



# **Social Research Methods**

**Alan Bryman**

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For Sophie and Daniel

# Qualitative data analysis

## Chapter outline

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## Chapter guide

Because qualitative data deriving from interviews or participant observation typically take the form of a large corpus of unstructured textual material, they are not straightforward to analyse. Moreover, unlike quantitative data analysis, clear-cut rules about how qualitative data analysis should be carried out have not been developed. In this chapter, some general approaches to qualitative data analysis will be examined, along with *coding*, which is the main feature of most of these approaches. The chapter explores:

- *analytic induction* as a general strategy of qualitative data analysis;
- *grounded theory* as a general strategy of qualitative data analysis; this is probably the most prominent of the general approaches to qualitative data analysis; the chapter examines its main features, processes, and outcomes, along with some of the criticisms that are sometimes levelled at the approach;
- *coding* as a key process in grounded theory and in approaches to qualitative data analysis more generally; it is the focus of an extended discussion in terms of what it entails and some of the limitations of a reliance on coding;
- the criticism that is sometimes made of coding in relation to qualitative data—namely, that it tends to fragment data; the idea of *narrative analysis* is introduced as an approach to data analysis that is gaining a growing following and that does not result in data fragmentation;
- the possibility of conducting a secondary analysis of other researchers' qualitative data is examined.

## Introduction

One of the main difficulties with qualitative research is that it very rapidly generates a large, cumbersome data-base because of its reliance on prose in the form of such media as field notes, interview transcripts, or documents. Miles (1979) has described qualitative data as an 'attractive nuisance', because of the attractiveness of its richness but the difficulty of finding analytic paths through that richness. The researcher must guard against being captivated by the richness of the data collected, so that there is a failure to give the data wider significance for the social sciences. In other words, it is crucial to guard against failing to carry out a true analysis. This means that you must protect yourself against the condition Lofland (1971: 18) once called 'analytic interruptus'.

Yet, finding a path through the thicket of prose that makes up your data is not an easy matter and is baffling to many researchers confronting such data for the first time. 'What do I do with it now?' is a common refrain. In large part, this is because, unlike the analysis of quantitative data, there are few well-established and widely accepted rules for the analysis of qualitative data. Although learning the techniques of quantitative data analysis may seem painful at the time, they do give you an unambiguous set of rules about how to handle your

data. You still have to interpret your analyses, but at least there are relatively clear rules for getting to that point. Qualitative data analysis has not reached this degree of codification of analytic procedures, and many writers would argue that this is not necessarily desirable anyway (see Bryman and Burgess 1994b on this point). What *can* be provided are broad guidelines (see Okely 1994), and it is in the spirit of this suggestion that this chapter has been written.

This chapter has two main sections.

1. *General strategies of qualitative data analysis*. In this section, I consider two approaches to data analysis—**analytic induction** and **grounded theory**.
2. *Basic operations in qualitative data analysis*. This section entails a consideration in particular of **coding**.

In addition, I consider **narrative analysis**, which is an approach to qualitative data analysis, which is to a certain extent different in style from the emphasis on coding that can be seen in both grounded theory and the basic operations typically used by qualitative researchers, and the secondary analysis of qualitative data.

In the next chapter, the use of computers in qualitative data analysis will be outlined.



## General strategies of qualitative data analysis

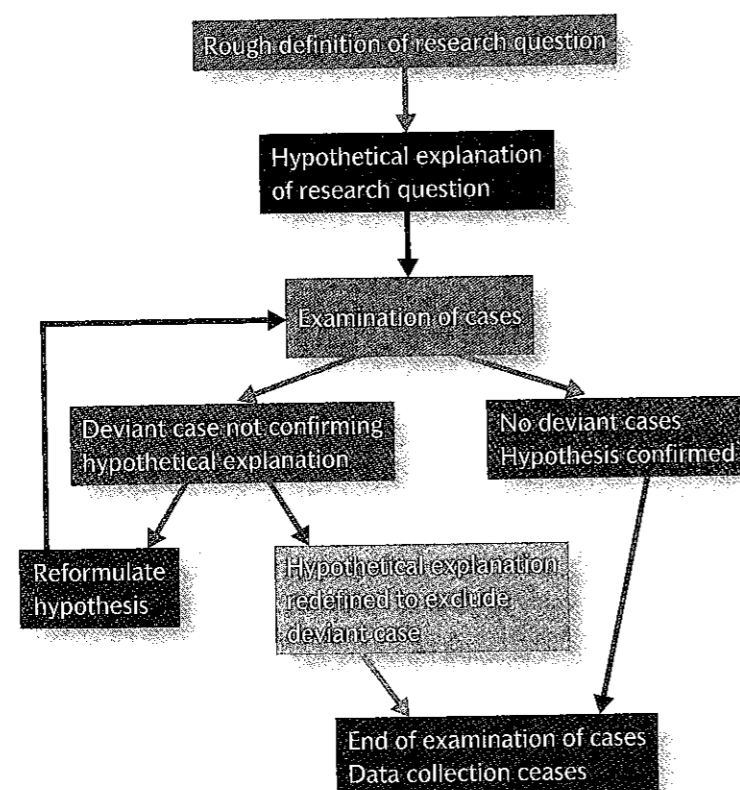
This section considers two strategies of analysis—analytic induction and grounded theory. They are probably the most frequently cited approaches, though others do exist (e.g. R. Williams 1976; Hycner 1985). By a general strategy of qualitative data analysis, I simply mean a framework that is meant to guide the analysis of data. As we will see, one of the ways in which qualitative and quantitative data analysis sometimes differ is that, with the latter, analysis invariably occurs after your data have been collected. However, as noted in Chapter 17, general approaches like grounded theory (and analytic induction) are often described as *iterative*—that is, there is a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data. This means that analysis starts after some of the

data have been collected, and the implications of that analysis then shape the next steps in the data-collection process. Consequently, while grounded theory and analytic induction are described as strategies of analysis, they can also be viewed as strategies for the *collection* of data.

### Analytic induction

The main steps in analytic induction are outlined in Figure 24.1. Analytic induction (see Key concept 24.1) begins with a rough definition of a research question, proceeds to a hypothetical explanation of that problem, and then continues on to the collection of data (examination

#### The process of analytic induction



## Key concept 24.1 What is analytic induction?

Analytic induction is an approach to the analysis of data in which the researcher seeks universal explanations of phenomena by pursuing the collection of data until no cases that are inconsistent with a hypothetical explanation (deviant or negative cases) of a phenomenon are found.

of cases). If a case that is inconsistent with the hypothesis is encountered, the analyst *either* redefines the hypothesis so as to exclude the deviant or negative case *or* reformulates the hypothesis and proceeds with further data collection. If the latter path is chosen, if a further deviant case is found, the analyst must choose again between reformulation or redefinition.

As this brief outline suggests, analytic induction is an extremely rigorous method of analysis, because encountering a single case that is inconsistent with a hypothesis is sufficient to necessitate further data collection or a reformulation of the hypothesis. Nor should the alternative of reformulating the hypothetical explanation be regarded as a soft option, as is shown by Katz's (1982) study of poverty lawyers in Chicago. Katz was interested in finding some characteristics that distinguished those who stayed on for some time as lawyers to help the poor (in spite of the lower pay and status associated with such work) from those whose tenure was brief. He writes that 'the definition of the explanandum [the phenomenon to be explained] was changed from staying two years, to desiring to stay two years, to desiring to stay in a frustrating place, to involvement in a frustrating place, to involvement in an insignificant status...' (Katz 1982: 200). Each shift necessitated a reanalysis and reorganization of his data. The rigours of analytic induction have not endeared the approach to qualitative researchers, and most of the examples used in textbooks to illustrate analytic induction derive from the 1940s and early 1950s (Bryman and Burgess 1994a: 4). Katz's work is unusual in being a relatively recent example. Bloor (1978) used a version of analytic induction in a study of doctors' decisions about whether to recommend an adenotonsillectomy. His approach especially diverged from the sequence described in Figure 24.1 in that a specific hypothesis was not formulated. An account using Bloor's approach can be found in Johnson (1998).

Two further problems with analytic induction are worth noting. First, the final explanations that analytic induction arrives at specify the conditions that are *sufficient* for the phenomenon occurring but rarely specify

the *necessary* conditions. This means that analytic induction may find out why people of certain characteristics or in certain circumstances become drug addicts (the focus of one major analytic induction study by Lindesmith 1947), but it does not allow us to say why those particular people became addicts rather than others in the same situation with the same characteristics. Second, it does not provide useful guidelines (unlike grounded theory) as to how many cases need to be investigated before the absence of negative cases and the validity of the hypothetical explanation (whether reformulated or not) can be confirmed.

### Grounded theory

Grounded theory (see Key concept 17.2) has become by far the most widely used framework for analysing qualitative data. The book that is the chief wellspring of the approach, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (published in 1967), must be one of the most widely cited books in the social sciences. However, providing a definitive account of the approach is by no means a straightforward matter for the following reasons.

- Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory along different paths after the publication of the above book. Glaser felt that the approach to grounded theory that Strauss was promoting (most notably in Strauss 1987, and Strauss and Corbin 1990) was too prescriptive and emphasized too much the development of concepts rather than of theories (Glaser 1992). However, because of the greater prominence of Strauss's writings, his version is largely the one followed in the exposition below. There is, however, considerable controversy about what grounded theory is and entails (Charmaz 2000). It is not uncommon for users of grounded theory to indicate whether the version that they are following is the Glaserian or the Straussian approach.
- Straussian grounded theory has changed a great deal over the years. This is revealed in a constant addition

to the tool chest of analytic devices that is revealed in his writings.

- Some writers have suggested that grounded theory is honoured more in the breach than in the observance, implying that claims are often made that grounded theory has been used but that evidence of this being the case is at best uncertain (Bryman 1988a: 85, 91; Locke 1996; Charmaz 2000). Sometimes the term is employed simply to imply that the analyst has grounded his or her theory in data, so that grounded theory is more or less synonymous with an **inductive** approach. Grounded theory is more than this and refers to a set of procedures that are described below. Referencing academic publications is often part of a tactic of persuading readers of the legitimacy of one's work (Gilbert 1977), and this process can be discerned in the citation of grounded theory. Alternatively, researchers sometimes appear to have used just one or two features of grounded theory but refer to their having used the approach without qualification (Locke 1996). Against such a background, writing about the essential ingredients of grounded theory is not an easy matter.

It is not going to be possible to describe here grounded theory in all its facets; instead, its main features will be outlined. In order to organize the exposition, I find it helpful to distinguish between *tools* and *outcomes* in grounded theory.

### Tools of grounded theory

Some of the tools of grounded theory have been referred to in previous chapters. Their location is indicated in the list that follows.

- *Theoretical sampling*—see Key concept 18.3.
- *Coding*—the key process in grounded theory, whereby data are broken down into component parts, which are given names. It begins soon after the collection of initial data. As Charmaz (2000: 515) puts it: 'We grounded theorists code our emerging data as we collect it. . . . Unlike quantitative research that requires data to fit into *preconceived* standardized codes, the researcher's interpretations of data shape his or her emergent codes in grounded theory' (emphasis in original). In grounded theory, different types or levels of coding are recognized (see the section on 'Coding in grounded theory' below).
- *Theoretical saturation*—see Key concept 18.4. Theoretical saturation is a process that relates to two phases in grounded theory: the coding of data (implying that you reach a point where there is no further point in reviewing your data to see how well they fit with

your concepts or categories) and the collection of data (implying that, once a concept or category has been developed, you may wish to continue collecting data to determine its nature and operation but then reach a point where new data are no longer illuminating the concept).

- *Constant comparison*—an aspect of grounded theory that was prominent in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and that is often referred to as a significant phase by practitioners, but that seems to be an implicit, rather than an explicit, element in more recent writings. It refers to a process of maintaining a close connection between data and conceptualization, so that the correspondence between concepts and categories with their indicators is not lost. More specifically, attention to the procedure of **constant comparison** enjoins the researcher constantly to compare phenomena being coded under a certain **category** so that a theoretical elaboration of that category can begin to emerge. Glaser and Strauss advised writing a *memo* (see below) on the category after a few phenomena had been coded. It also entails being sensitive to contrasts between the categories that are emerging.

### Coding in grounded theory

**Coding** is one of the most central processes in grounded theory. It entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be particularly salient within the social worlds of those being studied. As Charmaz (1983: 186) puts it: 'Codes . . . serve as shorthand devices to *label, separate, compile, and organize* data' (emphases in original). Coding is a somewhat different process from coding in relation to quantitative data, such as survey data. With the latter, coding is more or less solely a way of managing data, whereas in grounded theory, and indeed in approaches to qualitative data analysis that do not subscribe to the approach, it is an important first step in the generation of theory. Coding in grounded theory is also somewhat more tentative than in relation to the generation of quantitative data, where there is a tendency to think in terms of data and codes as very fixed. Coding in qualitative data analysis tends to be in a constant state of potential revision and fluidity. The data are treated as potential indicators of concepts, and the indicators are *constantly compared* (see the section on 'Tools of grounded theory' above) to see which concepts they best fit with. As Strauss (1987: 25) put it: 'Many indicators (behavioral actions/events) are examined comparatively by the analyst who then "codes" them, naming them as indicators of a class of events/behavioral actions.'

Strauss and Corbin (1990), drawing on their grounded theory approach, distinguish between three types of coding practice.

1. *Open coding*: 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data' (1990: 61); this process of coding yields concepts, which are later to be grouped and turned into categories. The coding performed in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' provides an example of the use of open coding, though the project itself was not a grounded theory one.
2. *Axial coding*: 'a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories' (1990: 96). This is done by linking codes to contexts, to consequences, to patterns of interaction, and to causes. An example is provided by Hawker and Kerr (2007) in connection with a project on ex-soldiers. They note from an examination of two transcripts several categories that had been arrived at following open coding, including: 'army standards', 'self identity', and 'us and them'. These revealed that ex-soldiers felt that the army made them different from civilians, but that in addition they felt that the army had made them 'more committed, more efficient and better organized than many civilian workers' (Hawker and Kerr 2007: 94). This prompted the authors to think of a new category that extended the categories developed through open codes, which they called 'army added value'. They then examined the transcripts again to discern what this axial code comprised and to test its utility. However, as Charmaz (2006) notes, not all grounded theory exponents regard the idea or stage of axial coding to be useful.
3. *Selective coding*: 'the procedure of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development' (1990: 116). A *core category* is the central issue or focus around which all other categories are integrated. It is what Strauss and Corbin call the storyline that frames an analytical account of the phenomenon of interest. Hawker and Kerr (2007) note that they were developing as a possible selective code 'once a soldier, never a civilian', which refers to the tendency for socialization into the army to be so intensive that soldiers are never able to revert fully to civilian life.

The three types of coding are really different levels of coding, and each relates to a different point in the elaboration of categories in grounded theory. Not all grounded theory practitioners operate with this threefold distinction,

and indeed the notion of axial coding has been especially controversial because it is sometimes perceived as closing off too quickly in a project the open-endedness and exploratory character of coding in qualitative data analysis.

Charmaz (2006) prefers to distinguish between two main forms or phases of coding: *initial coding* and *selective or focused coding*. Initial coding tends to be very detailed and may even result in a code per line of text, whereby a code is assigned to every line of text to provide initial impressions of the data. It is crucial at this stage to be open-minded and to generate as many new ideas and hence codes as necessary to encapsulate the data. It is the qualitative researcher's first steps towards making sense of his or her data. Charmaz suggests that it is important in initial coding to recognize that, although codes will reflect the perspectives of research participants, when the qualitative researcher makes sense of the codes, he or she may end up viewing their social world somewhat differently from them. Focused coding entails emphasizing the most common codes and those that are seen as most revealing about the data. This means that some, if not many, initial codes will be dropped. As she puts it: 'Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely' (Charmaz 2006: 57–8). New codes may be generated by combining initial codes. The data are then re-explored and re-evaluated in terms of these selected codes.

Pidgeon and Henwood (2004) provide a useful example of the move from initial coding to a focused and then axial coding based on Henwood's study of adult mother-daughter relationships. Sixty interviews with mother-daughter dyads were conducted. They write:

The initial coding led to the development of a long and varied, but highly unwieldy, list of instances under the label 'Relational Closeness'. The attributes that had been coded onto the card were initially glossed as attaching global value to the relationship. However, closer reading and comparison of the individual instances indicated a much more mixed view of the emotional intensity of the relationships, ranging from a welcome but painful sense of gratitude and debt to a stance of hypersensitivity and a desire to flee from a relationship which involved 'confinement' or 'smothering'. The inextricable link between the two concepts resulting from this subdivision was retained and coded through their respective labels 'Closeness' and 'Overcloseness'. This link then became a key stimulus and focus for conceptual development and reflection . . . (Pidgeon and Henwood 2004: 638)

Although there are slight differences in the way in which the phases of the coding process is supposed to occur in grounded theory according to its practitioners, there is a basic understanding of it as involving a movement from generating codes that stay close to the data to more selective and abstract ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon of interest.

### Outcomes of grounded theory

The following are the products of different phases of grounded theory.

- **Concept(s)**—refers to labels given to discrete phenomena; concepts are referred to as the 'building blocks of theory' (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 101). Concepts are produced through *open coding*.
- **Category, categories**—a **category** is a concept that has been elaborated so that it is regarded as representing real-world phenomena. As noted in Key concept 18.4, a category may subsume two or more concepts. As such, categories are at a higher level of abstraction than concepts. A category may become a *core category*

around which the other categories pivot. Research in focus 24.1 provides a good example of the emergence of a core category.

- **Properties**—attributes or aspects of a category.
- **Hypotheses**—initial hunches about relationships between concepts.
- **Theory**—according to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 22): 'a set of well-developed categories . . . that are systematically related through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social . . . or other phenomenon.' Since the inception of grounded theory, writings have pointed to two types or levels of theory: *substantive theory* and *formal theory*. The former relates to theory in a certain empirical instance or substantive area, such as occupational socialization. A formal theory is at a higher level of abstraction and has a wider range of applicability to several substantive areas, such as socialization in a number of spheres, suggesting that higher-level processes are at work. The generation of formal theory requires data collection in contrasting settings.



