



Making Sense of Qualitative Data. Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996. 206 pp.

ELAINE CHIN, *California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo*

Teachers of qualitative research methods courses are often at a loss when their students first encounter data analysis. Interpretation of one's data is as much art as science. It is a process, much like writing, that is both invisible and difficult to describe. There are no set procedures to follow and no "right" way to analyze data. At best, we can engage students in discussions and hands-on experiences that support systematic ways of thinking about data analysis. Thus, any book that proposes to lay bare the intricacies of qualitative data analysis is likely to be of great interest to novices, teachers of qualitative research methods, and even experienced researchers curious about how others engage in analysis.

Making Sense of Qualitative Data, by Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson, provides a good overview of the variety of approaches used in qualitative data analysis and demonstrates how each approach is used by interpreting data collected for a study on academic socialization. Each chapter follows the same basic structure. The authors begin by examining the epistemological assumptions embedded in each approach. They summarize the relevant literature and then provide a thumbnail sketch of the analytic method itself. This is followed by a description of how the authors used this method to make sense of short excerpts from their data. They then discuss the pros and cons of each approach, grounding their discussion in the analyses that precede it.

Analytic methods discussed in the book include procedures for coding developed in vivo or from concepts derived from the relevant literature, narrative analysis that reflects both a formal and a functional approach, deconstruction of metaphoric language, the use of Spradley's (*Participant Observation*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980) domain analysis in the interpretation of semantic networks, and the use of computer software data analysis packages. The authors also include a discussion of the role of writing plays in representing ethnographers' experiences in the field and in constructing the analysis of qualitative data.

One particular strength of this book is the authors' description of the thinking that goes into data analysis. Specifically, they demonstrate how a self-conscious approach to analysis leads to a richer conceptualization of what data can mean. For example, in the chapter on coding, the authors trace the development of two different kinds of coding: one approach simplifies the data by merely tagging interview segments with



codes linked to the key themes identified for the research project; the other approach complicates the data because the codes themselves arise from conceptual questions the researcher asks of the data. In other words, codes function as heuristic devices that help the researcher understand the network of meanings embedded within the data itself. Coding should never be simply a mechanical task. The authors are particularly concerned that readers approach data analysis in conceptually complex ways. This point is made succinctly and powerfully in the few "prescriptions" for doing qualitative research listed in the last chapter.

The authors are less successful, however, in describing the analytic process for approaches that are less well-developed in the extant literature. Their description of metaphoric analysis is particularly thin. For example, they explain the spatial and boundary metaphors used by anthropologists in talking about fieldwork. Although they identify key words and phrases as metaphors, they do not investigate in any depth how these terms work as metaphors. In particular, they do not examine the nature of the comparative relationship between the metaphor and the ideas it represents, nor do they explore the playfulness inherent in metaphoric language, which gives it much of its power.

Some readers might be put off by the postmodern concerns these authors express in every chapter. They are careful to state how every account is partial and that different perspectives that take into account issues of power, gender, ethnicity, class, and the like are likely to yield multiple valid interpretations of the data. However, given the changes in the field itself, the authors would be remiss had they not explained how such concerns affect the course of anthropological research.

I would recommend this book to anyone teaching a doctoral-level course in qualitative research methods. Because each chapter is self-contained, instructors can choose those topics most relevant to their courses. But any one chapter would need to be supplemented by readings that provide more in-depth explanations and additional examples of each analytic approach. Suggestions can be found in the annotated list at the end of each chapter. However, I would not recommend this book to students with no previous exposure to research methods or with no knowledge about qualitative research itself. The overviews of prominent figures in the field and the dominant paradigms are too brief and unelaborated. In addition, the descriptions of decision making during data analysis are better understood if students are at least somewhat familiar with the specific goals for analysis embedded in each approach.

© 1997 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the March 1997 issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (28:1).



Anthropology & Education

QUARTERLY