Chapter Ten

Understanding Qualitative Results and Findings

As we stated earlier, every research study presents results. In this chapter, we will look at the kinds of results we might expect to find in qualitative research articles.

Overall, there are four basic qualitative designs—discovering meaning, investigating, seeking illumination, and participating to right some imbalance or social wrong. All of these designs are linked to research questions in some way, and all of them seek to answer or clarify those questions. It is in this context that we can talk about qualitative research results and findings.

At the outset, we need to make clear that, in at least some qualitative studies, the separation of results and discussions is not clear cut. This is because, especially when dealing with issues of meaning, the discussion of the nature and implications of meaning is often an integral part of the research and its findings.

When we talked about quantitative results and findings, we looked at tools and presentation strategies, in that order. In the case of qualitative results and findings, it is more useful to talk about orientations and strategies for presenting these results and findings.

There are two major orientations toward results and findings in qualitative research—thematic analysis and meaning discernment. Cutting across these two orientations are three primary strategies—sorting and organizing, reflecting and synthesizing, and narrating.

We will look at each of these areas in turn.

Orientations

All forms of qualitative research collect and analyze data. Once those data have been collected, researchers need to make one of three decisions about how to treat those data when they analyze them:

- break into clusters based on themes
- "mine" for valuable and often hidden meaning
- use some combination of these two approaches

Because it is so clear in practice to see when researchers are combining these two orientations, we will focus only on those cases where one or the other orientation is being taken exclusively.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is based on the assumption that all pieces of qualitative data are inherently organized by larger and more abstract (and sometimes hierarchical) themes. Qualitative analysis then becomes the discovery and testing of these themes, which are then presented with corroborating support and evidence. By working with themes, it becomes easier to tackle and apply complex concepts and situations.

The act of breaking down a complex whole into a set of simpler explanatory themes is one of the primary goals of qualitative research. Therefore, we should expect to find
any number of approaches and techniques within thematic analysis, and in fact we do.

Here we will look at examples of three of the myriad types of thematic analyses that are found in qualitative research—grounded theory, focus group analysis, and material analysis. These three examples were chosen to illustrate to some degree the wide range of approaches that are available to researchers.

**Grounded Theory** Grounded theory is the oldest and most established type of thematic analysis. It depends upon the careful bottom-up coding of data to create working codes (called open codes), more refined and broader codes (usually called axial codes), and eventually a smaller number of final inclusive code areas called themes.

Here is a fictional example of how grounded theory results might be presented:

Ten students from Mr. Smith’s Advanced Placement class were interviewed and their transcripts were analyzed using open coding to generate an eventual set of stable axial categories that served as the basis for generating the themes that were themselves the basis of our eventual theory. This in-depth analysis yielded thirty-three open categories with twelve axial categories that were eventually translated into four broad themes. These themes were Individualized attention; Extensive use of real world examples; Extensive use of visual aids and graphs; and Use of humor.

**Focus Group Analysis** Focus groups, unlike grounded theory and other similar methodologies, deliberately gather data in a collective manner, so as to see how various participants build and reflect and modify what each other says. In this way, a more interactional picture of what participants believe and act upon can be built.

Here is a fictional example of how focus group analysis results might be presented:

A number of the mothers expressed serious concerns about the nutritional value of the school lunches that were served to their young children: I try to give my children fresh fruits and vegetables, which is tough to do on my salary, and then I find out that they have pizza three times a week for lunch (Monica). I like pizza too, but not three times a week. School is supposed to help expose my children to new healthy kinds of foods, and help them make better choices (Marian). How can the kids make better choices when the people choosing the food have no background or training in nutrition (Yolanda)?

**Material Analysis** While grounded theory and focus groups (and related methods) build their data around what people say, material analysis looks at what people own and display. Here is a fictional example of how researchers might perform a thematic material analysis of bumper stickers on cars in a particular parking lot:

When looking at the cars in the concert venue VIP parking lot, 120 of the 211 cars had bumper stickers that were deemed relevant to the concert experience itself. Seventy-two of them displayed the band name (Phish), or its logo (a stylized fish), or both. Thirty of the stickers made environmental comments (e.g., ‘Love Your Mother Nature, Phishheads for Forests, Boogie with a Tree Today) that reflect the environmentally friendly consciousness of the band and many of its following, and the final eighteen were either in-jokes or witty references (e.g., Fluffhead for President, NICU Too, Who is this band Phish, and why are they following me all across the country?).

**Meaning Discernment**

Meaning discernment is based on the assumption that all qualitative data exist on at least two different levels—what is apparent on the surface and what actually (or possibly) might exist at a deeper level.
Hermeneutic Analysis  Hermeneutic analysis is a form of meaning discernment that may involve meaning discovery, meaning making, or both. It is rooted in the ancient tradition of extracting meaning from sacred texts. As the concept evolved and expanded, it was first extended to any sort of text, and then to anything that could be “read,” from speech to movies and songs and cultural artifacts.

Hermeneutic analysis in qualitative research tends to focus on rooting out the assumptions and perspectives people operate upon when they are in certain experiences. It is a form of digging deeper or putting together seemingly disparate things to create a more coherent picture of meaning in a given situation.