## Research in focus 24.1 Categories in grounded theory

Orona's (1997) study of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease and in particular of their relatives exemplifies many features of grounded theory. Orona began her research with an interest in the decision-making process that led relatives to place sufferers in a home. She gradually realized from coding her interview transcripts that this was not a crucial feature for relatives, as she had anticipated, not least because many of them simply felt they had no choice. Instead, she was slowly taken by the significance for relatives of the 'identity loss' sufferers were deemed to experience. This gradually became her core category. She conducted further interviews in order to flesh this notion out and reread existing transcripts in the light of it. The link between indicators and category can be seen in relatives' references to the sufferer as 'gone', 'different', 'not the same person', and as a 'stranger'. Orona was able to unearth four major themes that emerged around the process of identity loss. The theme of 'temporality' was particularly significant in Orona's emerging theoretical reflections and was revealed in such comments in transcripts as:

It was the *time of the year* when nobody goes in the yard anyway . . .

At the *beginning* . . .

It got much worse *later on*.

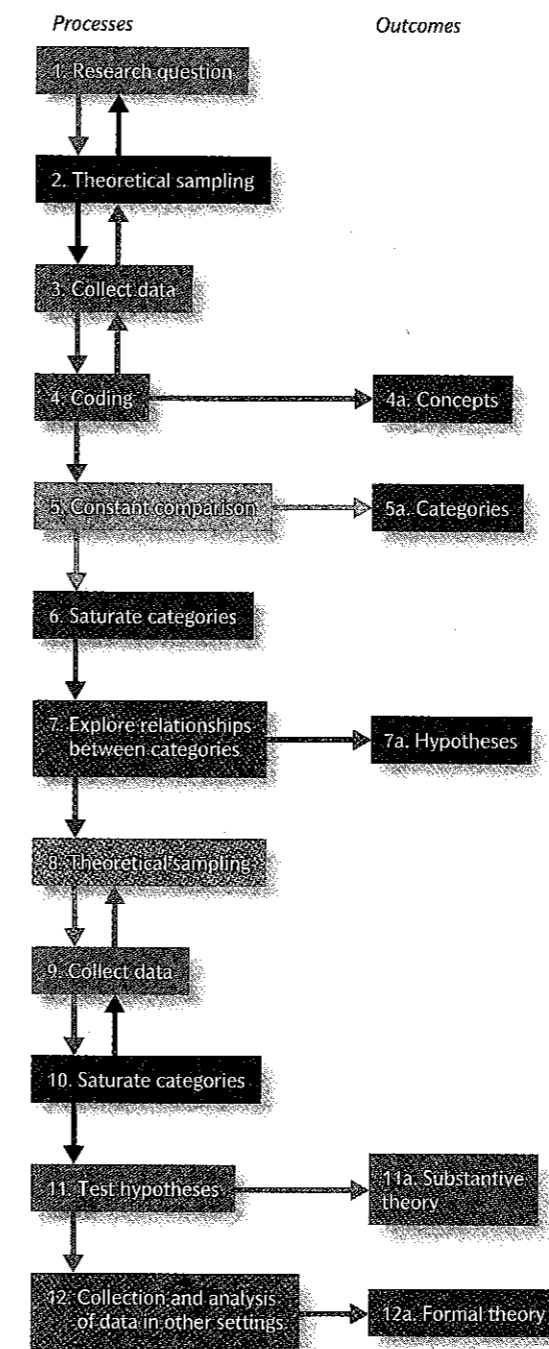
*More and more*, he was leaning on me.

*Before* she would never have been like that.

She *used* to love coffee. (Orona 1997: 179–80)

In other words, such comments served as indicators that allowed the category 'temporality' to be built up. The issue of temporality was significant in Orona's emerging analysis, because it related to the core category of identity loss. Relatives sought to help sufferers maintain their identities. However, gradually, with the passage of time, crucial events meant that the relatives could no longer deny sufferers' identity loss.

### Processes and outcomes in grounded theory



The different elements can be portrayed as in Figure 24.2. As with all diagrams, this is a representation, and it is particularly so in the case of grounded theory, because the existence of different versions of the approach

does not readily permit a more definitive rendition. Also, it is difficult to get across diagrammatically the iterative nature of grounded theory—in particular its commitment to the idea that data collection and analysis occur in parallel. This is partly achieved in the diagram through the presence of arrows pointing in both directions in relation to certain steps. The figure implies the following.

- The researcher begins with a general research question (step 1).
- Relevant people and/or incidents are theoretically sampled (step 2).
- Relevant data are collected (step 3).
- Data are coded (step 4), which may at the level of open coding generate concepts (step 4a).
- There is a constant movement backwards and forwards between the first four steps, so that early coding suggests the need for new data, which results in the need to sample theoretically, and so on.
- Through a constant comparison of indicators and concepts (step 5) categories are generated (step 5a). The crucial issue is to ensure that there is a fit between indicators and concepts.
- Categories are saturated during the coding process (step 6).
- Relationships between categories are explored (step 7) in such a way that hypotheses about connections between categories emerge (step 7a).
- Further data are collected via theoretical sampling (steps 8 and 9).
- The collection of data is likely to be governed by the theoretical saturation principle (step 10) and by the testing of the emerging hypotheses (step 11), which leads to the specification of substantive theory (step 11a). See Research in focus 24.2 for an illustration.
- The substantive theory is explored using grounded theory processes in relation to different settings from that in which it was generated (step 12), so that formal theory may be generated (step 12a). A formal theory will relate to more abstract categories, which are not specifically concerned with the research area in question (for example, chronically ill men, relatives of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease).

Step 12 is relatively unusual in grounded theory, because researchers typically concentrate on a certain setting, although the investigation described in Research in focus 24.3 did examine other settings to explore the emerging concepts. A further way in which formal theory can be generated is through the use of existing theory and research in comparable settings.



## Research in focus 24.2

### Grounded theory in action

Charmaz's (1997) research is concerned with the identity dilemmas of men who have chronic (but not terminal) illnesses. She outlines very clearly the chief steps in her analysis.

- Interviews with men and a small number of women.
- Exploring the transcripts for gender differences.
- Searching for themes in the men's interviews and published personal accounts (for example, autobiographies). An example is the notion of 'accommodation to uncertainty', as men find ways of dealing with the unpredictable paths of their illnesses.
- Building 'analytic categories from men's definitions of and taken-for-granted assumptions about their situations' (1997: 39). Of particular significance in her work is the idea of 'identity dilemmas'—that is, the ways in which men approach and possibly resolve the assault on their traditional self-images in terms of masculinity. She shows that men often used strategies to re-establish earlier selves, so that for many audiences their identity (at least in their own eyes) could be preserved.
- Further interviews designed to refine the categories.
- Rereading personal accounts of chronic illness with a particular focus on gender.
- Reading a new group of personal accounts.
- Making 'comparisons with women on selected key points' (1997: 39).

Charmaz provides a substantive theory that helps to explain the importance of notions of masculinity for the carving-out of an identity for chronically ill men.



## Research in focus 24.3

### Grounded theory in a study of consumer experiences of museums

Goulding (2009) has discussed the way in which she implemented grounded theory in the context of a study of how consumers experience museums, particularly so-called 'living' museums that seek to recreate the UK's industrial heritage. The approach she took was closer to Glaser's than to Strauss's version of grounded theory. Initially, she selected an open-air museum and interviewed the director and then conducted observations of parties of visitors, noting how they handled the attractions and exhibits. While these relatively unstructured observations were illuminating in terms of how visitors responded to the attractions, they did not generate insights into motivations, so Goulding conducted interviews with visitors to shed light on such things as their expectations and their perceptions of the exhibits. She conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, which generated a huge number of codes and words. She reduced this vast array of codes to themes that helped to understand her data, and this produced seven concepts, such as: the stimulation of nostalgia, the desire for education, and experience of alienation in the present. Each of these concepts had distinctive properties or dimensions. For example, the stimulation of nostalgia was encapsulated in such things as a sense of retreat from the present and a 'rose-tinted' recollection of the past. However, Goulding felt that she had not saturated her concepts, so she collected new data in two new comparable but different sites. The same data-collection approach was taken as with the original site but no new concepts were generated. However, the new data did allow her to reinforce her concepts and to produce a categorization of three types of visitor to such museums: existential, purist, and social. For example, existential visitors tended to exhibit high levels of the stimulation of nostalgia (one of the seven concepts derived from the data—see above), which was apparent from their position with regard to codes like 'selective recall', 'rose-tinted remembrance', a 'rejection of the present', and an 'ability to distort the past'.

Concepts and categories are perhaps the key elements in grounded theory. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that, as a qualitative data analysis strategy, grounded theory works better for generating categories than theory. In part, this may be because studies purporting to use the approach often generate grounded *concepts* rather than grounded theory as such. Concepts and categories are nonetheless at the heart of the approach, and key processes such as coding, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation are designed to guide their generation.

