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Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis”

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Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis”

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This submission is a reflection by Srivastava and Hopwood on their earlier article, A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis, originally published in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* in 2009, and selected for the journal’s special anniversary issue, “Top 20 in 20.” They discuss how they have applied the framework in their various studies since then, Srivastava, primarily in field-based international research in education and global development, and Hopwood, in education and health. Based on a brief analysis of the paper’s citations, they identify its impact to have been: in a wide variety of fields crossing disciplinary boundaries, studies situated in a range of domestic and international contexts, studies analyzing data from intersectional perspectives and conducted with marginalized participant groups, referred to in methodological textbooks and publications, and used by researchers of all levels of experience, independently or in teams. They end by identifying what they consider to be key emerging topics associated with qualitative data analysis, Hopwood, on nonrepresentational and posthumanist perspectives and the implications of “postcoding,” and Srivastava on considering the agency of less privileged, marginalized, or vulnerable participants in data collection and analysis.

How Did It Fit Into Your Career Path?

“A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis” was among the first papers both of us wrote. It was based on a framework Prachi developed as a doctoral student in 2004 to analyze her data. Nick had found it useful and applied it to his own doctoral research. He persistently encouraged her to publish the framework showing how it was applied in both (very different) studies. They wrote it during Prachi’s Economic and Social Research Council postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Oxford.

For Prachi, the paper consolidated a set of methodological questions she had been grappling with as a doctoral student, now nearly 15 years ago! By the time it was published in

2009, she had moved from the University of Sussex to the University of Ottawa as assistant professor for her second full-time academic post. Nick was then working at the University of Oxford, close to the end of his first postdoctoral post and just before moving to the University of Technology Sydney to start a postdoctoral fellowship.

We both write and teach on methodology but do not consider ourselves principally to be methodologists. It’s striking, therefore, that the paper became the most cited for both of us!

How Did It Impact Your Work?

Its wide uptake confirmed our belief that methodological contributions can be made by working through problems and challenges. Both of us faced tensions between following the data and staying true to purpose, the issue at the heart of the paper, and one we continue to confront.

This paper has framed every analysis we have done in our independent projects, even as we have become more experienced researchers. As our substantive areas of work are very different, our analyses vary in terms of the research questions, the nature of our data, the theoretical frameworks we deploy, and the analytical mechanics.

Prachi’s work is in education and global development, focusing on policy analysis and education access and exclusion, on the privatization of schooling in India and Asia, and on the involvement of private actors in education in the Global

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South. Much of this work is field based and conducted in collaborative international teams, with researchers of various levels of experience, assistants, and graduate student researchers. She may be working in a slum in India interviewing semi-literate parents on their experiences of accessing schooling for their children, conducting formal or nonformal interviews with elite participants in government or private sector organizations, or analyzing reams of legislation, policy, and organizational documents. The studies might be uniquely qualitative or mixed methods by design.

Nick's work has spanned education and health, generally adopting a qualitative approach. He has used the framework in studies of postgraduate education across social sciences, academic workplace learning, simulation in undergraduate clinical education, professional learning and practice in child and family health settings, and parenting education. Like Prachi, these projects often involved collaboration with researchers from diverse professional and disciplinary backgrounds as well as being at different points in their academic careers. The theoretical focus of these studies has varied, including cultural-historical, sociomaterial, practice-theoretical perspectives, and principles of work-based learning and identity formation.

Despite the exact contours of our studies, the framework of questions, "What are the data telling me?" (Question 1), "What is it I want to know?" (Question 2), and "What is the dialectical relationship between what the data are telling me, and what I want to know?" (Question 3), has helped us to maintain focus and sharpen insights. Holding Questions 1 and 2 in dynamic balance and reflecting on the changing relationship between them (Question 3) has provided a common platform for approaching our diverse analytical work. Regardless of the conceptual tools deployed, it has offered a means to remain theoretically rigorous, while at the same time, preventing theory from overdetermining the outcome.

The paper has also become a key resource in our undergraduate and graduate teaching, and in training we offer to research assistants. Qualitative analysis often looms large, murky, and fearsomely complex for neophyte researchers. Tomes like Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014) *Qualitative Data Analysis* (now in its third edition with Saldana) and others (e.g., Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Giardina, 2017; Rossman & Rallis, 2017) offer practical tips and highly rigorous engagement with pertinent methodological issues for the qualitative researcher. However, what researchers often find missing is a simple (but not simplistic) and concrete way of positioning themselves vis-à-vis their research questions and data, and connecting this with theoretical approaches. Feedback from students and newer researchers suggest they find the paper helps, at least to some extent, with this.

How Did It Impact the Field?

