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Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis: Reading Line-by-Line, but Analyzing by Meaningful Qualitative Units

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Abstract

In the first of a series of “how-to” essays on conducting qualitative data analysis, Ron Chenail points out the challenges of determining units to analyze qualitatively when dealing with text. He acknowledges that although we may read a document word-by-word or line-by-line, we need to adjust our focus when processing the text for purposes of conducting qualitative data analysis so we concentrate on meaningful, undivided entities or wholes as our units of analysis.

Keywords

Qualitative Data Analysis, Unit of Analysis, and Qualitative Research

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Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis: Reading Line-by-Line, but Analyzing by Meaningful Qualitative Units

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In the first of a series of “how-to” essays on conducting qualitative data analysis, Ron Chenail points out the challenges of determining units to analyze qualitatively when dealing with text. He acknowledges that although we may read a document word-by-word or line-by-line, we need to adjust our focus when processing the text for purposes of conducting qualitative data analysis so we concentrate on meaningful, undivided entities or wholes as our units of analysis. Key Words: Qualitative Data Analysis, Unit of Analysis, and Qualitative Research.

One of the biggest challenges in conducting qualitative data analysis is deciding on what piece of the data constitutes a meaningful unit to analyze. A unit by definition is “a single undivided entity or whole” (Collins English Dictionary, 2011) so in qualitative data analysis a unit would be a single undivided entity upon which you direct your analysis and express the qualities you perceive in that element. Since data do not come already packaged in nice little units, how do qualitative data analysts approach this quandary when selecting a meaningful undivided whole to analyze?

One procedure qualitative researchers often share in describing their analytical process is to write they conducted the analysis of a transcript, fieldnotes, or some other textual source was conducted in a line-by-line manner (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). This commonly found passage sounds fine, but approaching lines of a text as prospective units of analysis could lead researchers to over- and under-sizing their units to be analyzed. This arbitrary calibration by the researcher could lead to misidentifying meaningful qualitative elements to analyze. This problematic outcome can arise because in the analysis of textual material, the number of words portrayed in a line has more to do with margins, justification, and font size than setting forth significant qualitative elements to be studied for their qualities or essential features. In other words, a line of text might not constitute a suitable, undivided entity or whole to analyze qualitatively.

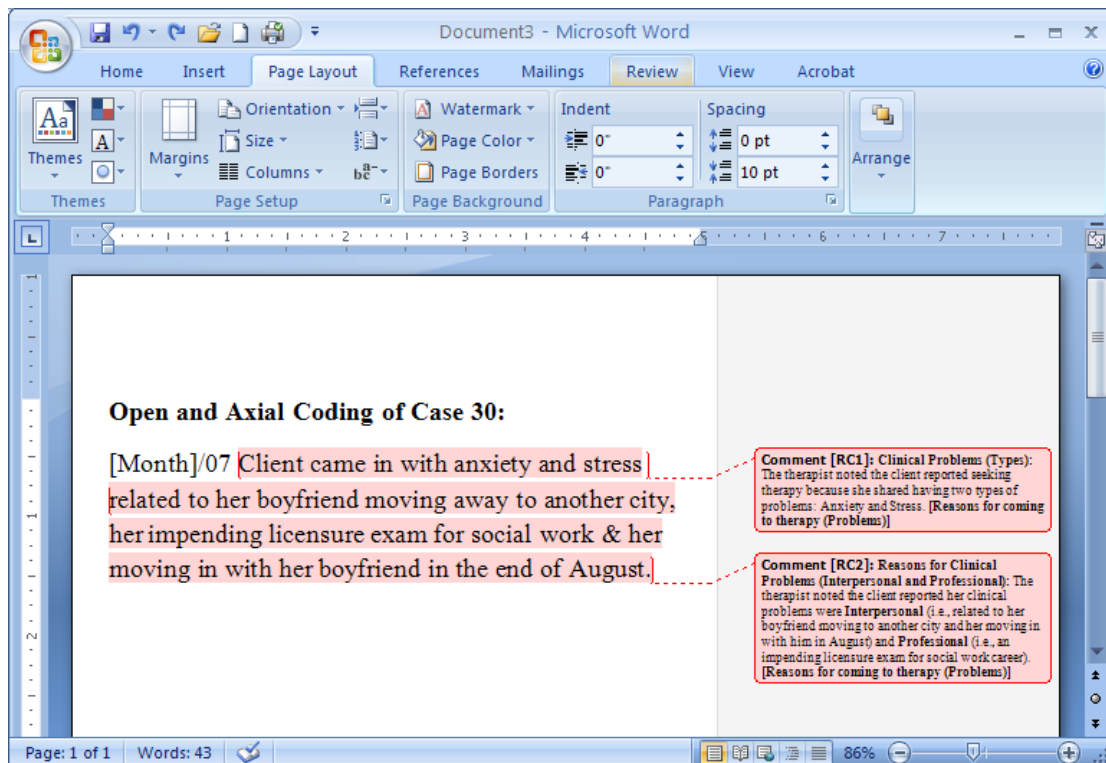
To make sure you focus on portions of the data that have potential as qualitatively meaningful undivided units to analyze, it is fine to read a transcript line-by-line to help slow down your pace of assessing suitable elements, but be careful to let that attention span determine your units of analysis because you might be better served to focus on units shorter and longer than an arbitrary line of text. Not surprisingly some qualitative researchers conversely advocate a word-by-word style of reading text for purposes of analysis (e.g., Reddy & Spence, 2008), but this narrower, myopic choice is again only an arbitrary start of the analytical process of separating any material into constituent qualitative elements.