#### Memos

One aid to the generation of concepts and categories is the *memo*. Memos in grounded theory are notes that

researchers might write for themselves and for those with whom they work concerning such elements of grounded theory as coding or concepts. They serve as reminders about what is meant by the terms being used and provide the building blocks for a certain amount of reflection. Memos are potentially very helpful to researchers in helping them to crystallize ideas and not to lose track of their thinking on various topics. An illustration of a memo from research in which I was involved is provided in Research in focus 24.4.

Finding examples of grounded theory that reveal all its facets and stages is very difficult, and it is unsurprising that many expositions of grounded theory fall back on the original illustrations provided in Glaser and Strauss (1967). Many studies show some of its ingredients but



## Research in focus 24.4

### A memo

In the course of research into the bus industry that I carried out with colleagues in the early 1990s (Bryman et al. 1996), we noticed that the managers we interviewed frequently referred to the notion that their companies had inherited features that derived from the running of those companies before deregulation. They often referred to the idea of inheriting characteristics that held them back in trying to meet the competitive environment they faced in the 1990s. As such, inheritance is what Strauss (1987) calls an 'in vivo code' (one that derives from the natural language of people in the social context being studied), rather than what he calls 'sociologically constructed codes', which are labels employing the analyst's own terminology. The following memo outlines the concept of inheritance, provides some illustrative quotations, and suggests some properties of the concept.

#### Memo for inheritance

*Inheritance*: many of our interviewees suggest that they have inherited certain company traits and traditions from the period prior to deregulation (i.e. pre-1985). It is a term that many of them themselves employed to denote company attributes that are not of their choosing but have survived from the pre-deregulation period. The key point about inheritance is that the inherited elements are seen by our interviewees as hindering their ability to respond to the changing environment of the post-deregulation era.

#### Inherited features include:

- expensive and often inappropriate fleets of vehicles and depots;
- the survival of attitudes and behaviour patterns, particularly among bus drivers, which are seen as inappropriate to the new environment (e.g. lack of concern for customer service) and which hinder service innovation;
- high wage rates associated with the pre-deregulation era; means that new competitors can enter the market while paying drivers lower wages.

#### Sample comments:

'We *inherited* a very high cost structure because of deregulation. 75% of our staff were paid in terms of conditions affected by [rates prior to deregulation]' (Commercial Director, Company B).

'I suppose another major weakness is that we are very tied by conditions and practices we've *inherited*' (Commercial Director, Company G).

'We have what we've *inherited* and we now have a massive surplus of double decks . . . We have to go on operating those' (Managing Director, Company B).

Managing Director of Company E said the company had inherited staff who were steeped in pre-deregulation attitudes, which meant that 'we don't have a staff where the message is "the customer is number one". We don't have a staff where that is emblazoned on the hearts and minds of everyone, far from it.'

*Prepost-deregulation:* interviewee makes a contrast between the periods before and after deregulation to show how they've changed. This shows in a sense the *absence* of inherited features and their possible impact; can refer to how the impact of possibly inherited features was negated or offset. For example, X referring to the recent end of the 3-week strike: 'there was no way we were going to give in to this sort of thing, this sort of blackmail. We just refused to move and the trade unions had never experienced that. It was all part of the change in culture following deregulation ...'

*Inheriting constraints:* such as staff on high wage rates and with inappropriate attitudes.

*Inheriting surplus capacity:* such as too many buses or wrong size.

not others. Research in focus 24.1 provides an illustration by one of Strauss's students that incorporates some key grounded theory features.

### Criticisms of grounded theory

In spite of the frequency with which it is cited and the frequent lip service paid to it, grounded theory is not without its limitations, of which the following can be briefly registered.

- Bulmer (1979) has questioned whether, as prescribed by the advocates of grounded theory, researchers can suspend their awareness of relevant theories or concepts until quite a late stage in the process of analysis. Social researchers are typically sensitive to the conceptual armoury of their disciplines, and it seems unlikely that this awareness can be put aside. Indeed, nowadays it is rarely accepted that theory-neutral observation is feasible. In other words, it is generally agreed that what we 'see' when we conduct research is conditioned by many factors, one of which is what we already know about the social world being studied (both in terms of social scientific conceptualizations and as members of society). Also, many writers might take the view that it is desirable that researchers are sensitive to existing conceptualizations, so that their investigations are focused and can build upon the work of others.
- Related to this first point is that, in many circumstances, researchers are required to spell out the possible implications of their planned investigation. For example, a lecturer making a bid for research funding or a student applying for funding for postgraduate research is usually required to demonstrate how his or her research will build upon what is already known or to demonstrate that he or she has a reasonably tightly defined research question, something that is also frequently disdained in grounded theory.
- There are practical difficulties with grounded theory. The time taken to transcribe recordings of interviews, for example, can make it difficult for researchers, especially when they have tight deadlines, to carry out a genuine grounded theory analysis with its constant interplay of data collection and conceptualization.
- It is somewhat doubtful whether grounded theory in many instances really results in *theory*. As previously suggested, it provides a rigorous approach to the generation of concepts, but it is often difficult to see what theory, in the sense of an explanation of something, is being put forward. Moreover, in spite of the frequent lip service paid to the generation of formal theory, most grounded theories are substantive in character; in other words, they pertain to the specific social phenomenon being researched and not to a broader range of phenomena (though, of course, they *may* have such broader applicability).
- In spite of the large amount written on grounded theory, but perhaps because of the many subtle changes in its presentation, grounded theory is still vague on certain points, such as the difference between concepts and categories. For example, while Strauss and Corbin (1998: 73) refer to theoretical sampling as 'sampling on the basis of emerging concepts' (emphasis added), Charmaz (2000: 519) writes that it is used to 'develop our emerging categories' (emphasis added). The term 'categories' is increasingly being employed rather than concepts, but such inconsistent use of key terms is not helpful to people trying to understand the overall process.
- Grounded theory is very much associated with an approach to data analysis that invites researchers to

fragment their data by coding the data into discrete chunks. However, in the eyes of some writers, this kind of activity results in a loss of a sense of context and of narrative flow (Coffey and Atkinson 1996), a point to which I will return below.

- The presence of competing accounts of the ingredients of grounded theory does not make it easy to characterize it or to establish how to use it. This situation has been made even more problematic by Charmaz's (2000) suggestion that most grounded theory is objectivist and that an alternative, constructionist (she calls it *constructivist*) approach is preferable. She argues that the grounded theory associated with Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin is objectivist in that it aims to uncover a reality that is external to social actors. She offers an alternative, constructionist version that 'assumes that people create and maintain meaningful worlds through dialectical processes of conferring meaning on their realities and acting within them ... Thus, social reality does not exist independent of human action' (Charmaz 2000: 521). Such a position stands in contrast to earlier grounded theory texts that 'imply that categories and concepts inhere within the data, awaiting the researcher's discovery. ... Instead, a constructivist approach recognizes that the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of an analysis emerge from the researcher's interaction within the field and questions about the data' (Charmaz 2000: 522). One difficulty here is that the two meanings of constructionism referred to in Key concept 2.6 seem to be conflated. Charmaz's first quotation above refers to constructionism as an ontological position in relating to social objects and categories; the second is

a reference to constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world. It is certainly fair to suggest that Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin in their various writings neglect the role of the researcher in the generation of knowledge, but it is not clear that they are indifferent to the notion that social reality exists independently of social actors. Strauss was, after all, the lead of the study referred to on pages 33–4 concerning the hospital as a negotiated order, which was used as an illustration of constructionism (Strauss et al. 1973). Also, Orona's (1997) account of her grounded theory analysis of sufferers of Alzheimer's disease is described in a commentary on the research by Strauss and Corbin (1997a: 172) as a 'textbook exemplification' of the approach. Yet this study is concerned with the subjective experience of the disease (interpretivism) and with the *construction* of identity in everyday life. However, there is little doubt that there is considerable confusion currently about the nature of grounded theory.

Nonetheless, grounded theory probably represents the most influential general strategy for conducting qualitative data analysis, though how far the approach is followed varies from study to study. What can be said is that many of its core processes, such as coding, memos, and the very idea of allowing theoretical ideas to emerge out of one's data, have been hugely influential. Indeed, it is striking that one of the main developments in qualitative data analysis since the early 1990s—computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS)—has implicitly promoted many of these processes, because the software programs have often been written with grounded theory in mind (Richards and Richards 1994; Lonkila 1995).



## Basic operations in qualitative data analysis

Coding is the starting point for most forms of qualitative data analysis, although some writers prefer to call the process *indexing* rather than coding. The principles involved have been well developed by writers on grounded theory and others. Some of the considerations in developing codes, some of which are derived from Lofland and Lofland (1995), are as follows.

- Of what general category is this item of data an instance?
- What does this item of data represent?
- What is this item of data about?
- Of what topic is this item of data an instance?
- What question about a topic does this item of data suggest?
- What sort of answer to a question about a topic does this item of data imply?
- What is happening here?
- What are people doing?
- What do people say they are doing?
- What kind of event is going on?



