# QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS: A PARTICIPATORY VIEW

## MA TRANSPERSONAL COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Dr. Emma Therese Lewis

inquiry@emmathereselewis.com

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**Introduction**

Writings within the research domain, as elsewhere, always reflect the worldview or understanding of the author - this lecture is no exception. The perspective reflected here is *participation* - some might call it the *transpersonal paradigm* although that would be less precise since there are many worldviews expressed within the halls of transpersonal discussion.

*Participation* is a philosophy - a way of understanding the world. It has been gaining momentum in the modern transpersonal world for the last decade or so as a possible salve to the reductive effects of modern science, the absolutism that religion demands, and the isolation that springs from focusing heavily on one end of the subject-object dichotomy (Lewis 2011, 2012). There is evidence that this momentum is actually a re-emergence of understanding since this way of viewing the world was well understood in ancient civilisations and indigenous cultures (Eliade, 1987; Schwaller de Lubicz, 1978; West, 1987). More detailed exploration of *participation* and what it means can be found, among others, in the writings of 20th century philosophers (Barfield, 1988; Bateson, 2002/1979; Whitehead, 1985) and post-modern, 21st century transpersonal theorists (Ferrer, 2002; Ferrer & Sherman, 2008; Hart, Nelson & Puhakka, 2000; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993 etc.) who wrangle with the post-modern (mostly non-participatory) doctrines expressed by theorists such as Ken Wilber (1999a, 1999b) and Michael Washburn (2003).

In the context of qualitative research, *participation* reflects *experience* as the centre of the human endeavour to understand. It sees the experiences of participants, researcher, other researchers and reader as all inter-related. Experience spans the divide created by subjective and/or objective perspective by uniting the perceiver with percept (that which is perceived). It is the currency of being and becoming human. A participatory research process is therefore a piece of experience under close study - the examination of which leads to insights and revelations increasing understanding of the nature of that piece of life. Participatory research is dynamic, alive and organic. It is process. It is structured (contained) principally by the integrity of the researcher, by the design of the study, by methodology, timetable, program requirements, tutor dialogue, participant feedback etc. These are the important yet arbitrary boundaries in research that enable the transformative potential of the process to be realised. The evidence of the phenomenon is that the longer and deeper you go into your study (within the MA and beyond) - the more you love it - the more it will show you.

The "step" in the research process under discussion today is *data analysis*. In *participation*, as with all organic matters, "steps" are arbitrary delimiters of an on-going flow. They help identify and focus attention on one particular piece of experience. *Data analysis* is taken to be the stage after participant data has been collected, or following the formal collection of personal data in self-studies, and before beginning to report what the research process has revealed. This is the operations hub

or the laboratory bench alchemically-speaking. It is the most intense and unique process in each study. It is lonesome, inspiring, frustrating, comforting, demanding and satisfying.

Each research design and the methodology it follows (e.g. Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, Narrative Inquiry etc.) has its own own *data analysis* procedures. These procedures loosely follow similar principles while also having their individual features. This lecture is designed to cover the general principles of *data analysis* that can be said to apply across the board.  If you find something that conflicts with your method then follow your instinct and reason it out, go over it with your tutor, or, worse case, adhere blindly to your methodology. Instances of tension (queries) that arise in you on reading the principles here and your own study or methodological approach are welcome at the lecture.

**Timing**

At the point of *Data Analysis* in research design, formal data collection i.e. interviews, group work, self-study, journalling, biographical study etc. has been completed. I do not recommend that data analysis begins while collection is on-going. While there is at least one method (e.g. Grounded Theory) where this is methodologically possible, it complicates procedures and challenges the researcher to be both present with the phenomenon and observing/analysing at the same time - something most people find difficult. When sitting with a participant and discussing an experience, we invoke the forces that constitute that experience (as examples - transference and countertransference). Experiencing this direct involvement (participation) in the phenomenon when data collecting provides a direct, first-hand, embodied experience of the phenomenon. Understanding arising subsequently from analysis however, requires a cooler, more distant, reflective, incubated approach that allows one to walk around the data in one's own space and time.

Finish collecting the formal data, get it into the format for analysis (transcribed etc.) and set it aside. Let things sit for at least a couple of weeks - longer if you can afford the time. Moustakas (1990) called this phase *incubation* acknowledging it as a well-defined step within Heuristic Inquiry - useful to all qualitative studies. One needs time for the experience of gathering data (and preparing or transcribing it) to "settle," to begin to cohere within one's psyche into an overall feeling about what the data are saying. To have this sense of coherence helps the analysis of the data yet to come.

