

Making Sense as Personal Process

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Marshall, J. 1981. "Making sense as a personal process", in P Reason and J Rowan (eds.) *Human Inquiry*, Chichester: John Wiley, 395-399.

[Whatever methods are used to make sense of data, in the end it turns out to be a very personal and individual process. Each researcher and group of co-researchers seem to work out their own way of going about it. Since this is such a personal process, we have included a personal statement from one researcher about how she goes about making sense of the data she collects, mainly from interview data. Judi Marshall prepared the notes on which this statement was based for a postgraduate seminar at the University of Bath, and has reflected on the process for the past year. What follows is an edited transcript of her talking to us - Eds.]

What I'm trying to do with the data

It's my assumption that there is some sort of order in the data that can emerge. My job as a researcher is to be an open and receptive medium through which this order comes out. I'm trying to understand what's there, and to represent what's there in all its complexity and richness. Trying to portray what I've been given, what's been put into my custody in a way that other people will recognize because it's more human, more full of some sort of rich portrayal than just a word or a table of figures.

On getting the data

It follows on from this that it's important for me to have been there; I can't imagine doing an adequate analysis of data if I haven't participated in collecting it. I always tape interviews because so much happens that I'm not able to attend to at the time, and I find that listening to it again brings all sorts of new things up. When I've got the transcripts, they are flat, written copy, so I always listen to a few tapes before I get involved in actually trying to analyse the data, to re-catch some of the flavour. And I also make notes of what people were like, the impression I got from them, and I have that in conjunction with the interview transcript so that I can conjure up that person, and still see them - the way they smoked their cigarette, or the strange combination of shirt and tie they wore that day. Something that will give me a feeling, so that I know more about what they are saying than just the 'flat' words they use. This has an added advantage that if there is a gap in the transcript I can often remember back to what they were talking about. It is important to have the full meaning because words and sentences can be very empty and stark if they don't have the full atmosphere and context in which they were said.

The early stages

When I set out to do the interviews, it's all exciting and very clear and I've got things sorted out. When I start to do the field work there's another stage of a sort of confusion about the data. Impressions seem to dominate - the particularly vocal people, the particularly unhappy people, the particularly successful cases; those I got on well with, and stayed around with a bit. These all contribute to my ideas about how the data are turning out, I have lots of impressions. But if I put these general impressions into more concrete form, usually they're

wrong because they're skewed in all these funny directions. So at this point there is an excitement that something is coming out of the data, but if anyone asks me I have no idea what, and will avoid being forced into saying! And at the same time there's a kind of fear that nothing is going to come out of the research and that I'm going to be left with a pile of tapes and nothing to say at the end. That's part of taking risks and using a more open method, you have to learn to live with these feelings, find them exciting rather than a problem.

Structuring the data

One of the practical problems is when to reduce all these transcripts to some sort of manageable form. Sometimes when I've done long interviews and I've had some idea of the headings I've wanted to use, I've picked things out and put them under these heads. But I'm a bit unsure about this, because this seems to rob the individual case of its wholeness. So I have to compensate for parcelling out little bits of a person and putting them under different categories and headings, and try to appreciate the wholeness of each person as well. I'm now thinking that I could make profiles of people and compare these profiles.

It always amuses me when I read books on how to do content analysis that you have to decide on some sort of level of analysis - looking at a word, a sentence, or a section. But the units are really fairly obvious - you get chunks of meaning which come out of the data itself. If you read a side of transcript, there is something which comes out to you as, say, someone's attitude toward their job, or the feeling of powerlessness in relation to the people in the Union. These are chunks of meaning, and you don't have to look at individual sentences, or debate what level of analysis it is. Also the books say, 'Arrive at the categories you will use.' Well, I don't do that either, but let the categories build up all the time as I put things together that go together. I think this is partly about how much anxiety and uncertainty you're willing to tolerate for how long; I think the more you can, the better the analysis work out.

When you're doing the analysis itself, this is a good time for any insights about the data. I can usually fill several sheets a day of thoughts and flashes of inspiration which often turn out to be quite important for the structuring. Some of these have to do with the theoretical shape the material is taking, just how all the concepts and categories relate together. Often it is really this framework that directs the rest of the writing. Others are understandings of people which preserve and emphasize their wholeness, and relate them to the theoretical frameworks. For example, with my study of women managers (*Woman Managers, Travellers in a Male World*), some of them stuck out as continuously taking massive risks with their careers, and others had done well but had been very passive.

I continually build up diagrams and arrows and spaces and schemas which for me are very much part of the conceptual development. I find that some survive the analysis, but others break down in time, perhaps they don't work out because there is some sort of tension in the data that I wasn't aware of. So diagrams that *don't* work help me understand and are almost as valuable as diagrams that do work.

On the quality of attention

This sort of work is really a whole-mind activity, I can't just pick it up in half an hour and then drop it. It needs a lot of attention, I have to overcome a lot of inertia. It's difficult to get

into the material and do it the way I like while thinking about other things. I've found that because it demands a lot of mental space it is best done in large chunks. I have to spend a whole day and not expect very much out of the first couple of hours, perhaps.