## Tips and skills

### Coded text from the Disney project

Interviewer	OK. What were your views or feelings about the presentation of different cultures, as shown in, for example, Jungle Cruise or It's a Small World at the Magic Kingdom or in World Showcase at Epcot?	
Wife	Well, I thought the different countries at Epcot were wonderful, but I need to say more than that, don't I?	uncritical enthusiasm
Husband	They were very good and some were better than others, but that was down to the host countries themselves really, as I suppose each of the countries represented would have been responsible for their own part, so that's nothing to do with Disney, I wouldn't have thought. I mean some of the landmarks were hard to recognize for what they were supposed to be, but some were very well done. Britain was OK, but there was only a pub and a Welsh shop there really, whereas some of the other pavilions, as I think they were called, were good ambassadors for the countries they represented. China, for example, had an excellent 360 degree film showing parts of China and I found that very interesting.	not critical of Disney  content critique
Interviewer	Did you think there was anything lacking about the content?	
Husband	Well I did notice that there weren't many black people at World Showcase, particularly the American Adventure. Now whether we were there on an unusual day in that respect I don't know, but we saw plenty of black Americans in the Magic Kingdom and other places, but very few if any in that World Showcase. And there was certainly little mention of black history in the American Adventure presentation, so maybe they felt alienated by that, I don't know, but they were noticeable by their absence.	visitors' ethnicity  visitors' ethnicity
Interviewer	So did you think there were any special emphases?	
Husband	Well thinking about it now, because I hadn't really given this any consideration before you started asking about it, but thinking about it now, it was only really representative of the developed world, you know, Britain, America, Japan, world leaders many of them in technology, and there was nothing of the Third World there. Maybe that's their own fault, maybe they were asked to participate and didn't, but now that I think about it, that does come to me. What do you think, love?	nationality critique
Wife	Well, like you, I hadn't thought of it like that before, but I agree with you.	

## Steps and considerations in coding

The following steps and considerations need to be borne in mind in preparation for and during coding.

- *Code as soon as possible.* It is well worth coding as you go along, as grounded theory suggests. This may sharpen your understanding of your data and help with theoretical sampling. Also, it may help to alleviate the feeling of being swamped by your data, which may happen if you defer analysis entirely until the end of the data collection period. At the very least, you should ensure that, if your data collection involves recording interviews, you begin transcription at a relatively early stage.
- *Read through your initial set of transcripts, field notes, documents, etc.,* without taking any notes or considering an interpretation; perhaps at the end jot down a few general notes about what struck you as especially interesting, important, or significant.
- *Do it again.* Read through your data again, but this time begin to make marginal notes about significant remarks or observations. Make as many as possible. Initially, they will be very basic—perhaps key words used by your respondents, names that you give to

themes in the data. When you do this you are *coding*—generating an index of terms that will help you to interpret and theorize in relation to your data.

- *Review your codes.* Begin to review your codes, possibly in relation to your transcripts. Are you using two or more words or phrases to describe the same phenomenon? If so, remove one of them. Do some of your codes relate to concepts and categories in the existing literature? If so, might it be sensible to use these instead? Can you see any connections between the codes? Is there some evidence that respondents believe that one thing tends to be associated with or caused by something else? If so, how do you characterize and therefore code these connections?
- *Consider more general theoretical ideas in relation to codes and data.* At this point, you should be beginning to generate some general theoretical ideas about your data. Try to outline connections between concepts and categories you are developing. Consider in more detail how they relate to the existing literature. Develop hypotheses about the linkages you are making and go back to your data to see if they can be confirmed.
- Remember that *any one item or slice of data can and often should be coded in more than one way.*
- *Do not worry about generating what seem to be too many codes—at least in the early stages of your analysis;* some will be fruitful and others will not—the important thing is to be as inventive and imaginative as possible; you can worry about tidying things up later.
- *Keep coding in perspective.* Do not equate coding with analysis. It is part of your analysis, albeit an important one. It is a mechanism for thinking about the meaning of your data *and* for reducing the vast amount of data that you are facing (Huberman and Miles 1994). You must still interpret your findings, which means attending to issues like the significance of your coded material for the lives of the people you are studying,

forging interconnections between codes, and reflecting on the overall importance of your findings for the research questions and the research literature that have driven your data collection.

## Turning data into fragments

The coding of such materials as interview transcripts has typically entailed writing marginal notes on them and gradually refining those notes into codes. In this way, portions of transcripts become seen as belonging to certain names or labels. In the past, this process was accompanied by cutting and pasting in the literal sense of using scissors and paste. It entailed cutting up one's transcripts into files of chunks of data, with each file representing a code. The process of cutting and pasting is useful for data retrieval, though it is always important to make sure that you have ways of identifying the origins of the chunk of text (for example, name, position, date). Word-processing programs allow this to be done in a way that does not rely on your DIY skills so much (see Research in focus 22.4 for an account of this use of word-processing software). Nowadays CAQDAS software is increasingly being used to perform these tasks (see Chapter 25).

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) observe, following Strauss and Corbin's account (1990) of grounded theory, codes should not be thought of purely as mechanisms for the fragmentation and retrieval of text. In other words, they can do more than simply manage the data you have gathered. For example, if we ask about the properties and interconnections between codes, we may begin to see that some of them may be dimensions of a broader phenomenon. For example, as shown in the next chapter (see especially Figure 25.1), 'ethnicity critique' came to be seen as a dimension of 'ideology critique', along with 'class critique' and 'gender critique'. In this way, we can begin to map the more general or formal properties of concepts that are being developed.



## Tips and skills

### Too many codes

The initial coding of a large corpus of data can generate an alarming number of codes. Charmaz (2004), for example, recommends as a first stage in coding for grounded theory 'line by line coding', whereby virtually every line in a transcript or other source of data will have a code attached to it. She argues that this process means that the qualitative researcher does not lose contact with his or her data and the perspectives and interpretations of those being studied. However, this process will almost certainly result in a proliferation of codes. This should not be alarming. What the analyst of qualitative data needs to do is ask questions about what these codes have in common so that they can be combined into higher-order and more abstract codes.

## Problems with coding

One of the most commonly mentioned criticisms of the coding approach to qualitative data analysis is the possible problem of losing the context of what is said. By plucking chunks of text out of the context within which they appeared, such as a particular interview transcript, the social setting can be lost.

A second criticism of coding is that it results in a fragmentation of data, so that the narrative flow of what people say is lost (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Sensitivity to this issue has been heightened by a growing interest in **narrative analysis** since the late 1980s (see the section on 'Narrative Analysis' below). Riessman (1993) became concerned about the fragmentation of data that results from coding themes when she came to analyse data she had collected through structured interviews on divorce and gender. She writes:

Some [interviewees] developed long accounts of what had happened in their marriages to justify their divorces. I did not realize these were narratives until I struggled to code them. Applying traditional qualitative methods, I searched the texts for common thematic elements. But some individuals knotted together several themes into long accounts that had coherence and sequence, defying easy categorization. I found myself not wanting to fragment the long accounts into distinct thematic categories. There seemed to be a common structure beneath talk about a variety of topics. While I coded one interview, a respondent provided language for my trouble. As I have thought about it since, it was a 'click moment' in my biography as a narrative researcher ... (Riessman 1993: p. vi)



## Thematic analysis

One of the most common approaches to qualitative data analysis entails what is often referred to as **thematic analysis**. However, unlike strategies like grounded theory or critical discourse analysis, this is not an approach to analysis that has an identifiable heritage or that has been outlined in terms of a distinctive cluster of techniques. Indeed, the search for themes is an activity that can be discerned in many if not most approaches to qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and narrative analysis. Also, for some writers a theme is more or less the

Riessman's account is interesting because it suggests several possibilities: that the coding method of qualitative data analysis fragments data; that some forms of data may be unsuitable for the coding method; and that researchers can turn narrative analysis on themselves, since what she provides in this passage is precisely a narrative. Interest in narrative analysis certainly shows signs of growing, and in large part this trend parallels the rebirth of interest in the life history approach (see Chapter 20). Nonetheless, the coding method is unlikely to become less prominent, because of several factors: its widespread acceptance in the research community; not all analysts are interested in research questions that lend themselves to the elicitation of narratives; the influence of grounded theory and its associated techniques; and the growing use and acceptance of computer software for qualitative data analysis, which frequently invites a coding approach.

Regardless of which analytical strategy you employ, what you must not do is simply say: 'this is what my subjects said and did—isn't that incredibly interesting'. It may be reasonably interesting, but your work can acquire significance only when you theorize in relation to it. Many researchers are wary of this—they worry that, in the process of interpretation and theorizing, they may fail to do justice to what they have seen and heard; that they may contaminate their subjects' words and behaviour. This is a risk, but it has to be balanced against the fact that your findings acquire significance in our intellectual community only when you have reflected on, interpreted, and theorized your data. You are not there as a mere mouthpiece.

same as a code, whereas for others it transcends any one code and is built up out of groups of codes. Key concept 24.2 provides some criteria for identifying what a theme is.