This is not the time to stop collecting *informal data* however. *Informal data* are the observations, synchronicities, insights and dreams that will occur during the length of the study. These data are not formally analysed in the ways discussed here but they may still inform part of the findings and final report. Going over journal/dream notes and re-reading them when writing up findings reminds you of insights and feelings that have occurred so far, the ways in which the process has effected you and any guidance you have been given to help you interpret. The deeper the contemplation of the material, the greater the insight into the research question.

Qualitative Data Analysis: A Participatory View

Once you ready to begin the process of analysing your data, begin by establishing how much time will be spent on this part of your process. There are different methods of analysis that require different processes and procedures so understand the one you have chosen thoroughly. Find the texts that best describe how to analyse within the methodological tradition of your study and then apply these general principles while following that method.

Once you have estimated the time you will take for analysis, add a bit more. This stage always takes longer than one thinks. It helps to break the time up into working blocks to create a pattern or regular schedule that you can maintain without too much stress on the rest of life - a few hours a day or a couple of days a week - whatever suits your lifestyle and level of commitment. This will mean that the analysis process will be a regular and steady effort rather than long, intense bursts that are stress-ridden due to under time pressure. *Analysis is creative.* It does not yield generously if done under duress. Some deadline pressure helps inspire movement but if left too late the analysis will be rushed and flat. Having a timetable also allows one to see when one is skipping over steps in the process which is interesting information for your process - perhaps there is something difficult to digest in the material? Lastly, a timetable helps to manage anxiety arising from the twin effects of time passing and deadlines approaching.

**Structure**

Timetabling brings us to the other key aspect of creative process - structure. All creative practice, to be free-flowing, needs to be bound by some structure. Just as a river has various rock formations that form its banks, define its course and determine its pace, the structure of your process contains (and thus defines) your findings. If your process lacks adequate structure then data never emerge into findings - they remain raw data. This is why all research methodologies, in whatever tradition, propose a structured approach to analysis. Research methods vary greatly in the degree to which they are structured. Grounded Theory has a highly developed structural approach to handling and analysing data (Charmaz, 2006). On the other end of the spectrum methods like Integral (Braud, 1998) and Organic Research (Braud & Anderson, 1998) propose little formal structure and will require you to develop your own analytical approach to the data. In the middle of this spectrum one would find methods such as Intuitive (Anderson, 2009) , Narrative (Clandinin, 2007) and Hermeneutic Inquiry.

Any research study, in whatever worldview, methodology or topic, needs to follow a structure for analysing data and needs to be able to articulate that structure in the final thesis. One of the elements of research that gives it meaning, is its ability to be understood and perhaps repeated by other researchers. Whatever conclusions or findings are drawn from data collection and contemplation, one needs to be able to illustrate how one's analysis led to these findings. While gut feelings, intuitions and dreams ideally form part of the analysis process, they must be linked clearly to the process of data collection/analysis so that the reader can share in their significance. Anthony

Lunt's (2010) book on *Avision* exemplifies the process of analysing and interpreting dreams masterfully.

Structure plays a central role in containing the *prima materia* or chaos of the data collection process. Chaos is, of course, naturally overwhelming. *Data analysis* is the process of bringing order to the chaos in order to understand its meaning oneself and then, ultimately, to convey that meaning to others. The more coherent and robust the structure, the clearer the meaning and the more valuable the final report.

In some minds, structure is associated with rigidity, formality and limitation. It is perceived as a curb on creativity or even as as un-creative by nature. In reality, any transformation or creative act requires boundaries to contain it.  In all creative pursuits we find containers; the alchemist has her flask or crucible, the artist her canvas and medium, the poet her meter and phrasing, the healer her psyche and so on.  Equally, in pursuits seen as "scientific" (and therefore often characterised as un-creative) such as maths, physics, chemistry etc. we find essential truths expressed through structures such as algebra, astronomical alignments, crystal formation etc. Any good (in the Platonic sense) piece of work, research being no exception, uses structure to contain creative impulse so that it is expressible.

If you are not working with a method that has a clearly delineated data analysis process then develop one for yourself. Articulate the process that your study is following clearly - in writing. This work is useful in writing up the final thesis and is also very helpful in containing anxiety and overwhelm arising from the data chaos. To feel comfortable one does not need to know what the research is going to conclude - just what steps are going to be followed to get there.

A reliable structure for analysis will address the following questions:

• how are you going to physically review the data?

• how are you going to sort the data?

• does your process ensure that **all** data are analysed?

