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## Seeing the Forest through the Trees: A Review of Gibson and Brown's Working with Qualitative Data

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## Seeing the Forest through the Trees: A Review of Gibson and Brown's Working with Qualitative Data

### Abstract

In their 2008 book, *Working with Qualitative Data*, Gibson and Brown introduce their readers to the notion that qualitative data analysis is more of an on-going process integral to the overall qualitative research process than a set of techniques or tools. In making this assertion, the authors help their audience connect analysis with theory, design, and final qualitative research report

### Keywords

Qualitative Data Analysis, Qualitative Research, Prescriptive Codification

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## **Seeing the Forest through the Trees: A Review of Gibson and Brown's *Working with Qualitative Data***

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Gibson and Brown (2008) in their new book, *Working with Qualitative Data*, have offered the new and learning qualitative researcher an encyclopedic look at working with qualitative data. Their mission which they take great pains to repeat in their Introduction, Conclusion, and at various points throughout the text, is a call to respect a necessary lack of “prescriptive codification” (p. 2) in the process of data analysis. The authors want their audience to see data analysis, not as technique, but as process. The process emphasizes placing data analysis in a larger context, “This book is about the ways in which data analysis relates to, impacts on and develops from the other aspects of social research practice” (p. 2). The key point for these authors is to engage, teach, and sensitize their audience as to how data analysis “develops from the other aspects of social research practice.”

To accomplish this goal, the authors structure their text around “showing how analysis can work when particular strategies and foci are adopted” (p. 2). They ambitiously address all phases of the research process with extensive examples, literature to explore, diagrams, main points at the beginning of each chapter, and boxes that summarize main points made within chapters. The authors’ organization of the presented material makes the sheer quantity of information more manageable for the reader, as well as easier to follow their argument. In addition, the authors are very careful to define their terms, beginning with what “analysis” means in the common phrase “data analysis”. Their intent here is to illustrate how terms can have multiple meanings, more reflective of authors considered classic in the field or how terms are used in “non-research discourse” (p. 3). In other words, authors Gibson and Brown want their readers to think as carefully and critically about the process a qualitative researcher engages in, as they have.

Data analysis is stressed as being a “general feature” (p. 13) of research practice. From this perspective analysis can never be separated from the researcher, the research question, the research method, events that occur during the research, the equipment used to record research, etc. Analysis must evolve from the ongoing intersection of multiple factors, which are likely to be a moving target. As a beginning researcher in the

qualitative arena, I chose to review this book, because of its step by step discussion of the phases in a research process, and because of its emphasis on the integrity of staying with the “messy” process of working with qualitative data. The experience of reading this text was a bit daunting: there are so many “trees” and so many different varieties in this vast forest of qualitative research, that I often felt lost in the sheer amount of detailed information.

In Chapter 2 the authors walk the reader through terms, definitions and theoretical concepts in qualitative research, especially grounded theory. Having provided a review, the authors go on to emphasize that whether one theory is better than another is more of a subjective than objective exercise. What counts is the role theory plays as a “resource for doing things with data” (p. 19).

Gibson and Brown in Chapter 3 take the reader through a wide variety of methods, including some of their advantages and disadvantages, in doing a literature search. In Chapter 4 the authors move into research design, focusing on helping researchers “think about the relationship between their design and data work” (p. 47). The authors give detailed discussions within the chapter’s sections, including inviting the reader to think about ethical issues, for instance how to think about sampling. Can a sample be considered representative of more than the sample? Do qualitative researchers aim to report in general, to generalize their findings from their sample to a broader group? How do ‘thick description’ and “nuanced understandings” (p. 57) become meaningful for a larger audience? This chapter also discusses the issue of trustworthiness vs. validity of data, summarizing Lincoln and Guba’s (1982) argument that trustworthiness is drawn from the “context of data collection and the methods of the generation of data” (p. 59).

In Chapter 5 Gibson and Brown describe using documents as “analytically focused or analytically filtered” (p. 65). The authors continue to remind their readers about process, “analysis is a lived part of the working through of the method, and not just a tool that is used to makes sense of the data once it is created” (p. 68). As in the previous chapters, the authors appear to leave no qualitative stone unturned, including a table that provides examples, and one is hard pressed not to imagine this is merely a sampling, of “the types of questions that a researcher might ask when examining a document for the first time” (p. 71). In Chapter 6 the authors move on to discuss how to handle data that is generated through questions and observations. Once again, after cautioning readers to remember that research is “a matter of discovery” (p. 85), so be prepared to alter course, our authors provide helpful sections on structured and unstructured interviews (pp. 87-88) with questions to bear in mind when designing the interview questions.

In Chapter 7 the authors follow the next research phase, matters pertaining to transcribing and representing the data. In their first sentence, they stress that “[t]ranscription is a form of representation” (p. 109), emphasizing their point by spelling the word “re-present”. This spelling reminds the researcher that once data are transcribed, a change has already occurred. It is not possible to capture a complete living experience through field notes, audio tapes, video tapes, etc. At the conclusion of this chapter, the authors remind their audience that “[t]he precise way in which transcription takes place is formulated through reflection on the nature of the data required to answer the research question.” (p. 125). Transcribing data is also a process and not just a tool, but part of a context that requires careful thinking.

Gibson and Brown focuses on themes, codes, and hypotheses in Chapter 8. As is by now a familiar cautionary note, the authors remind the reader that they are not teaching their audience how to code, although I found that I gained more knowledge about this process, but rather how to “simply gain some ideas about the types of procedure they might think about using when doing so” (p. 128). And the reason for this is that “thematic organization is not simply a technical matter, but a theoretical and conceptual issue” (p. 128). Chapters 9 and 10 cover the use of images and text, and the use of video and audio data. Chapter 9 is “thick” with description of semiotic and rhetorical analysis. Chapter 10 includes details of conversational analysis complete with coding methods that can help to re-present actual voice tone, etc.

The authors provide a detailed overview of computer software, including the pros and cons of this technology in Chapter 11. The authors are sensitive to a potential loss of sensitivity to data when a computer generates the analysis. In Chapter 12, the authors describe writing and presenting data as a further opportunity to process data. How to present data has more than a goal of dissemination, but rather another nuanced and reflexive activity that a researcher uses to work with the data, as well as to gain feedback from others in the process. To help the reader, the authors provide “Some simple rules of thumb about analysis and writing” (p. 203) at the end of the chapter.

In their conclusion, the authors, Gibson and Brown, revisit “analysis as situated practice” (p. 205), the main theme of this comprehensive text. Having been good forest guides, they leave the reader to use their knowledge to carve new paths for social research. As a new researcher, I will be making use of their guidance.

### Reference

Gibson, J. W., & Brown A. (2009). *Working with qualitative data*, London: Sage.

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### Author Note

Jacquelyn Browne, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., is a program professor of gerontology initiatives at Nova Southeastern University’s (NSU) Fischler School of Education and Human Services. She serves on the Broward Aging Alliance committee as lead for social marketing, the Florida Coastal Geriatric Resources, Education, and Training Center (GREAT GEC) advisory and curriculum committees at NSU, and has been invited to give numerous presentations on a wide spectrum of aging issues locally, and have given numerous presentations nationally. In addition to her work as Associate Editor with *The Qualitative Report*, Dr. Brown is also on the editorial board of the American Society of Aging’s newsletter, *The Older Learner*. She can be contacted at NSU, Fischler School of Education and Human Services, 1750 NE 167th Street, North Miami Beach, FL 33162-3017; Phone: 954-262-8664; Email: dwoskin@nova.edu

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