A brief analysis of the citations shows the following:

1. The paper has been applied by researchers in an astonishing variety of fields crossing disciplinary boundaries

and employing diverse modes of research using qualitative and mixed-methods designs. Research areas have included corporate social responsibility, education and teaching and learning, global development, global education, global health, human sexuality, ecology, medical education, nursing and patient care, social media analysis, workplace interactions and learning, and more.

2. Particularly, striking is the use of the paper in studies analyzing data from intersectional perspectives and in those conducted with marginalized participant groups, including: women; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community; minority or racialized groups; and immigrant and refugee populations. Studies have been situated in a number of field contexts including: Australia, Canada, Ghana, Haiti, Kenya, Thailand–Burma border, Uganda, South Africa, United Kingdom, the United States, and others. We are humbled if the paper has allowed researchers to connect their subjective lenses and positionalities with field insights to generate research insights, particularly with and in underrepresented research participants and contexts.
3. It has been widely referred to in methodological textbooks and publications (e.g., Mills & Morton, 2013; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Thorne, 2016; Tracy, 2013). This may suggest that the paper has become part of the qualitative methodological discourse, not just a tool used in studies.
4. While we originally conceived of the paper as helping to inform newer qualitative researchers, it has been used by students, new researchers, and experienced researchers alike, working independently or in teams.

Perhaps the paper occupies a position of offering a concrete way to easily grasp and frame the process of data analysis by wider perspectives and to open up some profound questions. In the hands of a thoughtful researcher, it may not resolve important epistemological questions, nor is it aimed to give step-by-step procedural guidance on data mechanics. However, it speaks to both by prompting questions while seeking to bring researchers back, always, to questions of purpose and progress; however, they are defined and discerned.

Were There Any Surprises That Came From This Publication?

We have been surprised by just how much demand there was (and seems there still is!) for an analytical framework that sits in between ontology/epistemology and the concrete mechanics or procedures of working with data. Our framework is not procedural, nor is it canonical. But it seems to be widely applicable.

We described it as "practical" and focused on issues of reflexivity. One of our aims was to engage with issues of reflexivity in a way that reduced the risk of self-indulgence and instead promoted fluid thought about the self in relation to data, theory, and questions in the context of an analytical process that is progressive and moves forward (even if nonlinear).

Keeping this in mind, we have been struck by the depth of the questions the framework provokes. Feedback from our students and team researchers and our own applications have brought up additional questions, like: Why are the words “me” and “I” in the framework so important? Which (part of) “me” is it referring to? Do data really ever “tell” anyone anything, or is interpretation and sense-making always a pull by the analyst?

The framework doesn’t answer these questions, and our paper doesn’t mention them explicitly, so it has been a welcome surprise as they have come up as others have applied it.

What Is the One Thing That You Think Has Changed the Most in This Area Since You Published This Article?

The change most significant in Nick’s context is the growth of approaches to analysis that multiply, open up, and diverge rather than seeking clear resolution. In a subsequent methodological paper, he wrote about the apparent completeness and closure of video and the potential value of deliberately incomplete representations (Hopwood, 2014). Thrift’s (2007) work on nonrepresentational theory predated our publication. However, the theoretical and analytical spaces that have opened up in what might broadly be considered nonrepresentational and posthumanist terrain constitute a huge change.

Of note here are diffractive approaches associated with new material feminisms, such as Barad’s (2013) cutting together–apart. While many qualitative researchers (including us) deploy coding techniques when appropriate, there is increasing sense of movement toward a “postcoding” world. This is not just about what to do after coding, which of course, is never the end of the matter, but about approaches to analysis that question the value of coding at all (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

For Prachi, the issue of reflexivity, particularly, the dynamic exchange between the field researcher and the field, and the potential of participants to reject the researcher’s methods or crafted field personae (beyond simply refusing or withdrawing participation) requires further attention. This has a deep impact on how data are collected, and how they can eventually be analyzed. While Prachi earlier published a paper on reflexivity, positionality, and field mediation for data collection and analysis (Srivastava, 2006), focusing on the agencies of participants, particularly, those thought to be vulnerable or marginalized, is relatively new.

Earlier literature centered on researchers reclaiming power in the research process when “studying up” or involving “elite” participants (e.g., Desmond, 2004). Some writers had already been problematizing static constructions of power in the research process (Smith, 2006), and work in this area has continued. While there is certainly a broader parallel discussion on the intersectionality of subjectivities, particularly regarding researcher roles, the application of such perspectives to the agency of participants thought to have “lesser power” is limited. Newer work on researching with children and young people, and that problematizes participatory research approaches (Allan, 2012; Morrow & Crivello, 2015), shows promise in how we may grapple with data analysis when working with vulnerable or less privileged participants.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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