• if you are missing data out - what is your reasoning?

• as you go through and sort data where/how will you record/keep it?

• what will you call the collections of data that arise as you sort?

• how will you manage the data so that, when it is jumbled through sorting, you can still tell where it came from e.g. who said it?

• how many times will you go through the data?

- how will you handle data that can be attributed to more than one place in your analysis?

- how is your analysis informed by your worldview/character/prejudices/preferences?

- how does the structure of your analysis relate to the structure of your interviews and data collection process? Is there any pattern?

- what tools will you use to keep track of your analysis and data e.g. scissors and paste, spreadsheets, database/filemaker apps, word processing docs etc.?

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Supporting Texts:

- Boeije, H. (2010). *Analysis in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

- Bloor, M., & Wood, F. (2006). *Keywords in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Bryman, A., & Hardy, M. A. (2009). *Handbook of Data Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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- **McLeod, J. (2011). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.**

- **Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. (1984). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.**

- Peraklya, A. (2005). Analyzing talk and text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 869-886). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- **Saldana, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.**

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If you have 1) answers to these questions, 2) a timetable and 3) your data to hand, then you are ready to begin your *data analysis*.

Since this lecture addresses *data analysis* generally rather than reflecting specific methodological approaches, we turn our attention now to general principles that produce good (meaningful) analysis and can be applied **across methodologies**.

For further information on how to approach data analysis the texts listed above are good guides. Data analysis, like other stages of qualitative research is peppered with terms and jargon; codes, categories, contexts, conditions, to alliterate just a few. These need to be understood in order to ex-

plain analysis in the terms that other researchers understand. If using your own terms then make sure you give good definitions. I have included Bloor & Wood's (2006) guide to terminology in the list above.

Make sure, of course, that you have the principal texts for your chosen method which will set out how to approach data analysis. If not clear which text will best suit your research you can consult your tutor or ask me for a recommendation, but the best approach is to skim through the books and decide which suits you best.

**Principles of Analysis**

In a participatory (and transpersonal) view there are some principles that can apply to *data analysis* regardless of method. If these are reflected in the study then one ends up with a solid understanding of the topic and a set of findings that have personal value and are conveyed to, and felt by, the wider world. Ultimately this is *your* inquiry - it is your question that is being answered by the research process. You should feel that the analysis process you follow **supports** your inquiry, not that it is squeezed it into a formal methodology or dogma. At the same time, it is critical to follow a structure as discussed above. The analysis process will then shed light onto aspects and corners of the inquiry that had not been considered at the outset. Stand behind any intuitions and insights arising from the data, and use your reasoning to think them through and keep an open mind as to what others (participants, your tutor, peers etc.) are trying to tell you. Most researchers are dealing with textual data so that medium is reflected here. If there are other inputs like visuals, audio etc. then these comments can be adapted to those media and further discussed at the lecture.

**Data** comes from the Latin *datum* meaning "that which is given"("datum, n.", 2012). These "givens" of the research process can include; participant interview transcripts, artwork or texts contributed by the participant, as well as interview notes, dream transcripts, notes, insights, analytical memos from the process so far.

**Collate** the data in one place and work through them slowly, encapsulating them into digestible independent segments (codes).  This is sometimes called *unitizing data* (Erlandson et al, 1993) or *coding* (Strauss, 1998). It can be defined as "disaggregating data into the smallest pieces of information that may stand alone as independent thoughts in the absence of additional information other than a broad understanding of the context. This does not mean that the whole will be understood when one reads a single unit [code].  A unit of data is said to exist when there is but one idea found in a portion of content.  A unit may consist of a few words, a complete sentence, several sentences or an entire paragraph." (Erlandson et al, 1993, p.117). Take care not to lose the meaning of what has been conveyed - this is the artistry of analysis.

**In Vivo Coding** is one approach to encapsulating data "that prioritize[s] and honor[s] the participant experience." (Saldana, 2009, p.74). *In vivo*'s root meaning is "in that which is alive," reflecting

that its *codes* refer to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record - 'the terms used by participants themselves.'" (Saldana, p.74 citing Strauss, 1987, p.33.). Given its adherence to the participants' own language, In Vivo Coding fits particularly well with the participatory approach. Saldana (2009) lists many other coding methods; Process Coding, Emotion Coding, Initial Coding, Values Coding, Descriptive Coding are all useful for psycho-therapeutic studies. You may combine more than one coding method to find an approach that works for your study.