This does not appear to be a promising start, because, although qualitative researchers often claim to have employed thematic analysis, it is not an identifiable approach. Indeed, it did not appear as a separate section in the first two editions of this book! Yet, as a simple exercise while writing this section, I did a search on 21 October 2010 of the SSCI via the Web of Science

for 'thematic analysis' for the years 2000–10 inclusive and came up with 1,184 hits. The vast majority of these derived from references in abstracts to the article being based on 'thematic analysis'. This figure of 1,184 represents a large increase on the corresponding figure in the previous edition of this book for the 2000–7 period, when 400 hits were produced. For example, Jones et al. (2010: 109), in their study of early retirement referred to at several points in Chapter 1, write that 'a thematic analysis was undertaken'. Prainsack and Kitzberger (2009: 53), drawing on their research on prisoners' views of DNA evidence, write about 'themes that emerged from our interviews'.

One general strategy for assisting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by Framework, an approach that has been developed at the National Centre for Social Research in the UK. Framework is described as a 'matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data' (Ritchie et al. 2003: 219). The idea is to construct an index of central themes and subthemes, which are then represented in a matrix that closely resembles an SPSS spreadsheet with its display of cases and variables. The themes and subthemes are essentially recurring motifs in the text that are then applied to the data. The themes and subthemes are the product of a thorough

reading and rereading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data. This framework is then applied to the data, which are organized initially into core themes, and the data are then displayed in terms of subthemes within the matrix and for each case. If we take the Disney project data described in Chapter 23, one of the main themes that was identified was 'Ideological critique'. This theme can be viewed as having a number of subthemes—class critique; ethnicity critique; gender critique; and nationality critique. Figure 24.3 is a matrix that draws on the coded text in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' and that would be used for representing the data on the theme 'Ideological critique'. The four subthemes are presented, and the idea is to place brief snippets from the data into the appropriate cell. Thus, the passage in Tips and skills 'Coded text from the Disney project' provides the data for the insertion of some material into two of the cells for Interviewee 4. It also specifies the location within the transcript of the snippet(s) that are included in the cell. Ritchie et al. advise that, when inserting material into cells, the researcher should:

1. indicate where in the transcript the fragment comes from (I have used the question number);

### The Framework approach to thematic analysis

Theme: Ideological critique

	Class critique	Ethnicity critique	Gender critique	Nationality critique
Interviewee 1				
Interviewee 2				
Interviewee 3				
Interviewee 4		'saw plenty of black Americans' in MK 'but few if any in that World Showcase'. 'Little mention of black history' (Q14)		World Showcase 'only really representative of the developed world' (Q14)
Interviewee 5				

2. keep the language of the research participant as far as possible;
3. try not to insert too much quoted material; and
4. use abbreviations in cells so that cells do not become too full.

As its name implies, this approach is meant to provide a framework for the thematic analysis of qualitative data and provides one way of thinking about how to manage

themes and data. It does not necessarily tell the user how to identify themes, which, as the authors suggest, are likely to reflect the analyst's awareness of recurring ideas and topics in the data. Software has been designed for the implementation of the Framework approach. Details can be found at:

[www.framework-natcen.co.uk](http://www.framework-natcen.co.uk) (accessed 7 February 2011).



## Key concept 24.2 What is a theme?

In spite of its apparent frequency of use in the analysis of qualitative data (see main text), thematic analysis is a remarkably underdeveloped procedure, in that there are few specifications of its steps or ingredients. This is changing (e.g. Ryan and Bernard 2003; Braun and Clarke 2006), but, even so, what actually constitutes a theme is often not spelled out. By and large, we can say that a theme is:

- a category identified by the analyst through his/her data;
- that relates to his/her research focus (and quite possibly the research questions);
- that builds on codes identified in transcripts and/or field notes;
- and that provides the researcher with the basis for a theoretical understanding of his or her data that can make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus.

When searching for themes, Ryan and Bernard (2003) recommend looking for:

- *repetitions*: topics that recur again and again;
- *indigenous typologies or categories*: local expressions that are either unfamiliar or are used in an unfamiliar way;
- *metaphors and analogies*: the ways in which participants represent their thoughts in terms of metaphors or analogies (they give the example of people describing their marriage as like 'the Rock of Gibraltar');
- *transitions*: the ways in which topics shift in transcripts and other materials;
- *similarities and differences*: exploring how interviewees might discuss a topic in different ways or differ from each other in certain ways or exploring whole texts like transcripts and asking how they differ;
- *linguistic connectors*: examining the use of words like 'because' or 'since', because such terms point to causal connections in the minds of participants;
- *missing data*: reflecting on what is *not* in the data by asking questions about what interviewees, for example, omit in their answers to questions;

- *theory-related material*: using social scientific concepts as a springboard for themes.

An emphasis on repetition is probably one of the most common criteria for establishing that a pattern within the data warrants being considered a theme. Repetition may refer to recurrence within a data source (for example, an interview transcript or document) or, as is more often the case, across data sources (for example, a corpus of interview transcripts or documents). However, repetition *per se* is an insufficient criterion for something to warrant being labelled a theme. Most importantly, it must be relevant to the investigation's research questions or research focus. In other words, simply because quite a large number of people who have been interviewed say much the same thing does not mean it warrants being considered a theme. The identification of a theme is a stage or two further on from coding data in terms of initial or open codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). It requires the researcher to reflect on the initial codes that have been generated and to gain a sense of the continuities and linkages between them.

While thematic analysis lacks a clearly specified series of procedures, in spite of its prominence as a means of conducting qualitative data analysis, the Framework approach and Ryan and Bernard's suggestions provide some pointers about how to begin and to organize such an analysis. It can be employed in relation to several of the different ways of analysing qualitative data covered in this book, such as grounded theory, narrative analysis,

critical discourse analysis, and qualitative content analysis. It has also been employed in relation to the systematic review of qualitative research (Thomas and Harden 2008). It is this flexibility—the fact that it can be deployed in such different contexts—that probably accounts for its popularity, in spite of the absence of a great deal of codification of its core procedures.



## Student experience Thematic analysis of transcripts

Several of the students who had conducted qualitative research using interviews mentioned forms of analysis that were indicative of adopting a thematic approach. Rebecca Barnes writes that she sought to 'identify key themes', while Erin Sanders writes that she 'transcribed the interviews verbatim—and used NVivo to code the transcripts—looking for emerging and relevant themes'.

Once Samantha Vandermark had completed her focus groups with mothers of young children and transcribed them, she

began a qualitative thematic analysis. I read through the transcripts line by line, noting down themes as I saw them appear in the data, for example if a mother openly spoke about the negative impact of fast food chains on childhood health, I would note this down as 'Causes—fast food'. At the bottom of each page I would then note down the main themes that had come from that page's conversation. From this initial, detailed analysis I looked again at the themes that had been pulled out, and started to conglomerate these into wider thematic categories that would represent overall segments of conversation from within the focus groups. Finally, I used the electronic copies of my transcripts to piece together the segments of data which represented each theme, and developed my qualitative analysis through analysing in detail what the mothers said about these themes and what they might signify in terms of wider social attitudes and norms.



To read more about Rebecca's, Erin's, and Samantha's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/)



## Student experience Combining memos with thematic analysis

Isabella Robbins used memos as a means of elaborating her thematic analysis of her data. Her memos formed part of her discussions with her supervisor.

I developed analytic memos, on each interview completed, throughout the data-collection period. These along with full verbatim transcripts and message board data were put into NVivo. I had ideas about the thematicity before I used NVivo, so at the beginning a pen and paper were used in conjunction with NVivo. The themes that I was pulling from the data were consistent, and this felt reassuring. My supervisors were also involved with the analysis, in that I would report back with analytic memos and we discussed emerging themes, and I developed ideas and analysis from there.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/)



## Narrative analysis

**Narrative analysis**, which was referred to in the previous section, is an approach to the elicitation and analysis of data that is sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as providers of accounts (often in the form of stories) about themselves or events by which they are affected, detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts. With narrative analysis, the focus of attention shifts from 'what actually happened?' to 'how do people make sense of what happened?' The last point can be expanded to 'how do people make sense of what happened and to what effect?', because stories are nearly always told with a purpose in mind—there is an intended effect. Proponents of narrative analysis argue that most approaches to the collection and analysis of data neglect the fact that people perceive their lives in terms of continuity and process and that attempts to understand social life that are not attuned to this feature neglect the perspective of those being studied. Life history research (see Chapter 20) has been a prominent location for the application of a narrative analysis (see Research in focus 20.8 for an example), but its use can be much broader than this. Mishler (1986: 77), for example, has argued for greater interest in 'elicited personal narratives'. In his view, and that of many others, the answers that people provide, in particular in qualitative interviews, can be viewed as stories that are potential fodder for a narrative analysis. In other words, narrative analysis relates not just to the life span but also to accounts relating to episodes and to the interconnections between them.