Here is a fictional account of how a researcher might report hermeneutic findings:

On the wall beside his desk, Mr. Joyce displayed an old child’s quilt, hanging on dowel rods from the ceiling. He told me that his second grade students never ask him about the quilt, but that it had been his own blanket from his childhood. “I display the quilt,” he said, “because these children come from tough backgrounds and a tough neighborhood. I can’t comfort them directly, because they are too suspicious and any kid I would comfort would get singled out for ridicule. But this quilt, which they have the native cunning not to question, helps do some of that soothing for me.”

Phenomenological Analysis  Hermeneutics is about what words and things mean. Phenomenology is about what things mean to someone. That is, a phenomenological analysis details how certain ideas or concepts function as a part of lived experience.

When it was first developed, phenomenology was primarily an introspective method, where the researcher examined his or her own lived experience. That aspect of phenomenology still exists, but today it is primarily a method for researchers to uncover and explore the lived experiences of others. Virtually any sort of experience, from dealing with test anxiety or seeking to gain acceptance by one’s peers, to serious life setbacks or dealing with a terminal experience, can be examined phenomenologically.

Here is a fictional account of a set of phenomenological research findings:

When I first look at a test paper (said Mary), the first thing I see is a big black circle in the middle of the page. When I see this circle, I know that I need to keep my wits about me, or I will start getting a headache. So I close my eyes and rub them vigorously until I see stars. For some reason, this helps. It doesn’t matter if I know the test material or not—the black circle comes every time. When I was in grade school, I told my teachers, but they got to the point where they didn’t believe me. Now I just do what I need to do and hope for the best.

Portraiture  Portraiture is a qualitative method that is used when it is particularly important to gain a deeper insight into one or more of the participants. That is, a major part of meaning discernment is observing and deciphering not just what a person does or says, but who that person really is. Portraiture is also used when researchers study unique individuals, or individuals in unique circumstances.

Here is a brief fictional account of a portrait of a research participant:

Donald was a short, stocky eighth grader with black eyes and sandy hair. From the sag in his shoulders, it was apparent that his backpack was heavy, full of books to take home to the trailer where he and his mom lived. I asked Donald if his mom would mind me visiting. He said, “my mom doesn’t like people to come over and see where we live, after my dad left. But she wants to make sure that my video games don’t get me into trouble at school, either.” He gave me her phone number and I called and she was willing to talk to me.
Strategies

In a manner somewhat independent of the orientation that researchers might take toward their analysis of qualitative data, there are three broad and basic strategies they might use to present those results and findings:

Sorting and Organizing

Sorting and organizing are an integral part of thematic analysis, but they are also important for meaning discernment.

Here is a fictional example of how a thematic analysis finding might be sorted and organized:

After the initial interviews, participants were sorted into three groups: (1) those who opposed environmental education because it was considered to be superfluous; (2) those who opposed environmental education because it was seen to threaten business education; and (3) those who opposed environmental education because it was considered to be politically progressive.

Here is a fictional example of how a meaning discernment finding might be sorted and organized:

Truant teens looked at the school police cruisers as a nuisance, while teens who were dealing drugs in the schools and teens who were actively engaged in gang activities viewed the cruisers as the “chariots of an invading army.”

Reflecting and Synthesizing

Reflecting and synthesizing are an integral part of meaning discernment, but they are also important for thematic analysis.

Here is a fictional example of how a meaning discernment finding might be synthesized and reflected upon:

Tommy (not his real name) talked about what he felt when he saw a police cruiser slow down to look at him and several of his gang members: They think they know what they see when they see us—just a bunch of gang bangers. What do they know about where I live and what I have to put up with every day? How would they act if the only people they could trust were fellow gang members? How tough would they be then? How would they have the nerve to judge me?

Here is a fictional example of how a thematic analysis finding might be synthesized and reflected upon:

Environmental education teachers learned to develop different interactional strategies with each of the three opposing groups of parents. For the superfluous camp, they held seminars on the value of environmental education. For the business education advocates, they worked with business education teachers to show how both forms of education were necessary. Finally, to address the political issue, they conducted a town-hall panel meeting where advocates across the entire political spectrum spoke in support of environmental education.

Narrating

Regardless of what researchers’ orientations toward qualitative results and findings might be, it is clear that narration often plays a key role in how those results and findings are presented.

While qualitative researchers often strive to adhere to similar levels of precision and rigor that quantitative researchers employ, more often than not they do not have the same prescriptively structured analysis tools that quantitative researchers employ. That is why the use of clear and precise narrative techniques is often employed, so as to help in providing order and structure.

Here is a fictional example of a narratively oriented presentation of qualitative findings:
Chapter Eleven

Understanding Discussions and Conclusions

It is not enough for researchers to merely present their results. They must take the further step of showing us what these results mean, and how to contextualize them properly. This is the role of the Discussion and Conclusions section.

Most Discussion and Conclusions sections attempt to cover four major issues—What happened? What was not expected? What do these results mean? Where do we go from here? Each of these areas will be addressed in turn.

Summary Statements

Most of the time, Discussion and Conclusions sections jump right in to summarize what happened. These are summary statements. The major findings are presented, and then interpreted in light of the research questions.

Here is a set of fictional summary statements, from differing types of studies: