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Introduction to Special Issue: Diverse Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Research

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Introduction to Special Issue: Diverse Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Research

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue, "Diverse Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Research," in which seven papers analyze one shared data set to illustrate different approaches to qualitative analysis. In addition to discussing the articles included in the special issue, this introduction provides an overview of applied research—highlighting some of the implications for qualitative research—and discusses how researchers could use the special issue to compare different qualitative approaches to choose one most appropriate for a given project's goals.

Keywords

applied qualitative research, qualitative data analysis, secondary data, shared data

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Diverse Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Research

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This article introduces the special issue, "Diverse Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis for Applied Research," in which seven papers analyze one shared data set to illustrate different approaches to qualitative analysis. In addition to discussing the articles included in the special issue, this introduction provides an overview of applied research—highlighting some of the implications for qualitative research—and discusses how researchers could use the special issue to compare different qualitative approaches to choose one most appropriate for a given project's goals.

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The range of qualitative methodologies and approaches is vast, affording researchers diverse ways to engage in designing and conceptualizing qualitative research studies, making sense of data, and reporting findings (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Lester, Cho, and Lochmiller (2020) recently suggested that part of the challenge of learning to *do* qualitative research is that there are "seemingly limitless approaches that a qualitative researcher might leverage" (p. 94), including discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000), content analysis (Schreier, 2012), narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2006), framework analysis (Goldsmith, 2021), grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2006), and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). And, as we see in this issue with thematic analysis, even within an approach there are many variations in process and perspective (Lester et al., 2020).

It can therefore be a challenging endeavor for researchers to decide which approach is most appropriate to achieve a project's goals or to address the problem being studied. Responding to this challenge is especially important for researchers and practitioners working in applied fields, as they generally aim to not only produce analyses that are intelligible to other researchers, but also to inform decisions made by practitioners and policy makers. The degree to which qualitative research practices are accessible to applied researchers has been a topic of consideration previously, with textbooks (e.g., Hollway & Wheeler, 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2014) and some articles (e.g., Rhodes, 2011) offering guidance to those doing the *on the ground* work. Indeed, while the literature surrounding social science research has offered definitional distinctions between "applied" and "basic" research (e.g., Bickman & Rog, 2009; Lester &

O'Reilly, 2019), relatively little writing has focused exclusively on the many qualitative analytic approaches that might be leveraged by applied researchers.

Applied research may be a difficult—and perhaps arbitrary—practice to define, but we view it as being focused on developing or improving "our understanding of a 'problem,' with the intent of contributing to the solution of that problem" (Bickman & Rog, 2009, p. x). While applied research is often conducted to inform specific programs or policies, especially in the case of formative and summative evaluations, it does not always require a pre-defined problem: it may be pursued to inform general practice (O'Reilly et al., 2020) or involve the study of a "persistent, societal problem" (Bickman & Rog, p. x). Qualitative methods are particularly useful to help applied researchers describe how, why, and under what circumstances programs, products, and tools can be used to successfully achieve their goals.

Applied research can carry with it specific characteristics that impact which methods and approaches may be best suited for a project. Researchers engaged in this type of work often find themselves working on time-sensitive projects and in interdisciplinary teams—ranging from academic institutions, to research firms, to groups of practitioners. These contexts can require qualitative approaches that are both accessible to individuals with varying levels of specialized training and which produce timely findings that can inform participants and communities when they need it most.

We suggest that the field can benefit from new and practical examples that allow researchers to compare different qualitative approaches, how they can be used in applied settings, and the unique lenses they bring. In order to achieve this goal, we have asked each author in this special issue to analyze one shared data set from a study exploring "postnatal care referral behavior by traditional birth attendants (TBAs) in Nigeria" (Chukwuma, Mbachu, Cohen, Bossert, et al., 2017). The shared data set, which was secured from Syracuse University's Qualitative Data Repository, consists of transcripts from three focus groups—one with hospital health care workers, another with traditional birth attendants, and a third with TBA delivery clients (Chukwuma, Mbachu, Cohen, McConnell, et al., 2017). Contributing authors—who work within in a range of disciplines—were encouraged to focus less on the substantive findings of factors affecting TBAs' postnatal referral behavior, and instead aim to unearth the analytical contributions and insights that their approach might contribute to a similar data set.

