor teaching.

Interviewer: Moving on, what's your understanding of reflective practice?

Susan: It's about looking back at what you've done, how you do it, what experiences you've gained from that. You've got to constantly be a reflective practitioner and look at not just what we're teaching but how we teach it, how we impart that knowledge and the students' experience. You can reflect but it needs to be two ways with the people who you've been working with - how they've engaged that process and how they have seen it. I think it's critical; it's a two way engagement.

Interviewer: So you think it's important?

Susan: Oh yes, there are people who don't do that in this line of work; I'm thinking beyond the faculty to other academics who I've worked with who don't do it and churn out the same lecture year on year. They teach this because it's week eight, never mind if things have changed. It's dry and they don't excite or engage the students, they don't want to learn in that environment.

Interviewer: And what would you say was your motivation to be reflective of your practice?

Susan: For students to enjoy my teaching, and it comes back to wanting to be seen as a teacher.

Interviewer: So would you say that was internal?

Susan: In the sense of me?

Interviewer: Yes.

Susan: Yes, very much. There is pressure, in the fact we have to write personal teaching reviews and we do practice within the faculty to look at how you teach and the experience and the student expectations. But it's very much for me, that it's enjoyable for me and it's not enjoyable to teach if you look at a room full of students who look blank, don't ask questions and don't respond back. If you're sat in a seminar and thinking 'ugh I've got two hours to wade through this' why would you ever want to keep doing that? It's about being enjoyable for me but also so that I can see students have been excited by what we've done and what we've covered.

These extracts demonstrate that, even in areas where there are broad similarities, there are likely to be differences of detail. For example, Fern and Susan both agreed that reflective practice was important and both used personal reflection and gaining feedback from students as methods of reflection. However, there were also some differences: Susan added personal teaching review and comparing practice with other parts of the faculty to her list of mechanisms. In addition, she said that her motivation was to enjoy teaching, while the motivation of Fern was pride.

So, when I made lists of similarities and differences between Fern and Susan in relation to reflective practice, they looked like this:

Similarities

1. Agreed it was important.

2. Used personal reflection and student feedback as mechanisms.

Differences

1. Susan used personal teaching reviews and comparison with other parts of the faculty as mechanisms.

2. Susan motivated by a desire to enjoy teaching, Fern by pride.

Step 2 – Amend the list of similarities and differences as further cases are added to the analysis

One of the great strengths of qualitative data, but one of the factors that makes it difficult to analyse, is the complexity that it can capture and record. The greater richness is a key difference between qualitative and quantitative data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 16). As more cases are added to the analysis, it is likely that any simple list of similarities and differences will need to be substantially modified. This section will show how the introduction of an interview with a third lecturer from the case study university, Rachel, added to the complexity of the analysis of the issue of reflective practice. The section from Rachel's transcript on this subject is shown below:

Interviewer: What is your understanding of reflective practice?

Rachel: Looking at what you do, looking back at what you do, and looking at how you can improve.

Interviewer: Do you find it important?

Rachel: Yes, because I think you can slip into a certain way of doing lectures, a certain way of doing seminars and a certain way of dealing with students and you forget that time's moved on and actually you should be. You should move with the times and I think changing jobs has given me a new lease of life. I've done things I haven't done ever before and just thinking about what you're doing and what you're teaching and what you want to get across is something we should do all the time.

Interviewer: Do you feel under pressure from anywhere to reflect?

Rachel: From myself.

Interviewer: Just yourself?

Rachel: Yes, it is surprising that there is no external pressure. I want to write good lectures and to always have great images and things like that. So a lot of pressure from myself but I don't think that's such a bad thing, because if I didn't give myself that pressure then I probably wouldn't bother any more.

Incorporating Rachel's data demonstrated three likely effects of adding further cases to the analysis of similarities and differences.

Firstly, factors are likely to disappear from the list of similarities. Rachel agreed that reflective practice was important and that personal reflection was a method of achieving this. So here were two areas of continuing agreement. However, she did not discuss incorporating student feedback into reflection so this could no longer be considered a similarity between all the cases.

Secondly, the list of differences is likely to become more complex as the researcher seeks to keep track of who said what. In addition to noting that Fern and Susan used feedback from students and Rachel did not, I also needed to record that Rachel gave different reasons to both Fern and Susan for undertaking reflective practice, i.e. to teach to a high standard and to stay updated.

Thirdly, comparisons are likely to become possible in some new areas, which were discussed in some interviews but not others. So, for example, I noted that Rachel and Susan both discussed where the pressure to reflect came from, but Fern did not. The comparison showed that Rachel only identified internal pressure (indeed, she commented on the lack of external pressure), while Susan said that it was mainly internal but two of her identified mechanisms –

personal teaching review and comparisons with other parts of the faculty – were required activities and so a reflection of external pressure. This difference needed to be recorded, but it was also necessary to record that the issue was not discussed by Fern.