Some researchers apply narrative analysis to interview accounts. For example, in her account of her 'click

moment' as a narrative researcher (see the long quotation on page 582), Riessman describes how she applied narrative analysis to conventional interview transcript material and then began to uncover the stories her interviewees were telling her. In this case, Riessman was applying a narrative approach to materials that had been gathered in a conventional way for conventional purposes. Other researchers start out with the intention of conducting a narrative analysis and deliberately ask people to recount stories (e.g. R. L. Miller 2000). Thus, while stories can arise out of answers to questions that are not designed to elicit a narrative, certain kinds of question are especially likely to elicit them. Riessman (2004a) suggests that a question such as 'tell me what happened', followed up with 'and then what happened?', is much more likely to provide a narrative account than 'when did X happen?' While some narrative researchers prefer simply to start people off by asking them to tell their story about an event, Riessman argues that it is usually necessary to keep asking follow-up questions to stimulate the flow of details and impressions. For example, in her study of divorce, she often asked 'Can you remember a time when . . . ?' and then followed it up with 'What happened that makes you remember that particular moment in your marriage?' There are, then, two distinct ways of thinking about narrative analysis: for some researchers it is an approach to analysing different kinds of data; for others, it is this, but, in addition, the researcher deliberately seeks to stimulate the telling of stories. The examples provided in Research in focus 24.5 and 24.6 are examples of the former; Research in focus 24.7 is an example of the purposeful elicitation of stories.



### Research in focus 24.5 HIV narratives

Squire (2000) conducted narrative interviews with 'thirty-four people infected or affected by HIV, who used HIV support groups for HIV positive people, and for workers, carers and volunteers in the HIV field'. Some were interviewed on more than one occasion. Interviewees were not directed to produce autobiographical narratives, but, in the course of the interviews, many did so. For example, interviewees who were HIV-positive produced narratives of how the identities that were forged immediately after diagnosis were derived from a stigmatizing identity. However, with time, they forged identities based on acceptance and also a shift from not being involved with others towards communion with others who were similarly affected by the disease. Other narratives

described by Squire include a *disengagement* narrative of seeking to get away from the illness and a *coming-out* narrative, which was one of finding ways of coming to terms with a gay sexual identity. With the latter, coming out about being HIV-positive inevitably meant for many gay men coming out about their sexuality to those who were not aware that they were gay. The dilemmas and concerns that this process occasioned, even though the concerns did not always have the negative impacts that were feared, was a key element in the coming-out narrative.



### Research in focus 24.6 An example of organizational narratives in a hospital

Brown (1998) examined the competing narratives involved in the aftermath of the introduction of a hospital information support system (HISS) at a British hospital trust referred to as 'The City'. The information technology (IT) implementation was largely seen as unsuccessful because of the absence of clear clinical benefits and cost over-runs. Drawing on his unstructured and semi-structured interviews with key actors regarding the IT implementation and its aftermath, Brown presents three contrasting narratives: the ward narrative; the laboratory narrative; and the implementation team's narrative, thereby presenting the perspectives of the main groups of participants in the implementation.

The three contrasting narratives provide a very clear sense of the organization as a political arena in which groups and individuals contest the legitimacy of others' interpretations of events. Thus, 'the representations of each group's narrative are described as vehicles for establishing its altruistic motives for embarking on the project, and for attributing responsibility for what had come to be defined as a failing project to others' (Brown 1998: 49).

Thus, while the three groups had similar motivations for participating in the initiative, largely in terms of the espousal of an ethic of patient care, they had rather different latent motivations and interpretations of what went wrong. In terms of the former, whereas the ward narrative implied a latent motivation to save doctors' and nurses' time, the laboratory team emphasized the importance of retaining the existing IT systems, and the implementation team placed the accent on the possible advantages for their own careers, in large part by the increased level of dependence on their skills. In terms of the contrasting narratives of what went wrong, the ward narrative was to do with the failure of the implementation team to coordinate the initiative and meet deadlines, and the laboratory team emphasized the tendency for the implementation team not to listen or communicate. For their part, the implementation team's diagnosis was to do with the ward staff failing to communicate their needs, lack of cooperation from the laboratory staff, and poorly written software.



### Research in focus 24.7 Narratives about the mantelpiece

Hurdley's (2006) interest in material culture led her to examine how people think about artefacts that are important to them. She interviewed thirty people and their families in Cardiff who had been identified in a postal questionnaire survey as likely to be appropriate research participants. Hurdley conducted her interviews in order to elicit narratives about the artefacts displayed on their mantelpieces. According to Hurdley (2006: 721): 'exploring the narratives about things emphasizes what mantelpiece displays (or other domestic display areas) are accomplishing in the home.'

Research participants were invited to tell stories about these items on display. These stories were usually contextualized by requesting interviewees to provide stories about their housing histories. Hurdley (2006: 721) writes:

Each object could . . . be made the subject of a narrative, as I asked individuals to tell me about the origins of the vase, or clock, or ornament. At other times, the information they had written in the questionnaires concerning childhood memories, or why they did not want a mantelpiece, suggested a narrative pathway. . . . Although the artefact on display remains materially the same, different stories, or different versions of the same story, can be related to it according to the specific identity its owner wishes to invoke in an interaction.

She goes on to show that the artefacts and the stories around them are a context within which not only identities can surface, but also identities that would not otherwise be obvious to the observer or possibly to the research participant.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) argue that a narrative should be viewed in terms of the functions that the narrative serves for the teller. The aim of narrative interviews is to elicit interviewees' reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts (see Research in focus 24.5 for an example). A narrative analysis will then entail a seeking-out of the forms and functions of narrative. R. L. Miller (2000) proposes that narrative interviews in life story or biographical research are far more concerned with eliciting the interviewee's perspective as revealed in the telling of the story of his or her life or family than with the facts of that life. There is a concern with how that perspective changes in relation to different contexts. The interviewer is very much a part of the process in that he or she is fully implicated in the construction of the story for the interviewee. Research in focus 24.6 provides an example of the application of a narrative analysis approach to an environment that demonstrates its potential beyond the life story context. In this case, the author explores competing narratives in accounting for the failed implementation of an IT system in a British hospital.

Narrative analysis, then, is an approach to the analysis of qualitative data that emphasizes the stories that people employ to account for events. It can be applied to data that have been created through a variety of research methods (notably semi-structured and unstructured interviewing and participant observation), but it has also become a focus for an interviewing approach in its own right—that is, the narrative interview in which the researcher sets out to elicit stories. It would be wrong to view narrative analysis primarily in terms of qualitative interviewing in spite of the focus on it in the account presented here. Narrative analysis can be employed in relation to documents too and as such provides a potential strategy for analysing such sources in addition to those

covered in Chapter 23. For example, E. M. Davis (2008) conducted a narrative analysis of documents concerning breast cancer produced by the National Cancer Institute in the USA. E. M. Davis (2008: 68) employed six dimensions of narrative to analyse the discourse surrounding breast cancer in these documents: 'characters, setting, events, audience, causal relations, and themes'. She uncovered 'a robust narrative focused on an ideal of women who can be treated successfully and who can look forward to recovery from breast cancer. The narrative demonstrates a generally consistent set of underlying values and expectations' (E. M. Davis 2008: 68). She calls this an early cancer narrative, which comprises six elements that form a narrative plot:

1. *Presymptomatic*. The woman is diligent about checking herself.
2. *Symptomatic*. The woman responds quickly and in a medically appropriate way to the discovery of an abnormality.
3. *Diagnosis*. Tests are conducted, and, if cancer is diagnosed, the woman becomes a patient. A doctor will administer the appropriate treatment.
4. *Treatment*. The woman becomes informed about her treatment(s) and their side effects and communicates regularly about her condition and concerns with her doctor.
5. *Recovery*. The patient improves both physically and emotionally, while maintaining communication with her doctor.
6. *Post-recovery*. The patient returns to her previous life before the onset of cancer.

Underlying this narrative are two core themes: risk (all women are at risk of the disease) and control (medical treatments are crucial to the development of the disease).

In addition, Davis points to a contradiction within the narrative: on the one hand, it is a temporary nuisance; on the other hand, breast cancer is a lifelong issue for women.

As Riessman (2008) observes, narratives may relate to quite long periods of time (such as an entire life story or to an extended period of time, as in many illness narratives or in relation to an occupational career, as in Research in focus 20.8) or to a specific event. In relation to the latter, she gives the example of stories of acts of resistance, as provided somewhat unusually in answers to open questions employed in the course of a structured interview survey of 430 people in New Jersey concerning how 'they experience, interpret, and use law' (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1338). One of the strategies of resistance identified was 'rule literalness', which refers to people using organizations' rules to their own ends in order to circumvent or bend those rules as a means of resistance. An example is that of Michael Chapin, who was arrested and fined \$500 for driving without insurance and was forced to pay in cash. It was later found that he had been arrested in error and the charges against him were dismissed. He refused to accept a cheque as a refund:

Then they try to write me a check for my money back and I wouldn't accept it. I made a big stink. I said I want my cash back. I gave you cash, I want cash back. . . . I said I don't care what you have to do. I don't care if you have to print the money up. I want cash money. You didn't trust me for a check and I don't trust you either. I made them open the safe. [The judge] came back to see what I was yelling at the clerk, telling her I want my money. (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1353–4)

In this case, the story relates to a specific incident rather than something that occurs over an extended period of time. By contrast, the stories elicited in connection with the focus of Research in focus 24.5 relate to extended periods of time, as do the narratives that relate to E. M. Davis's (2008) document-based investigation.