Given the differences between reading texts line-by-line or word-by-word, and analyzing data by meaningful qualitative elements, it is critical that you make note how

and when you shift back and forth between reading words or lines to analyzing meaningful undivided units signifying qualitative differences that make a difference. These shifts of perspective are an important part of the instrumentation process of qualitative data analysis so it is also critical in the spirit of transparency that this iterative activity be chronicled in the reporting of the procedures used in a study's method in order to share how quality or rigor was maintained in this aspect of the qualitative data analysis enterprise.

A simple way to fashion an audit trail showing how your selection of analytical units was not overly affected by the form in which the data are stored (i.e., left justified lines of text in a digital file) is to use a word processing tool such as [Microsoft Word's Insert Comment reviewing option](#). With this application you can highlight units of a transcript as small as a letter and as large as the whole document to create codes and analytical memos that appear as "text clouds" in the document's left-hand column (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Sample Coding*



As you work your way through the data noting your analysis unit-by-unit with Word's Insert Comment tool, it is easy for you or anyone else who wants to review the analysis to see how the tagged units of analysis are arrayed throughout the document. Even without reading any of the codes or analytical memos, a warning sign should go up if the units displayed in the document regularly equal a line of text. This pattern of coding lines-as-undivided units of analysis can suggest the researcher might have been overly organized by the lines of words and not by undivided units of data. If this line-as-analytical-unit

pattern is observed, review the text again to see if these elements can be re-processed into finer, meaningful qualitative units. In Figure 1, the initial open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) sample shows one code (RC1) consisting of one line of text and the other code (RC2) encompassing text spanning three lines. This code-to-line pattern suggests the analyst was focusing on meaningful, undivided qualitative units rather than lines of text to create the system of codes and analytical memos.

Whether you as the qualitative analyst use a software package and its editing applications or paper and a set of crayons to demarcate your analytical units, take the time to scan your array of units to see if you have been able to switch successfully between reading the document line-by-line and processing the data to identify meaningful qualitative units to analyze. Qualitative data analysis requires you be able to read and process text so differentiating qualitative differences become the ultimate focus of your analysis. If the lines of text become too hard for you to ignore, you can always listen to the original recordings from which your transcripts were created, so if your eyes are difficult to recalibrate, then maybe your ears can lend some assistance to help you hear qualitative differences that make a difference in your analysis. You can also try reading and listening together to help you focus on meaning and not simply on textual and aural displays of data. As you hone your qualitative analytical competencies through multiple exposures to these multi-channels of communication, you will develop both your eye and ear for noting meaningful qualitative units to analyze.

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