As a footnote to this third point, it sometimes emerges that comparisons of issues that appear to be new could, in fact, have been made earlier. To take an example, Rachel suggested that reflective practice was something that should be done ‘all the time’. On looking back to see whether this idea was referred to in previous interviews, I noted that Susan discussed the need to ‘constantly’ be a reflective practitioner. Next I re-read the interview with Fern and saw that she described reflective practice as her ‘natural condition’. I interpreted this phrase as meaning that she reflected very regularly, so a further similarity emerged, one that I missed when initially comparing the interviews of Fern and Susan, i.e. that all three respondents reflected continuously on their practice.

So having incorporated the material from Rachel’s interview, the list of similarities and differences in relation to reflective practice looked like this:

Similarities

1. All agreed it was important.

2. All used personal reflection as a method.

3. All thought that reflection should be a continuous process.

Differences:

1. Susan and Fern used student feedback, Rachel did not.

2. Susan was the only one to use personal teaching review and comparison with other parts of the faculty as mechanisms.

3. Susan was motivated by a desire to enjoy teaching, Fern by pride, Rachel by a wish to teach to a high standard and to stay updated.

4. Rachel thought the pressure to reflect was entirely internal, Susan discussed both internal and external pressures, the issue was not addressed by Fern.

Step 3 – Identify research findings once all the cases have been included in the analysis

There were, of course, further interviews to consider in the case study but there is not space to go through the process of adding each of them to the analysis. However, it should be clear from the process presented above how the addition of further cases would lead to the list of similarities and differences being amended. Some published work on the constant comparative method discusses continuing to add new cases to the dataset until the point of 'saturation' is reached, i.e. new cases are not adding anything to the analysis (e.g. Charmaz, 2006: 113-114; Boeije, 2010: 83-84). However, it is unlikely that many research projects can offer this level of flexibility. In practice, the point at which a researcher stops collecting data is usually determined by the amount of time or other resources that can be devoted to the project. So a researcher often has less data than they would ideally like from which to draw

their findings. It is possible that undertaking more interviews with the lecturers would have presented a clearer picture, but the seven interviews undertaken were enough to demonstrate some distinct similarities and differences between cases.

Two commonalities that persisted across all the respondents were an agreement that reflective practice was important and the use of personal reflection as a mechanism for reflective practice. So these were two clear and simple findings that arose from the data. There are two reasons why such unanimous agreement is unusual. The first is that, as was noted above, a semi-structured interview guide can ensure that some topics are covered in every interview, but the freedom to digress from the guide means that there will also be a large number of topics discussed by some respondents but not by others.

The second reason is that there are likely to be individuals who disagree even where there is a broad consensus. One method of dealing with such disagreement is analytic induction: an advanced form of analysis which involves examining cases that differ from the norm and seeking to explain this difference (Flick, 2006: 4-5). However, a simpler approach for the new researcher is to ask how many cases should have a common feature for it to be counted as commonality. Answering this question will involve counting: Miles and Huberman (1994: 253) suggest that this is an essential part of qualitative analysis and Barbour (2008: 217) argues that it is a key element of using the constant comparative method. So how much agreement is needed for a factor to be considered as commonality? My very rough rule of thumb is that, if three quarters of respondents or more share an experience or a view, then it should be considered to be a commonality. I did not need to use this rule of thumb here because, with the exception of the agreement that reflective practice was important and the

universal use of personal reflection as a mechanism, there was no point on which large numbers of respondents agreed.

It was noted above that the pattern of differences tends to become more complex as more cases are added to the analysis; almost by definition, seeking to reach findings and identify themes in relation to differences is likely to be less simple than doing so in relation to similarities. The analysis of the first three interviews suggested that there were differences in terms of the mechanisms used for reflective practice and the motivation for undertaking reflective practice. Adding the remaining cases to the analysis led to the following findings in relation to mechanisms:

- Several respondents discussed methods of involving colleagues in seeking to identify best practice. The methods discussed were both formal (e.g. peer review) and informal (e.g. watching the teaching of colleagues).

- A small number of respondents discussed incorporating student feedback into their reflective practice.

- There were a number of other mechanisms identified by individuals: personal teaching review, making a written evaluation of a teaching session and publishing teaching materials.

- Some respondents discussed reflective practice as a distinct process, while others spoke of it as something that they did continually.
- Respondents identified a range of reasons for undertaking reflective practice – such as pride and a wish to enjoy teaching – most of which were linked to a desire to feel that they were doing their job well

- Most respondents identified stronger internal than external pressure to undertake reflective practice.