**Reflect** on this stage as much as possible and leave out as little data as possible. When data repeats then note the repetition. Do not lump together many ideas or "units" of meaning into one code - it will make the later job of categorising and conclusion-drawing harder. When data is coded in small units then every piece of of it is made conscious. Attention is thus devoted to every aspect of the experience/phenomenon has been given. This dedication and thoroughness gives the process the ritual and sanctity that accompanies transformation. It is the greatest insurance that one will be present to the meaning arising out of the research process.

**Grouping** the *codes* is the next step. Go through the codes and organise them into like groups and give these groups headings (categories, themes etc.). Do not force codes into a category. If a code needs a new category to reflect it then make one - don't limit them at this stage. Categorising is an art and can be done many times and throw up many different results. This is the place where the data takes on structure. There may be hundreds (or at least tens) of categories at first. Once these are identified, one can consolidate them by grouping them into themes again. A grouping or category arises where a pattern emerges that can be expressed in terms of what "fits" into that pattern and what does not belong. Saldana calls this "second cycle coding" and cites Janice Morse' overview of the process;

> "*Data analysis is a process that requires astute questioning, a relentless search for answers, active observation, and accurate recall. It is a process of piecing together data, of making the invisible obvious, of recognizing the significant from the insignificant, of linking seemingly unrelated facts logically, of fitting categories one with another, and of attributing consequences to antecedents. It is a process of conjecture and verfication, of correction and modification, of suggestion and defense. It is a creative process of organizing data so that the analytic scheme will appear obvious.*" (Morse, 1994, p.25 in Saldana, 2009, p.149).

Looking for the following aspects helps with categorisation:

**Patterns** occur throughout the data, e.g., repetition of key words or phrasing, hesitation appearing, emotional hot-spots in the data, places where one feels most engaged by the material vs. disengaged or absent etc. How do these patterns mirror what is arising in the topic under study? Look

on your *data analysis* as revelation rather than creation. Use a sculptors sensibility to reveal the essential points that sit among the morass of data.

**Inconsistencies** occur when a participant expresses differing views at various points in the interview or when different participants contribute seemingly opposing data. Look out for tension and what seems like conflict within the data and do not gloss over it. Sorting out and understanding these tensions will produce the most significant insights. Do not be afraid to interpret data. If there are inconsistencies or contradictions in a person's narrative do not be afraid to say so. Reflect on why that might be occurring. Spot the places where the participant is communicating unconsciously. Interpretation of unconscious data is critical to a meaningful study - the participant's psyche will be expressing the phenomenon in unconscious as well as conscious ways.

**Timing** - Notice what sections of the data are free-flowing versus slow and cumbersome. How does this relate to what is being said? Why is this is happening? Listen to the interviews again and make note of the participants' demeanour. Reflect on hesitations and non-words as data. Analyse pauses so you can see *how* data was delivered. What is your sense of why the participant pauses at any given point? Take note of laughter, upset, anger or defensiveness - can you explain the relationship between the timing of these responses and what is being said?

**Guidance** - Do not over-rely on rational faculties - stay open to dreams, synchronicities and intuitions regarding the organisation and meaning of data. Use feelings and felt sense (as well as logic or reasoning) to detect patterns in the transcripts. What appeals to you? What do you miss? What opinions arise when you are categorising?

Once this stage is finished then take a view on the categories you have. Look again for the patterns that connect. Can they naturally be grouped into themes or main categories? What relationships exist between them?

Miles and Huberman (1994) define an approach called Pattern Coding as "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis. They are a sort of meta-code... Pattern Coding is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes or constructs." (p.69).

**Repeating** the process of going through the codes and categories a number of times means as many appear as possible. The longer one works with the data, the more consciousness is invested in it. The "spiralling" approach deepens understanding of the topic under study and reveals new insights. When we go back over data and categorisations we see things that we did not see earlier. Resist any temptation to construct categories where there is no data or little data to support them. The most profound studies are those where the researcher has really "in-dwelt" (Moustakas, 1990)

with their data. As readers we can feel the truth of a research study by the depth and simplicity in its categories/themes.

**Re-listening** to the interviews constantly while working with the written transcripts prevents disconnection from the felt sense of the words on the page. One can stay connected to the feelings and meaning of the person behind the contribution. The contributions to qualitative research are expressions of a person's being - often very intimate aspects not previously expressed to another. They are treated as sacred materials rather than technical details.

Awareness of the "conditions" of data collection i.e., the circumstances or contexts in which they arose is useful informal data. Were the interviews difficult to arrange? Were there problems communicating? What occurred in the physical space of the interview? How might these conditions be related to the topic and to the codes and categories emerging?

