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## Clarifying the Complexities of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Phillip Adu's A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding

Gyeonghwa Lee  
University of Leeds, ml13g3l@leeds.ac.uk

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## Clarifying the Complexities of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Phillip Adu's A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding

### Abstract

Handling a large number of diverse types of qualitative data can be challenging for qualitative researchers. Also, there seems to be no clear standard for qualitative data analysis unlike the quantitative form. This is one of the main reasons for difficulties in analysing qualitative data and may cause concerns about the issue of research credibility. Dr Adu's book may help to solve such worries and challenges by providing a step-by-step qualitative data coding process from setting up the research paradigms to presenting findings systematically, concretely, and comprehensively.

### Keywords

qualitative data coding, coding method, qualitative data analysis software, presentation of qualitative findings, NVivo

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## **Clarifying the Complexities of Qualitative Research: A Book Review of Phillip Adu's *A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding***

Gyeonghwa Lee  
School of Design, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

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Handling a large number of diverse types of qualitative data can be challenging for qualitative researchers. Also, there seems to be no clear standard for qualitative data analysis unlike the quantitative form. This is one of the main reasons for difficulties in analysing qualitative data and may cause concerns about the issue of research credibility. Dr Adu's book may help to solve such worries and challenges by providing a step-by-step qualitative data coding process from setting up the research paradigms to presenting findings systematically, concretely, and comprehensively.

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For early career qualitative researchers with limited experience, selection of data collection methods and analysis techniques can be confusing. Additionally, dealing with a large amount of unstructured or semi-structured data from various sources (e.g., video, audio, documents and so on) can be even more challenging. During my own PhD studies, I spent a lot of time considering how to structure my research and present data visually using textually rich data collected from think-aloud protocols, focus group discussions, and interviews. In addressing these problems, I found Dr Philip Adu's 2019 book, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding*, extremely useful. It helped me to make progress in terms of structuring my whole project and presenting my data in an effective and efficient manner. It also made me think comprehensively about my doctoral research project from paradigms to research reliability.

As the name of the book suggests, it guides researchers through how to deal with qualitative data step-by-step. The book comprises fourteen chapters in total. Overall, the book can be divided into four sections in a broad manner: theoretical background of qualitative research (chapters 1 and 2); understanding qualitative data coding, useful terms, essential strategies for qualitative data coding, and the manual coding process from coding to generating themes in practice (chapters 3 to 9); application of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) to qualitative research (chapters 10 to 12); and presenting findings and research credibility (chapters 13 and 14).

In the first chapter, the author introduces research paradigms as well as reviewing some of the important qualitative research approaches. Different disciplines may emphasise certain paradigms that are suitable for their research focus. This is sometimes confusing especially for early career researchers or research students. Adu focuses mainly on the interpretative paradigm, which is used predominantly in the qualitative research approach. In chapter two, although he reviews eight qualitative research methods, namely the phenomenological approach, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, interpretative phenomenological analysis, the transcendental phenomenological approach, ethnography, the narrative approach, case studies, and grounded theory, this is not just a list of explanations. He also provides

directions for when to use and how to conduct each of these research methods. These chapters will be helpful for qualitative researchers to clarify many types of research paradigms and approaches and help them to understand which is suitable for their research.

In chapters three to nine, the book helps us to understand characteristics of qualitative coding, describes some of the important terms and essential strategies for dealing with qualitative data, and demonstrates how to conduct manual coding from coding the data, to generating categories and themes, and making connections. In the third chapter, Adu helps us to understand the meaning of qualitative coding as well as three types of qualitative coding strategies, dubbed the “DIP coding method” (p. 27).

These are “description-focused coding, Interpretation focused coding, and presumption-focused coding” (p. 27). Adu demonstrates when to use each of these coding strategies and how to code data from a raw dataset, giving illustrations from real world coding processes based on interview transcriptions. When a qualitative researcher codes data, it is vitally important to set the coding strategy for their own research based on research aims, objectives, and research questions (what the researcher wants to explore). This chapter supplies researchers with knowledge of different coding strategies, which one is suitable for them, and allows the coding process to be systematic and consistent.

