

ANALYSING THE DATA (Adapted from Thomas (2011, ch. 5))

Once you've got all your data, what do you do with it? Remember that it is only data until you have analysed it and used it intelligently. Only then will your data become evidence. So, how do you do the analysis?

Your data is likely to come in one of two main forms:

- words
- numbers.

You treat different data in different ways. Let's look at each in turn.

Words

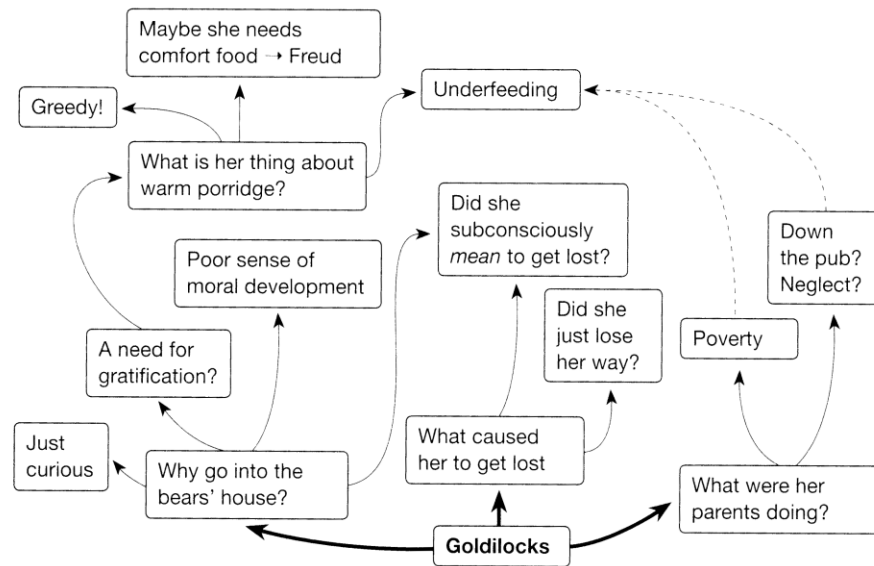
What is sometimes called 'qualitative research' is research to do with words. When I say 'words' I mean words joined up in the way that we usually join them up in language in our everyday lives. I don't mean isolated words, counted, as you might count them, with questionnaire responses. I mean proper grown-up sentences with meanings. How do you analyse these, other than by just taking the sentences at face value and copying them out into your research report?

Most ways of analysing words are based on the *constant comparative method*. It's all you need to know. Here's what it is:

The basic recipe for constant comparative method — step by step.

1. You will need: your notes, diaries, any recordings or transcriptions; some different coloured highlighters; a pad of A4 paper; a pen; a computer (if you prefer to work on one).
2. You first read all of your data: interview notes, transcriptions, diaries, notes from observations, etc.
3. With the highlighters, highlight parts that you think are important. Use different colours for different kinds of 'important'. Do this either in a word-processing file or in hard copy. You'll begin to get an impression of key ideas or subjects that are coming up again and again. You can call these your *temporary constructs*. Make a list of them. This is *coding*.
4. Now read through the data again, using your list of *temporary constructs* against which to compare (this is *the constant comparative* bit). Now make up a grid with the temporary constructs in a column on the left, and - on the right - page numbers of where the temporary construct is mentioned in your data - you will need to quote these words. You can make notes and observations on the grid as you do this.
5. Delete any temporary constructs that are not earning their keep. In other words, if the temporary construct is not appearing again and again, delete it from your list.
6. Now, after your second reading, make a list of second-order constructs that seem to explain your data. With them you should be able to summarise the important themes in your data.

7. If you are satisfied after a final look through your data, you can label these as your themes.
8. Think about the themes. How do they seem to be connecting together? What matches with what? Are there any unanimous areas of agreement? Are there any contradictions or paradoxes?
9. Garnish: find ways of visually representing your themes - think, for example about how you could draw them in the shape of a storyboard (or something like it), as shown below:



10. Place as part of your analysis chapter.
11. Write up your findings, using quotations as evidence.

These themes or categories are the walls and shapes that you build out of your data. Your data – words – provides the bricks – the themes are what you make of them. Your job when you are using words in this way is to find the meanings that people are putting into the words. It is these meanings that you have to think about.

There are various ways in which you can draw diagrams of your themes to show how one is connected to another. I have outlined elsewhere (Thomas, 2013) how this can be done with network analysis and construct mapping.

References

Thomas, G. (2011). *Doing Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, G. (2013). *How to Do your Research Project* (2nd edn). London: Sage.