**Categories** are, by now, emerging into themes. Keeping track of the codes that underpin or support them helps when later writing up or describing the themes in findings. One can use the categories and codes as examples and quotations to make sure the themes are understood.

In sum, the key words in *analysing* a transpersonal or participatory study are; *relationship*, *pattern* and *connection*. It is relatively easy to break up and then summarise data into codes - not so easy to maintain their meaning and represent data as connected and related information and thus provide insight grounded in data. It is this capability that differentiates a participatory study from a modern science study while it reflects the general principles set out by Miles and Huberman (1984, p.21); "We consider that analysis consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification." *Participation* emphasises meaning and relatedness as critical to strong findings.

**Computers** are not able to do connected and related analysis. The logic flows and automation of computer analysis are a long way from the natural, intuitively-driven creativity of the human mind. A computer-based analysis will produce a flat, dull and valueless study although it may save time and effort. The time and effort invested in a participatory study are precisely what yields its value - like most relationships in life.

The more we go over the data and are involved with them upon them, the more their deeper meaning emerges. Data are not flat facts even if they appear so - they change. Understanding of them is a combination of their existence *and* the researcher's perception. The more we contemplate something, bringing consciousness to it, the more our perspective deepens revealing new aspects of the truth. Reviewing insight with a tutor or peer can help deepen them further.

The necessary counter-weight to the boundless creativity of the imagination is our embodied experience. The only barometer we have as to whether something is true, in the sense of real, is whether

we can feel it to be so. As Musés (1955) finds "Although one may not be able explicitly to define his response at the time, one always tends to recognise the words of a true statement--insofar as that statement impinges upon one's own experience--with the eagerness and satisfaction of a man who is at last hearing what he long knew but could not say or had not consciously expressed." (p.13). *Data analysis*, in the participatory sense, recruits all the faculties of being human; intuition, intellect, emotion, sensation to the task of hearing the truth. As analysis proceeds, keeping awareness open on all these channels can give findings a depth of meaning that will reward the researcher and resonate with the reader. For more detail, specifically working with "felt sense" (embodied awareness), Eugene Gendlin's works *Focusing* (1996) and *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning* (1997) are excellent guides. Practicing awareness of perception is a valuable asset for life *in toto* - especially for the therapeutic practitioner.

**Validation/Verification**

If all this talk of subjective evaluation leaves one wondering where the *objective* aspects of analysis come into play, these are really balanced out in other stages of the research design. In qualitative analysis, the researcher's perception *is* his/her instrument and thus subjectivity is to the fore. Elsewhere in the study, the literature review - which must be rigorous and thorough - demands findings and analysis are placed in the context of the field at large. Experience must ultimately be placed within the broader human community and context to be useful and satisfying.

One may invite co-researchers or participants to review an early draft of findings as they emerge. This is a highly recommended step in a participatory study. Pioneering participatory researcher, John Heron (2003), involves his *co-researchers* in every step of the findings process through working in groups. This is part of the approach he has called *Co-operative Inquiry* which he sees it as an holistic epistemology. Co-operative Inquiry and Peter Reason's *Participatory Action Research* (2001) are good methods for this type of research as they take the view that the participation of the co-researchers *throughout* the process is inherent to valid research. " For there is the important if obvious point that knowers can only be knowers when known by other knowers: knowing presupposes mutual participative awareness." (Heron, 2003, p.237).

*Participation* does not need to be narrowly scripted as a given method however. It is more an attitude to process. The truth arising out of human experience emerges when the inquiry (using any methodology) is handled respectfully and carefully as a dynamic entity. Truth (or meaning) does not need to be perceived by, or revealed to all participants simultaneously. It does however need to be "checked out" across various avenues of verification - both internal and external - to be resonant and meaningful. Discussions with your tutor and your participants - particularly challenging ones - can be useful to establish a solid, verified, foundation for the study.

*Participatory data analysis* can be a richer, deeper experience than the cold, flat, cerebral parsing of "bits" of information for comparison and contrast, one with another. The natural world, of which human experience is part, must be understood using natural approaches. In Gendlin's words: "Applying any concept elicits experiential feedback. We can let our next step of thought come from this experiential feedback rather than only from the concept. We can think with both conceptual and experiential steps, a "zigzag" which employs both powers." (Gendlin, 1997, p.xvii). In understanding another human being's experience or action, we simply employ our full range of natural faculties. We can then focus our intelligence on finding creative and sensible ways to meet and express what is revealed to us there.

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