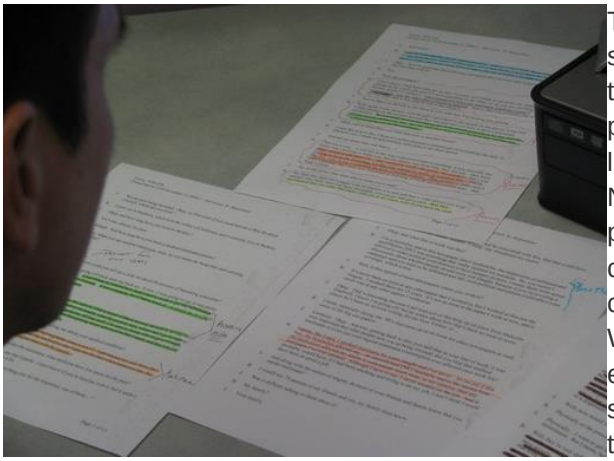
Deriving Meaning with Qualitative Analysis

How can you synthesize a lengthy conversation into usable data? With qualitative information gathered from key informant interviews, focus groups or some record reviews, the aim is not to just tally the number of similar responses like with a survey. Instead, you look for themes and patterns in order to understand what is meaningful and what is extraneous. This is what thematic or content analysis consists of. These patterns and themes tell a story, and this story should be used to inform your program efforts.

So how do you go about analyzing qualitative data? Typically, you develop what is called a "coding manual" based on the main topics that are central to the interview questions or the objective. Once a preliminary list of themes is created, actual data (quotes from interviews or notes from observations, etc.) can be coded. Quite often you will have data relating to something you set out to evaluate as well as data you were not necessarily expecting to find.

For instance, if you were evaluating the implementation and enforcement of a smoke-free park policy, your preliminary list of broad themes might include: barriers to implementation, public viewpoints, policy makers' rationale, factors related to smoking in parks, reasons for successful implementation, and so on. Because of the emergent nature of analyzing and organizing the data, your code list will evolve over time as you find more sub-themes or categories in the data.

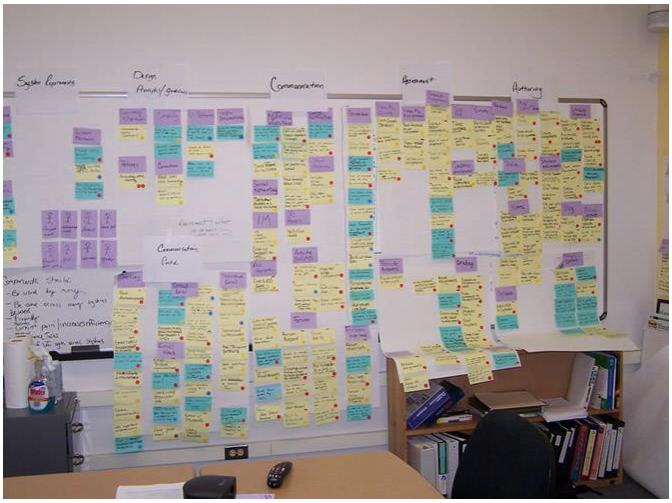


The next step is the coding. There are many ways to sort and code the data, although the idea remains in the same regardless of the method used. Some people use qualitative statistical software programs like ATLAS.ti, The Ethnograph, and Nud*ist. However, by no means are such software packages necessary. In fact, unless you have conducted hundreds of interviews, coding the data can be done by simply sorting the data into separate Word documents based on the respective codes, or even by cutting out the quotations and creating separate piles based on the codes. What is key is that you read the transcripts, notes or documents several times, allowing the information to sink in and percolate.

Regardless of how you decide to code the data, during this stage the data get separated into categories. For example, here is an excerpt of a transcript of a county health administrator: "Yeah, last year our city passed a law regarding smoke-free parks. I thought it was a great law, and much needed. I know for a fact that one of the children's parks was a frequent hangout for homeless and vagrant folk, and they all seemed to smoke and drink there. Anyway, the law was passed and went into effect earlier this year. While I think the community supports it, I don't think the law really gets enforced. I've gotten phone calls from citizens who report smoking. So, I write a report and send it to the local police department, which is supposed to be in charge of enforcing the law. However, I'm pretty sure they don't care; or, they

certainly don't make it a priority. I never hear from them, and people are still smoking in some of those parks."

In coding this paragraph, you might first label it based on the demographics of the person interviewed. In this case: white, male, county health administrator, etc. The demographics provide context and may, in fact, play a major part of the overall story. Next you would code according to theme. You might code this entire paragraph under the theme of "Smoke-free Park Law" since this was the topic of the quote. However, this same quote, or parts of it, may also be placed in other category codes as well. For example, "homeless," "park smoking," "children's park," "alcohol," "enforcement," "written report," and/or "police."



Once all the data are coded, the real analysis begins. In reviewing the coded data, decide whether the original themes and categories you started with were salient to the story that has emerged from the data. Some people make tallies of how often a code or theme might come up in the data, while others prefer to use of method of weighting based on theory or relevance. How you decide to do this is up to you, but you'll need to be consistent and transparent by describing the process you used in the write up of your results.

You will also most likely collapse many of the codes or categories into new broader themes. This is where it gets tricky for most newcomers, because there is no set way to do this. But, it's helpful to think of the data as main points in a story about this issue. What do the data say that will enable you to communicate this story? Again, this is not easy, and it can be a painstakingly slow process, even for experts in the field (and why many people prefer quantitative data collection activities). Nonetheless, the more you become intimately familiar with your data, the more a pronounced story will emerge. It simply takes time.

So how would you write up this data? If a pattern emerged across several interviews, you could write about how one of the barriers to implementing a successful smoke-free park law or policy is the lack of enforcement. You could further say that it was suggested that law enforcement officials do not view this policy or law as a priority to enforce. Add a few direct quotes in the write up to document these findings. And voila, you then have one part of the story!

The most important part of any story, though, is the ending where the reader is told what it all means. The real heart of your write up of any evaluation activity is where you interpret the findings and make recommendations for next steps. So in this case, the data indicated that your project may need to do more education and collaboration with local law enforcement.

Ultimately, qualitative analysis is all about making sense of the various pieces of data so that your project has a clear picture about what needs to happen next (or what has happened and why).

For more ideas about how to analyze qualitative data, check out Tips & Tools #7 and Tips & Tools #4 on the TCEC website.

Photos by: Robin Kipke, The Fluid Project