Using qualitative data analysis software can be useful but that is not always the case. Adu clarifies two important approaches to qualitative data coding - manual and using QDAS – giving appropriate examples for specific situations (chapter four). In chapter five, the author argues that the qualitative researcher is a “research instrument” (p. 81). Because of this, subjectivity or bias from the researcher based on her/his worldview are inevitably reflected. However, Adu claims that “our views, biases, belief and lens” (p. 81) can offer benefits if they are identified. To support his argument, he emphasises the importance of “self-reflection” (p. 81) by adopting the concept of the self. The self includes various factors such as the “researcher’s demographic characteristics, perspectives, preconceptions, lens and expectations” (Berger, 2013, cited in Adu, 2019, p. 69). In other words, knowing ourselves is crucial for the qualitative analysis process. To facilitate this, Adu suggests using a bracketing (*epoché*) method, illustrating several steps of adopting bracketing at the data analysis stage with detailed commentaries.

From transcribing to finalising coding data, researchers continuously create memos in the data coding practice. In many cases, qualitative researchers have experience of generating new ideas and insights that come to mind while reading or listening to raw data (transcription or audio files). Adu argues that qualitative researchers should make memos to capture these intuitive outcomes promptly. He also states that making memos is a valuable process “to facilitate the development of codes, categories, themes and theories” (p. 87). This may be one of the reasons why the NVivo software package offers an independent “memo” function. Adu notes the importance of memo writing and describes three types of memos: “initial, analytical, and procedural memos” (p. 86) in chapter six. Then he testifies to how these memo skills are used during the manual data coding process in the next chapter. Thus, in chapter seven, the concrete process of manual coding is presented with hands-on tasks performed by the author using Microsoft Word. Adu demonstrates different types of memo skills while coding data manually here to demonstrate what he explained in the previous chapter. In the eighth chapter, two strategies for transferring codes to categories and themes are introduced. They are the “presumption-focused coding strategy and sorting strategy” (p. 122). The author illustrates situations where one or the other of these strategies needs to be selected giving numerous examples showing how to create categories and themes from codes. In this chapter, the author illustrates how Microsoft Excel and SPSS software can be utilised with manual coding using Microsoft Word.

In chapters ten, eleven, and twelve, three different qualitative data analysis software packages are introduced. These are QDA Miner Lite, NVivo12, and Dedoose respectively. The author provides images of work screens while using each of these programmes to prove the usefulness of each programme and gives clear demonstrations of how to code data using them. This shows readers the similarities and differences between these software packages and helps them to select the most useful software for their research.

In the last section (chapters thirteen and fourteen), the author shows readers how to present findings effectively and with credibility. Although each step of the qualitative data analysis process (from setting up the research paradigm to generating themes) is vitally important, it is clear that if we do not present findings well, our efforts as researchers may be underestimated and our research findings may be devalued and neglected. In chapter thirteen, the author illustrates empirical examples of qualitative findings with figures, tables, and diagrams. This section demonstrates to readers how qualitative research findings can be presented effectively, systematically, and visually. In the last chapter, Adu emphasises the importance of credibility in qualitative research with three essential strategies including “ensuring consistency, being systematic, and promoting transparency” (pp. 368-369) giving some detailed practical solutions.

Throughout the book, the author helpfully provides answers to possible questions which could arise from readers. He uses the first and second-person pronouns *I* and *you* in an engaging way to deal with this. In conclusion, there is no doubt that Adu’s book is essential reading for postgraduate students and researchers/practitioners who are already engaged in the field of social science.

### Reference

Adu, P. (2019). *A step-by-step guide to qualitative data coding*. Routledge.

### Author Note

Gyeonghwa Lee is a PhD candidate at the School of Design, University of Leeds, UK. Prior to her PhD, she received her BFA in Fibre Arts and MD in Colour Design in Ewha Womans University, South Korea, and a MA in Graphic Design in the University of Leeds, UK. She has several years of practical experience in the design industry as a graphic and product colour designer. Her doctoral research topic is “Inclusive Information and Colour Design.” Please direct correspondence to [ml13g31@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ml13g31@leeds.ac.uk).

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