Ultimately, what is presented here is a collection of six articles that offer a "protocol" or "useable map" that can help researchers decide which approach is right for them and the research problem at hand. In addition, the first article, written by Karcher et al. (2021), addresses key considerations related to data sharing and reuse in qualitative research. Of course, what is offered here is not comprehensive, but rather we hope it can serve to jumpstart a continued conversation about how to share old, new, and emergent analytic practices with a ride range of researchers—particularly those doing applied work. Prior to discussing each of the articles, we offer an abbreviated overview of the methodological literature around the usefulness of qualitative research for applied research.

The Relevance of Qualitative Research for Practice

Within the qualitative community there has been a growing emphasis on producing work in conversation with practitioners and in order to inform and enhance different areas of practice such as health, social care, and education (see Lester & O'Reilly, 2015). The call for applicability has come in part from the evidence-based practice movement and from greater recognition that decisions and practices across institutional settings ought to be informed by valuable research knowledge and translation, but it has also come from more grassroots origins, such as from proponents of participatory action research approaches. This focus has created

opportunities for qualitative researchers to develop approaches that are particularly suited to provide a foundation for knowledge and practice.

It is important to recognize that if qualitative researchers seek to impact programs and policies, they must engage those in the field and take care to translate their findings for practice in the form of useful and implementable recommendations. In other words, the onus is on the researcher to translate their work from an academic to applied language (Rychetnik et al., 2012). In order to ensure that research is designed and communicated in meaningful ways, it is important to actively engage those working in the field so that their views, ideas, and priorities can direct and facilitate data collection, analysis, and dissemination. This collaborative process can help confirm that research is developed with applicability in mind (Fox, 2003). This is also especially valuable when writing up the analytic findings, to not only be certain that they are written in a meaningful way for practice-based audiences, but also to ensure that the recommendations are realistic and achievable.

Summary of Included Papers

The special issue includes seven papers, with the collection designed so it might be used to support those who have long engaged in qualitative research, as well as those who are relatively new to doing qualitative work. The first article, "Epistemic and ethical challenges to qualitative data reuse," was written by a team of scholars at the Qualitative Data Repository at Syracuse University. Given that the contributing authors were asked to work with a shared dataset found in this repository, we felt it particularly important to include state of the art thinking about the sharing and reuse of qualitative data. Karcher et al. (2021) highlight epistemological critiques of reusing qualitative data while also pointing to the importance and value of thoughtful curation of data. They offer the idea of "epistemologically responsible reuse" of qualitative data, forwarding the concrete steps and practices that can support the responsible use of data among qualitative researchers. This article sets the stage for the six articles that follow, each of which uses the shared data set to illustrate their key analytic points.

The second and third articles both take up different ways of conceptualizing thematic analysis. In the second article, entitled "Reflexive thematic analysis for applied qualitative health research," Campbell et al. (2021) draw upon Braun and Clarke's (2005) discussion of six stages of reflexive thematic analysis in order to explore how this approach could be used by an interdisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners in a way that honored each author's unique and subjective perspective, while producing meaningful and cohesive findings. In the third article, entitled "Conducting thematic analysis with qualitative data," Lochmiller (2021) illustrates his approach to a thematic analysis similarly based on Braun and Clarke's six stages, noting how the practicality of this approach can be useful for applied settings. Lochmiller describes the types of questions he asks as he explores a dataset and describes how he uses categories and themes to present the data in "broad strokes." Importantly, both Campbell et al. and Lochmiller also highlight some of the limitations and challenges that might be faced by applied researchers when leveraging perspectives within the thematic analysis umbrella.

In the fourth article, entitled "Sort and sift, think and shift: Let the data be your guide," Maietta et al. (2021) illustrate the tenets and tools associated with their approach of data analysis, including iterative cycles of diving into data in order to "read, review, recognize, and record observations" and stepping back to "reflect, re-strategize, and re-orient." The article presents a helpful collection of tools that can be used during each of these stages—from quotation inventories to different types of memos and diagrams—and highlights how these tools can be combined in order to gain entry into the data and to allow researchers to collaborate as a team while working according to their individual style. Finally, the article concludes with

reflections on how an approach like *sort and sift* can be used by consultants working with someone else's data.

In the fifth article, entitled "Using framework analysis in applied qualitative research," Goldsmith (2021) argues that framework analysis is particularly well suited for conducting applied research and, similar to the previous article, notes how the explicit steps and tools found in framework analysis can provide a strong audit trail—providing transparency that can increase usefulness of the findings in applied settings. Goldsmith explains that framework analysis is a "comparative form of thematic analysis" that includes inductive and deductive forms of analysis and describes five analytic steps: data familiarization, framework identification, indexing, charting and mapping, and interpretation. Used in the context of the issue's shared data set, Goldsmith maps variation in the different stakeholder groups and not only notices themes, but notes their absence—"policy-relevant silences" that might require further research.

In the sixth article, entitled "Discursive psychology for applied qualitative research," Lester and O'Reilly (2021) introduce discursive psychology—a form of discourse analysis—and illustrate its utility for applied research. Looking at discourse within the focus groups brings Lester and O'Reilly to focus on epistemic positioning and how the health care workers and traditional birth attendants construct their role, identity, and accountability relative to the care they offer. In illustrating the types of findings that discourse psychology might present for applied settings, they discuss the tensions between hierarchical position of the distinct groups leading them to recommendations for creating communication models and greater transparency between the relative roles of each type of provider.

The seventh and final article of the special issue, entitled "Applied qualitative data analysis after the ontological turn," forwards the utility of new materialism as an analytic lens in applied qualitative research. Drawing upon Barad's agential realism, Marn and Wolgemuth (2021) detail the process of analyzing the shared dataset. They powerfully highlight how applied research of all kinds is bound to, and affected by, the material conditions of the data itself, raising important questions for researchers to consider regardless of the analytic approach they take up. In many ways, this article offers an invitation for the qualitative community to think anew about the meaning of applied research and what our shared futures might look like.

Conclusion

In this special issue, we have asked authors to engage in an experiment: to use a shared set of focus group transcripts to illustrate various approaches to qualitative analysis. Taken as a whole, these articles can help researchers working in applied settings strengthen not only their understanding of the approaches available to them, but also of various tools they can use to analyze data. For example, the articles present a variety of ways that researchers can visualize data—both during the analysis process and when presenting findings—thus helping policy makers or practitioners gain different points of entry into the findings. We see rich thematic maps (Campbell et al., 2021); data intensity mappings (Goldsmith, 2021); quotation networks (Maietta et al., 2021); and illustrations of themes, categories, and sub-categories (Lochmiller, 2021).

The task of secondary analysis raised different challenges, many of which themselves illustrate important points about qualitative research as well as the unique qualities of the approaches highlighted in this issue. First, the authors highlight how qualitative analysis does not happen in a vacuum and how it can begin well before you have collected all your data. Authors noted challenges they experienced creating alignment between the research questions, data collection methods, and the analytic approach (Goldsmith, 2021) or noted how having

extra contextual information about research participants, such as their age, marital status, or socioeconomic status, might have provided further insight that could have affected their analysis (Campbell et al., 2021). Lester and O'Reilly (2021) noted a key challenge for their experiment: the fact that the data set lacked audio recordings of the focus group. Since discursive psychology examines not just what is said, but how it is said, researchers often treat the act of transcription as an important part of the analysis, and at the very least require transcripts that note a range of verbal and non-verbal elements such as pauses, overlapping speech, and the pace of speech. Finally, Marn and Wolgemuth (2021) concluded their paper wondering not only whether it was possible to use a new materialist approach to analyze data that was presumably collected within an "interpretivist" qualitative project, but also whether the whole endeavor had produced a demonstration that was "not quite data analysis, not quite new materialist, and not quite applied." Collectively, the articles offer a cutting edge and contemporary view of what it might mean to pursue qualitative data analysis from a range of analytic and theoretical perspectives, while foregrounding considerations of unique characteristics of applied research. Furthermore, and perhaps more implicitly, what this special issue highlights is the potential for qualitative researchers to engage with shared datasets in generative ways.

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