*This double-checking is an essential part of the rigour of your analysis,* and needs to be reported as part of your procedure. You don't have to accept your peer's judgement as the correct one. Instead, you use it as a basis for *reviewing your own judgements.* Typically, you find you accept some of the 'disagreements' but not others. That is perfectly acceptable, the essential point being that you have *sought* that kind of validation of your judgements.

Asking someone to parallel your categorical analysis is rarely feasible or reasonable; if you *evidence* your categories and acknowledge their fundamental subjectivity that is usually enough.

# 9

# Writing up Interview Data

The great virtue of a rigorous content analysis is that it immerses you in the *detail* of your substantive findings. The process of classifying and categorizing, difficult though it is, has a disciplining effect not just on your spreadsheets but on your own intellectual grasp of your material.

This organization has the effect of enabling you to *see* more clearly the significance, particularly the general significance, of what people have said to you. Your mind will, therefore, have been working on two levels: the task of *categorization* and the task of *interpretation*. The interesting thing about the latter is that it is a process that goes on without any prompting from you. At the end of Chapter 8 we said that categorization is characteristic of human intelligence, but so also is *interpretation*: it is part of the everyday process of living. And by the same token it is not entirely a self-conscious or even a conscious activity. When you are dealing with a wide range of rather complicated information there is a good deal of unconscious work of this kind. *And you have to allow time for this unconscious process to operate.*

This is just as well. Having carried out a comprehensive content analysis you will feel the need for a break. A two-week interval will not be wasted, because at the end of that time you will come back to your material with a fresh eye and a *better organized mind* for the writing-up process.

## Getting down to the business of writing

An organized mind still needs organized material – and, of course, to a large extent the former emerges from the activity of constructing the latter.

Let us review the process of organizing your data. It started at the level of question development – identifying questions of real importance that are likely to call forth an interested response on the part of the interviewee. If there is substance in the question there will be substance in the answers to it. And if each question deals with a different topic there will be a discernible difference in substance between them.

So when you come to write up your material (the quotations you are going to use) your organization is there in a readily accessible format, at two levels: the main question you posed, which you can treat as a *main heading* – perhaps a section or even a chapter; and your categories, which you can treat as sub-headings.

Since you have coded your quotations on the spreadsheets to the specific transcripts they come from, you can refer back to them if you need more 'context' at the point of writing up.

## Writing up

The essential character of writing up interview data is to weave a narrative which is interpolated with illustrative quotes. Your task is essentially to allow the interviewees to speak for themselves, with linking material which does little more than ensure continuity and point up the import of what the interviewees are saying. A good example of this is the study of single lone mothers by Burghes and Brown, previously cited. A more extended quotation is given in Box 9.1, exemplifying exactly the points that have just been made.

### Box 9.1

*Other help*

Other sources of help mentioned by the single lone mothers included a local family centre, a foster mother and other mothers living in the same hostel.

'I was quite lucky ... even though I didn't have support from my family ... I were in a hostel for young mothers when I first had J ... we all rallied round together ... they helped me a lot ... told me about their experiences about bringing up a baby.'

Four mothers also referred specifically to help from their boyfriends' mothers, while two cited support received from the boyfriends themselves. Grandparents and friends were also mentioned, sometimes as part of the assistance received from an extended family consortium:

'... his sister ... used to come over and talk to me. She used to stay in the house with me till him or his mum came back from work so it weren't so bad ... she either watches him or me mum watches him or S watches him when I go out.'

'... I had all my friends and they helped me.... My mum, my auntie and then my cousins would come and take him out and things like that.'

'I was living with a full family so there was a lot of help there. So it'd probably be a totally different story if I was on my own.'

Sometimes, however, support from extended family and friends had not lasted beyond an initial burst of enthusiasm following the birth:

'... for the first six months of having her it was fine ... people were very willing to babysit for a new baby; but then when it got to the teething stage, the friends disappeared.'

'... When I had her I had a lot of help but now she's one ... they don't want to know. And it seems harder for me all the time.'