But then I get involved and it starts to make sense, and insights start to come from some sort of unconscious level. When analysis is going well, I really have some kind of 'broad band' attention when lots of things seem to be connecting, when I can see over horizons in all sorts of directions. Lots of things come into my consciousness which perhaps I hadn't been aware of for years, and my mind is able to make connections at all sorts of levels. My attention becomes very active. It's a feeling of being focused and quick-witted, of being independent of trying. Whilst at the beginning of analysis I plod, and have to *try* and have to *sit down* and *concentrate*, and attempt things more slowly, when things begin to tick I don't have to try and sustain this kind of attention any more, it's quite independent of trying and it's independent of any sort of surface activity. It's almost a feeling that I can direct my surface activity but I can't direct the other forms of attention, that they *come in* and start getting *involved* with what I'm doing at the surface and start speeding it up.

I often feel that there are two parts of me acting. There's a relaxed part of me that looks at the material and understands it and appreciates it for what it is; and there's this other active and directing bit which is fitting and manipulating and matching the data. It's almost as if those two have both got to be working well. If I'm not understanding things but still trying to fit them into categories, that doesn't work; or if I am understanding but the other bit is switched off, then I'm not getting anywhere.

This active attention is difficult to distract - I'll work against all odds, in a crowded room, on a train, when the television's on. It is very difficult to switch off, so I find myself going out for a drink with friends and wanting to tell them about all these people that are so real to me, they are more real than where I am. And that's the time when I need a pad beside the bed for when I wake up and everything is clear; I write things down on bits of paper all over the place.

I don't know where this attention comes from; it's almost like it has got to be ready. When I've done enough of one stage of the research I'm in a position to go onto the next bit. Sometimes I find that I try to write and it just won't work even if I persist for hours and hours this other feeling doesn't come. I can't be ready so I go off and do other things. And sometimes I do have the feeling that I am now ready, I am ready to go on.

Then toward the end of analysis there's a phase when it is quite difficult. Things start to get tough, as if I'm holding all this stuff in my head and beginning to feel overloaded. I need then to close, I'm getting tired, I want to bring things together and capture it all, it feels as if I won't be able to hold onto it much longer. That's quite a tough time. But then there's the bit toward the very end when there's a kind of feeling that *I know* what it's all about and the structure of the data. It's a feeling of relief that I know that the data is worthwhile, that I've got something meaningful, and that I can write it, I can put it together. It's almost like having the *essence* of things that I can always fall back on now, so it does become more solid and more understandable. That feeling gives me confidence that I can put it together.

On bias and validity

I've never worked collaboratively, or argued the toss with other people about how to interpret data. While I think there would perhaps be some value in doing this, and in looking at the data from different perspectives, I feel this might be trying to intellectualize it and bring it down. Because my feeling of *rightness* is important, my feeling that this is what I can do, it's my translation, what I have found and interpreted from the data. My bias is something I appreciate, it's part of me as a researcher. And while it is important for me and for others to recognize my bias, it really is what I can give as a researcher, it is my contribution, and it's coherent and it's felt and it has all these other qualities which make me value it more than a detached attempt to be objective. I work from a particular position; I appreciate other positions, and I feel that each has its own integrity and its own validity.

There's another, a dark side to this, the feeling that I've made it all up, and I-lelp! how can I justify all this? It's this thing about *knowing*, sometimes I lose it, sometimes I look at words on a page and think, do I really remember, do I know? This is a difficulty with this approach; it is something you learn to live with.

Stages during analysis

First there's all the uncertainty at the beginning about whether I'm going to get anything, and how big a task it is going to be. And then when I start working it's all stilted and partial and nothing seems to shape up. At this stage, if it's difficult, it's worth persisting, but if it's very difficult perhaps it's not right, and if you really can't get anywhere, you need to stop.

Then there's this bit when 'it' takes off: there's the other layers of me taking off, and there's the material taking off in terms of shape and structure and I'm getting involved and things begin to work out. It's very exciting and I seem to be going places. That's when I'm immersed and don't want to be interrupted.

Then toward the end again it's getting tough, and it's very difficult to hold it all in my head all at once. And then there's this feeling at the end, this feeling *of knowing*, and it's very important to catch this and write it down, not looking back at the data, almost putting to one side all the work I've done, but writing it from *me* as the ultimate translator. I can go back and fill in all the details and illustrations afterwards.

When I've got it all finished, my usual reaction is not to look at it. There's a relief at having finished, usually I think I could have done more if I'd had more time, but then I know I wouldn't because I'm tired. Often there's a feeling of excitement at finishing, and then I'm often quite down for a couple of days, exhausted, and can't understand why - I really ought to feel good now I've finished. And yet I really don't want to know much about it, and I can't get into anything else.

And then there's a time when I've got to look back on it for some reason, someone prompts me and I eventually pick it up from the desk and feel absolutely surprised and in wonderment at how *good* it is. I think, 'I did that and it's good!'. That's important.