There are two points to note about the format of these findings. The first is that the differences have been made implicit rather than explicit. For example, saying that 'several respondents discussed methods of involving colleagues in seeking to identify best practice' makes clear, without actually stating, that there were other respondents who did not discuss involving colleagues. The second is that, while numbers are rarely used to discuss qualitative findings, the words used to discuss trends are chosen to give broad indications of the number of respondents involved. Expressions such as 'several', 'a number' and 'some' suggest that the number of respondents is neither particularly high nor particularly low, the use of 'most 'clearly indicates a larger number, in contrast to the phrase 'a small number'.

It should be noted as an aside that, while identifying points in the format of the bullet points above is an important stage in using the constant comparative method, findings should not be left simply as broad trends, otherwise qualitative research would simply mimic quantitative studies, with smaller number of cases. It is necessary to add detail about individual cases and quotations in order to demonstrate how broad trends are reflected at a personal level.

So, for example, when writing the research output, the findings in relation to mechanisms for reflective practice that involved working with colleagues might look like this:

> Several respondents discussed methods of involving colleagues in seeking to identify best practice. Some used formal processes involving colleagues either directly (e.g. peer review) or indirectly (e.g. comparing with practice in other

parts of the faculty). However, others preferred to use informal processes such as watching the teaching of colleagues or discussing a teaching session with them. One respondent suggested that working with colleagues had been a particularly important mechanism that facilitated reflection on his practice – more important than a course that he had attended about teaching in higher education. As he put it: '….working with colleagues and thinking about the job and wanting to do better, I think has been more valuable than that particular course'.

The data provided in this case demonstrated similarities and differences between respondents but did not achieve the third aim of thematic analysis identified by Gibson and Brown (2009: 128-129), i.e. explaining differences between different factors. This is a particularly difficult aim to achieve and one that is usually only possible when considering more conceptual questions than those that were discussed in relation to reflective practice. However, it is useful to consider the types of relationship between factors that studies using the constant comparative method have revealed, in order to demonstrate the full potential of this method. Some examples are provided below:

1. Rager (2004) found that one issue had an impact on several others. American women who undertook self-directed learning were able to point to four benefits: empowerment (they felt more in control), connectedness (they were able to make contact with people in similar situations), selective learning (they could choose which subjects they learned about) and the search for meaning (they were better able to articulate what meaning the experience should have for them).

2. In contrast, the research of Lawson (2003) among boys who had sexually abused children found that central to their thinking was the idea that, after treatment, they wished to become a 'success story'. This idea of success was shown to incorporate three issues: avoiding a relapse into offending, complying with what others expected them to do and making decisions based on the correct information.

3. Baildon and Sim (2009) examined the impact of two issues that were in tension with each other. They found that Singaporean school cultures that emphasised teaching to enable students to pass assessments were in conflict with the need for people who could think critically and develop innovations in an increasingly globalised world. The result was anxiety for teachers.

4. Radwin et al. (2005) developed a typology of the factors that cancer patients used when describing their nursing care. They found that most comments centred on the concepts of whether the staff were commendable, whether the approach used was caring, whether professional standards were maintained and the outcomes of their care. Illustrative issues that contributed to each of these concepts were identified: for example, staff were considered commendable if they were hard working, approachable and inspired gratitude. While, of course, some respondents gave descriptions that covered more than one of the concepts, the typology proved a helpful manner of classifying the elements of care that were most important to patients.

These examples demonstrate how the constant comparative method can be used to explain complex patterns of relationships between different factors. The data provided above has only been able to achieve two of the simpler aims of thematic analysis, i.e. examining

commonality and examining difference. However, it has demonstrated the value of the constant comparative method in achieving these two aims, which often represent the limits of what can be achieved when analysing more descriptive and less conceptual issues.

Summary

Summaries are a helpful tool to enable the researcher to begin to make sense of the very large amount of information that is usually available in interview transcripts; a summary of each interview can be viewed at a glance, facilitating the identification of similarities and differences between cases. However, more systematic comparisons can be made using the constant comparative method, which can be used alongside summaries or as an alternative. Although the constant comparative method is frequently discussed within the context of grounded theory, or alongside the use of codes, it is also a method which can stand on its own and can be applied to most forms of qualitative data. It is often particularly valuable for the new researcher, because of its simple starting point of making comparisons between two cases. While the analysis inevitably becomes more complex as more cases are added, it remains a helpful approach to identifying key themes within a dataset. Complex patterns of relationships between factors can be identified using the constant comparative method, but in many cases it is most helpful in identifying patterns of similarity and difference between cases. These patterns should be discussed by the researcher in their output, together with supporting material from individual cases and quotations.

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