You don't include *all* the relevant quotes – just enough to give the range and variety of the answers. And if there are 'discrepant' quotes you add them as a qualifying insight. You can see how Burghes and Brown have done this.

## Quantitative analyses

One way in which you can reflect the *generality* of the kinds of statements quoted is to cite how many of the interviewees made that point (or one like it) or how many made different or contradictory points. Burghes and Brown make an observation of this kind in their connecting narrative in Box 9.1. That is usually sufficient but there are occasions, i.e. when the picture is a little more complicated, to set out the different pattern of statements in a tabular form. If it is easier to 'see' the point like that then it is justified. Numerical relationships are sometimes clumsily expressed in verbal form.

## The balance of quotation and linking narrative

It goes without saying that the quotations you select should be *representative* of the total range. Some people will have made the same point in a more vivid or compelling way than others; and, of course, you should select those. What you have to guard against is selecting quotations that suit your particular preferences or present a neater picture. The best lies are half-truths and carefully selected quotations can totally distort the picture. An honest balance has to be struck there.

An equally important balance is that between quotations and the *amount* of linking narrative. An approximate practical guide is that quotations should make up not less than a third of the text, but not more than half.

Under the category sub-headings you will need an introductory paragraph or two, but then you should let the interviewees take over, with no more than a meaningful linking between the quotations – and sometimes you should simply cite several in succession.

This linking should be like a *framework* that holds the quotations together – but it is these (what your interviewees have *said*) which should make the point. In terms of *emphasis*, the material should be 90 per cent from the interviewees.

## Reviewing your selection of quotations

We have already cautioned against the risks of 'selective bias' – selecting to favour a particular emphasis. That is not necessarily a consciously corrupt process, but you have to guard against it all the same.

Your selection may be unbalanced for no malign reasons whatsoever. There can be a 'drift' in the quotations that catch your attention when you are writing up, which results in a completely unintended bias. How does one guard against that?

The basic procedure is a simple one. You have your spreadsheets with the category headings and the columns of statements from individual interviews. As you *use* a quotation in your write-up you should highlight it. That tells you which ones you have used and which ones you have chosen not to. At various points you should scan the selected and non-selected quotations to check your justification for your choice. What you are after is a *balanced* representation. Some of them will make the 'representative' points better than others. However, there may be shades or nuances that are not caught by just one or two quotations.

## How many quotations?

There are two main determinants here. If all or most of your interviewees have made the same kind of point then the *commonality* of this needs to be demonstrated by a range of quotations: one in isolation might convey the incorrect message that it was a 'one off', although you should or could indicate that *x* number of people said essentially the same thing. But the number of quotations is still part of the impact of *quality*.

The second point is that although people may be saying *approximately* the same kind of thing there will be shades of opinions, important variations of detail which can only be conveyed by a range of quotations. In a sense these statements are 'unpacking' what the category heading signifies. When you scan the highlighted items on your spreadsheet you may find that you have been too selective. It has to be borne in mind that you identified these initially as having 'something to say'. If they don't add anything to other quotations then it is perfectly fair to omit them. But you have to justify that choice to yourself and to others.

Basic to the kind of research that semi-structured interviews are a part of is the *trustworthiness* of procedures. This means more than being honest and checking that your data are sound, and acknowledging their limits. It also means that the processes, like data analysis, are open for inspection. This kind of open accounting is part of what E.G. Guba and Y.S. Lincoln (1981) in *Effective Evaluation*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, call the 'audit trail' – a trail that someone else, the 'auditor', can follow to see how you reached your conclusions.

Quite apart from the integrity issue, by documenting or preserving the records of your process of analysis you can, if necessary, *backtrack* to check on your chain of evidence and the reasoning derived from that.

In the same way that traditionally 'scientific' quantitative researchers might check back on their calculations (because the results are of a level that raise questions), so naturalistic researchers may need to review the 'calculations' that led them to draw the conclusions they have.

All researchers must expect to be challenged on their findings: your justification is only as good as the means by which you achieved them.

As we have said before, data do not just speak for themselves: selection and interpretation *are* required but these should be kept to the minimum necessary for the implications of the evidence to be apparent.