As an approach to the analysis of qualitative data, narrative analysis has not gone uncriticized. Bury (2001), while noting the growing interest in *illness narratives* (stories that people tell about the causes of, in particular, chronic illnesses they and/or others experience and the impacts they have on their and others' lives), argues that there has been a tendency for narrative researchers to

treat the stories they are told uncritically. For example, he suggests that the frequent recourse in illness narratives to coping with and normalizing chronic illness may in large part be to do with an attempt to convince the audience (for example, an interviewer or the reader of a book about someone's struggle with illness) of competence. It may, therefore, have more to do with signalling that one is not a failure in a society in which failure is frowned upon. Thus a narrative of coping with adversity in the form of a chronic illness may have more to do with wanting to be seen as a fully functioning member of society than a realistic account of coming-to-terms with a medical condition. However, as Bury recognizes, the social conditions that prompt such narratives and the form that the narratives take are themselves revealing. In drawing attention to the motives that may lie behind illness narratives, he is seeking not to undermine narrative analysis but to draw attention to the issue of what it is that narratives are supposed to be revealing to the researcher. A similar point could possibly be raised in connection with the study of narrative in organizations referred to in Research in focus 24.6. What is it that such studies reveal? Clearly, they draw attention to competing understandings of what goes on in organizations, but one might query how far the narratives reflect an underlying 'truth' about what happens or how far they reflect the divergent perspectives of different groups. In a sense, it does not matter: it is the perception that is typically important to people, but it may prove significant to the researcher in terms of how the stories should be interpreted.

One further issue is that narrative analysis has increasingly splintered into a number of different approaches that nonetheless share certain common assumptions. For example, Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010) draw a distinction between analyses that focus on the content and structure of stories and those that emphasize how the stories are conveyed. The latter entails attending to such things as stories as performances or the rhetorical devices used to convey them. As Riessman (2008: 11) has observed: 'Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. As in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives.' The presence of different ways of practising narrative analysis does not represent a criticism of the approach, but it does suggest that, for students interested in applying it to their data, there is a good deal of groundwork that needs to be done in terms of sorting out what kind of narrative analysis they are conducting.



## Student experience

### The use of narrative interviews

Isabella Robbins adopted a narrative interview approach for her study of parents' decision-making in connection with vaccination of their children. She did this by encouraging them to tell stories about the vaccinations.

In order to capture what I considered to be complex decision-making routes for some people contemplating childhood vaccination, I employed qualitative in-depth interviews as my main methodological route. In these interviews mothers were invited to explain how they came to their decisions regarding childhood vaccination. They were encouraged to tell the story of their child's/children's vaccination/s, and I took opportunities to follow up their talk. This narrative approach was supplemented towards the end of the interviews by inviting the mothers to respond to a series of informal vignettes, designed to elicit material relevant to foreshadowed and emerging themes.



To read more about Isabella's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/)



## Secondary analysis of qualitative data

One final point to bear in mind is that this discussion of qualitative data analysis may have been presumed to be solely concerned with the analysis of data in which the analyst has played a part in collecting. However, in recent years, secondary analysis of qualitative data has become a growing focus of discussion and interest. While the secondary analysis of quantitative data has been on the research agenda for many years (see Chapter 14), similar use of qualitative data has only recently come to the fore. The general idea of secondary analysis was addressed in Key concept 14.1.

There is no obvious reason why qualitative data cannot be the focus of secondary analysis, though it is undoubtedly the case that such data do present certain problems that are not fully shared by quantitative data. The possible grounds for conducting a secondary analysis are more or less the same as those associated with quantitative data (see Chapter 14). In the context of qualitative data, it is possible that a secondary analysis will allow the researcher to mine data that were not examined by the primary investigators or that new interpretations may be possible (see Research in focus 24.8 for an example).

With such considerations in mind, Qualidata, an archival resource centre, was created in the UK in 1994. The centre is not a repository for qualitative data (unlike the Data Archive, which does house quantitative data);

instead, it is concerned with 'locating, assessing and documenting qualitative data and arranging their deposit in suitable public archive repositories' (Corti et al. 1995). It has a very useful website:

[www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/about/introduction.asp](http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/about/introduction.asp) (accessed 8 November 2010).

Its online catalogue—Qualicat—can be searched at the following address:

[www.qualidata.essex.ac.uk/search/qualicat.asp](http://www.qualidata.essex.ac.uk/search/qualicat.asp) (accessed 8 November 2010).

Qualidata acknowledges certain difficulties with the reuse of qualitative data, such as the difficulty of making settings and people anonymous and the ethical problems involved in such reuse associated with promises of confidentiality. Also, Hammersley (1997) has suggested that reuse of qualitative data may be hindered by the secondary analyst's lack of an insider's understanding of the social context within which the data were produced. This possible difficulty may hinder the interpretation of data but would seem to be more of a problem with ethnographic field notes than with interview transcripts. Such problems even seem to afflict researchers revisiting their own data many years after the original research had been carried out (Mauthner et al. 1998: 742). There are also distinctive ethical issues deriving from the fact that the

original researcher(s) may not have obtained the consent of research participants for the analysis of data by others. This is a particular problem with qualitative data in view of the fact that it invariably contains detailed accounts of contexts and people that can make it difficult to conceal the identities of institutions and individuals in the presentation of raw data (as opposed to publications in

which such concealment is usually feasible). Nonetheless, in spite of certain practical difficulties, secondary analysis offers rich opportunities, not least because the tendency for qualitative researchers to generate large and unwieldy sets of data means that much of the material remains underexplored.



## Research in focus 24.8

### A secondary analysis of qualitative data from the Affluent Worker study

Savage (2005) examined the field notes collected by researchers in the course of the *Affluent Worker* study in the 1960s (see, e.g., Goldthorpe et al. 1968). This was an important project that explored questions concerning social class and work in Great Britain in this period. The findings in the monographs that emerged from the study emphasized the quantitative data collected from the social survey, and little use was made of the qualitative data that were collected in the course of the interviews. These qualitative data were deposited with Qualidata. Savage re-examined some of the essentially qualitative field note data that were collected. Savage argues that, although a huge amount of qualitative data was generated through the *Affluent Worker* studies, very little of this part of the research made its way into publication. Instead the researchers focused on aspects of their data that could be quantified, so that 'a huge amount of evocative material was "left on the cutting room floor"' (Savage 2005: 932). Savage uses the field notes, which contain many verbatim quotations from respondent interviews, to argue that rereading the field notes with a contemporary understanding of issues of money, power, and status indicates that the respondents had different understandings of class from Goldthorpe et al. that the researchers did not pick up on, and this difference of understanding affected how the data were interpreted. Savage shows that many of the affluent workers struggled with the notion of 'class identity' and that the kinds of views that they held about class and related matters were not as different from other working-class groups as the authors' inferences about their survey data implied. His analysis also suggests greater continuity in individual identities between now and then than might have been expected. He shows how the interpretation of the data is affected by the researcher, in that the differences between his views of the data and those of the original researchers may in part be to do with different perspectives that are brought to bear on those data. This example of the secondary analysis of qualitative data indicates that new light can be shed on old data, but it also raises interesting methodological issues, in this case concerning how to disentangle inferences about change from the impact of looking at old data through new conceptual lenses.



## Key points

- The collection of qualitative data frequently results in the accumulation of a large volume of information.
- Qualitative data analysis is not governed by codified rules in the same way as quantitative data analysis.
- There are different approaches to qualitative data analysis, of which grounded theory is probably the most prominent.

- Coding is a key process in most qualitative data analysis strategies, but it is sometimes accused of fragmenting and decontextualizing text.
- Narrative analysis is an approach that emphasizes the stories that people tell in the course of interviews and other interactions with the qualitative researcher and that has become a distinctive strategy in its own right for the analysis of qualitative data.
- Secondary analysis of qualitative data is becoming a more prominent activity than in the past.



## Questions for review

- What is meant by suggesting that qualitative data are an 'attractive nuisance'?

### *General strategies of qualitative data analysis*

- What are the main ingredients of analytic induction?
- What makes it a rigorous method?
- What are the main ingredients of grounded theory?
- What is the role of coding in grounded theory and what are the different types of coding?
- What is the role of memos in grounded theory?
- Charmaz (2000: 519) has written that theoretical sampling 'represents a defining property of grounded theory'. Why do you think she feels this to be the case?
- What are some of the main criticisms of grounded theory?

### *Basic operations in qualitative data analysis*

- Is coding associated solely with grounded theory?
- What are the main steps in coding?
- To what extent does coding result in excessive fragmentation of data?

### *Thematic analysis*

- How far is there a codified scheme for conducting thematic analysis?
- How does the Framework approach help with a thematic analysis?
- What are the chief ways of identifying themes in qualitative data?

### *Narrative analysis*

- To what extent does narrative analysis provide an alternative to data fragmentation?
- How does the emphasis on stories in narrative analysis provide a distinctive approach to the analysis of qualitative data?
- Can narrative analysis be applied to all kinds of qualitative interview?
- What is a narrative interview and how far does it differ from other kinds of qualitative interview?

### *Secondary analysis of qualitative data*

- How feasible is it for researchers to analyse qualitative data collected by another researcher?



## Online Resource Centre

[www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymansrm4e/)

Visit the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book to enrich your understanding of qualitative data analysis. Consult web links, test yourself using multiple choice questions, and gain further guidance and inspiration from the Student Researcher's Toolkit.