

Week 3: February 6, 2009

Qualitative Methods: Observing, Interviewing and Documenting, Part II

“Lady, I do not make up things. That is ‘lies.’ Lies are not true. But the truth could be made up if you know how. And that’s the truth!”

Lily Tomlin, (Actress, Comedienne), in her “Little Girl” role

Terms and concepts you should know:

- Self reflective notes
- Thematic analysis
- Coding
- Content analysis
- “Quantifying” qualitative data
- Unit of content (in content analysis)
- Manifest content
- Latent content
- Observation protocol

Last week we focused on interviewing and narrative research. This week we’ll focus on ethnographic research, field observation, field notes and content analysis.

I. Ethnography (or Naturalistic Inquiry)

A. Ethnographic methods are relevant if you choose to observe a setting for
Assignment #2

B. “What is the culture of this group of people?”--this study is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. The researcher examines the group’s observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and ways of life, usually through extended exposure to the group.

C. In a “one-shot” observation, your focus is on the following:

1. Social interactions you observe; rituals
2. Use of “social space”
3. Body language, as relevant
4. Overall interpretation of what you observe:

D. Method for Ethnographic Study

1. **Observation Protocol** – a way to structure your field notes and description of the observation. It has two main parts (see also **thick description**):

- a) Description of what you observe (what people do, what they say,

thick description of the setting). May also include sketches of the setting.

b) Self reflective comments—what you think about the observations, how you explain them, questions that come up for you

2. Analysis and Interpretation

a) Address your original research questions (if you have any): what do the data tell you about them?

b) Summarize your observations in narrative format

c) Include reflective comments in order to make sense of the observations

d) What was expected and unexpected about what you observed?

e) Relevance to social work practice

f) Relevance to Transcultural Perspective

g) What other questions for further research does the observation bring up?

II. Field Notes Procedures and Methods

A. **Field notes** – a description of what you have observed. They can take the form of an Observational Protocol (see above), or the notes you take during an interview.

B. Question: How much should you try to write down? Answer: As much as possible! Review **thick description** from last week's class.

C. Important tips:

1. During the interview or observation, write key words and phrases about what you observe and what the respondent says—words and phrases you can understand later

2. Complete your field notes as soon as possible after the interview (preferably immediately afterwards), by adding more text to the key words and phrases, as well as other thoughts that occur to you. The longer you wait, the less you remember. The less you remember, the more potential for distortion.

3. Whenever possible, use direct quotes from the respondent to maintain fidelity to the respondent's voice

4. Note—audio taping an interview does not take the place of taking field notes

III. Content Analysis – A research method for studying virtually any form of communication consisting of

A. Coding and tabulating (counting) the occurrences of units content (Otherwise known as the process of “**quantifying data that are qualitative**”), and

B. Thematic analysis

1. **Manifest content -- Units of content** can be words, phrases, sentences, or groups of sentences *as they appear*—the obvious and clearly evident aspects of the communication.
2. **Latent content** – Units of content can be underlying themes or meanings, not necessarily obvious from the actual words. These are your (the researcher’s renaming or re-labeling or categorizing of the manifest content.
3. Note: **themes** can be labeled using manifest content, or latent content interpretations
4. One theme can include multiple manifest and latent content units, and
5. A particular manifest or latent unit of content can fit under *multiple themes*

Example for class discussion: excerpt from an interview transcript with a young woman who was asked about whether a CBT group therapy intervention was helpful, and if so how.

1 *I was pretty miserable before the group. I mean, I wouldn’t talk to him [her boyfriend] for*
 2 *weeks on end. Sometimes I couldn’t get out of bed. I thought I was going crazy—I really*
 3 *did. I guess I just felt pretty hopeless. Then during the group somebody said something that*
 4 *really hit me. K [another woman in the group] said that whenever she felt like*
 5 *this...”[Interviewer: “Like what?”] “...I mean like this really hopeless feeling. K called it*
 6 *‘feeling real small’. I never thought of it like that, but it’s true. You feel small. Like you*
 7 *don’t matter. Then the therapist asked her to talk about feeling small some more, like, ‘What*
 8 *does that make you think of?’ Then K said she thought of other people who had money and*
 9 *were successful, family, kids, the whole nine yards, and all she could think of was her own*
 10 *failures. And I thought, wow, how true was that? Everybody else [in the group] did too. We*
 11 *kept coming back to that, feeling small like, and I swear a few months later we were*
 12 *laughing about it. Measuring each other, ‘How small are you today?’ ‘Medium small, and*
 13 *you?’ And then I said ‘Bigger today—I told my boyfriend it’s his turn to cook dinner!’*

| Theme (1 or 2 word label) | Quote example | Number of occurrences |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
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| Theme (1 or 2 word label) | Quote example | Number of occurrences |
|------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
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***Can you see examples of a quote or content unit fitting under more than one theme?

***Once the table is filled out, can you see any relationships among the themes (i.e. like associations between variables)?

***What are some of the differences between *themes* and *variables*, the way we discussed variables in 240?

C. Questions to consider:

1. How is content analysis different from the qualitative data methods we have talked about so far?
2. What are the “quantitative” and “qualitative” aspects of content analysis?
3. Think of an example at your field placement where content analysis might be useful.
4. How would content analysis be applied to observing the behavior or culture of a group?
5. Would content analysis fit at all in your project?

IV. Small group exercise—identifying manifest and latent content

V. Writing Qualitative Research Results – A Few Tips

- A. The qualitative report is very individualized, structured by the approach (narrative, ethnographic, phenomenological, grounded theory, case study)
- B. Despite the individualized nature of qualitative research, the basic report structure (Intro, Lit Review, Methods, etc.) still applies.
- C. Make sure you address your research questions or objectives of doing the qualitative study (just like you would for a quantitative study)

D. Use quotes from participants as much as possible. This makes your writing a more accurate reflection of your participants.