

Moving beyond description in qualitative analysis: Finding applied advice

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There is nothing wrong with description in qualitative analysis. In fact, thick description is the bedrock upon which much of the best qualitative research is built. Or, as Jane Gilgun (2015) argues, description is often the *foundation* upon which interpretation and theory development is based in qualitative inquiry. That said, all too often from where I sit in my editor's chair, I see articles that rest on thin description, at best. The authors' repeat what their participants have said in summary fashion and then stop, leaving a reader to wonder what the significance of the work. Or, to use the question so often posed to U.S. students of research methods, *so what?*

Last year, a group of four early-to-senior scholars were invited by a group of doctoral students to participate in a panel discussion at the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) conference held in the United States in January 2015. I was honored to be a member of this panel which was dubbed *Beyond Description: A Workshop on Moving from Description to Analysis in Qualitative Social Work Research*. The student organizers included two from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, Aditi Das and Amanda Michelle Jones, as well as Charity Hoffman from the University of Michigan. The students asked their seniors to think about how we moved from describing qualitative data to interpreting it during analysis. They asked, "how did we do that heavy lifting?"

The SSWR session was lively and provocative and appeared to be well received by those in attendance. For this reason, it seemed worth trying to expand on these conference comments. The net results are published in this issue of *Qualitative Social Work*. The opening article is by Jane Gilgun. Jane elaborates in her piece entitled, "*Beyond description to interpretation and theory in qualitative social work research*" (Gilgun, 2015). Her article is followed by a talented early-career scholar, Tina K. Sacks who writes an essay entitled, *New pathways to analysis through thick description: Historical trauma and emerging qualitative research* (Sacks, 2015).

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My own comments follow in this editorial essay. The fourth panelist declined my invitation to participate in this issue.

My approach to answering the students' question is consistent with my methodological approach to understanding the world; I sought to explore it using existing evidence. In doing so, I turned a reflective lens inward and scanned a half dozen of my own projects, treating them like empirical evidence. This critical review of my own analytical processes produced a list of seven generic techniques I have used—hopefully successfully—in the past. For me, this entire project has been an interesting exercise, in part, because I wasn't consciously aware of these as generic techniques at the time I was using them. In the end, I hope I provide my preliminary answer to the students' question but also model the process of qualitative inquiry.

Before I start, there are two things to generally know about my scholarship. The first is that much of it—but not all—is historical in nature. As such, I often work with records or archival material that already exists. Second, I have made it a bit of a career project to wrestle with the *politics* of what constitutes *valid evidence* for purposes of social work research. I like the idea of challenging social workers, and social work scholars, to *see* the importance of evidence that already exists around them and to question the taken-for-granted value of other data. So, in my projects, I often *start* with the evidence (for example, some interesting social artifact or observation) and then work *backwards*, trying to figure whether there are questions which can be asked and answered using that evidence. Obviously, this challenges the traditional order of things in social science research where you are supposed to start with a question and then seek evidence to answer it. I fully appreciate my work is not everyone's cup of tea.

The following essay is divided into two sections. The first briefly describes the empirical evidence (data) I used in eight different projects. The second section identifies the seven generic analytical techniques I uncovered that seemed to have helped moved my work beyond merely describing the evidence. The purpose of this essay, of course, is to offer some techniques that might be useful to beginning qualitative researchers in thinking about their own work. For that reason, don't get distracted by the content of my examples but rather consider the method being employed.

The eight projects, which I used for evidence in this exercise, are as follows:

The Acknowledgement Page Study. Early in my career I did a study using a set of acknowledgement pages from dissertation theses, written over a 50-year period, by students graduating from the Columbia University School of Social Work doctoral program. I tried to answer questions about the doctoral *experience* at Columbia from their words of thanks (Staller, 2001).

Burden Study. In this study with my former colleague at the University of Alabama, Debra Nelson-Gardell, we conducted a secondary data analysis of focus group evidence from youthful female survivors of sexual abuse. Debra had collected the original data; however, together we returned to it to see if there was more to be learned (Staller and Nelson-Gardell, 2005).

Runaway Study. In this work, I used newspaper articles from the *New York Times* (NYT) published over an 18-year period in order to examine the social construction of the runaway youth problem in the United States during the 1960s–1970s. The results were reported in an article and a book (Staller, 2003, 2006).

Newsie Study. I am currently working on a study of the New York City newsboy strike, in 1899, against newspapers published by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Some of our U.S. readers might be familiar with the Walt Disney movie, *The Newsies* which portrayed this event as a David and Goliath success story of poor ragged street boys defeating wealthy media moguls. I returned to all of the original source evidence I could find: newspaper accounts, internal business records, magistrate and police court records, and other primary sources relating to the strike to see if the Disney interpretation was accurate (Staller, unpublished).

The Recipe Book. Kevin Corcoran, an ever-creative U.S. social work scholar, invited colleagues from across the U.S. to contribute family recipes for a cookbook he edited catering to social work students (Corcoran, 2012). I spared students from a concoction from my own kitchen; however, I did contribute an appendix to this book by writing a short article on a Civil War era (circa 1864) recipe book I had found during my exploration of the Children's Aid Society archives at the New-York Historical Society. The recipe book contained lots of hand-written recipes, of course, but it also had a number of advertisements and newspaper clippings which had been tucked among its pages, apparently left there by its original (unknown) owner (Staller, 2012).

Metatalk as Methodology. As the basis of this article, I used comments from reviews I received on two manuscripts submitted for publication in peer reviewed journals. Initially I argued that that reviewers held different epistemological preferences than my own. However, in the final version, I ended up examining the relationship among editors, reviewers, and authors (Staller, 2007).

What Remains? Stanley Witkin recently edited a book containing a collection of autoethnographies written by social work scholars (Witkin, 2014). I contributed a chapter to this collection. In my piece, I took the case record of a young male client from the Children's Aid Society (CAS) in the 1940s and, interlaced it with events in my own life following the death of my much-beloved father as we dismantled our family residence of 40 years (Staller, 2014).

St Mary County. In this study, I was part of a research team that observed and interviewed dozens of professionals from a rural community that had maintained an unusually high rate of criminal convictions in child sexual abuse prosecutions over several decades. The research team interviewed police officers, social workers, mental health providers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges (Staller and Faller, 2009).

So the above list constitutes the empirical evidence I used to investigate the panel's question: How do you move beyond description to interpretation during qualitative analysis? My results follow.

Beyond description in analysis: Finding seven strategies

What follows are the seven generic techniques that I have employed more than once in order to get myself past a simple, but premature, descriptive stopping point. I illustrate each with two examples from my work.

Switching the unit of analysis. The first strategy involved switching the unit of analysis (or the object under investigation) from its most obvious focus to a less obvious—but hopefully more interesting—one. My first example comes from the Acknowledgement page study. The obvious unit of analysis was the individual student or the acknowledgement page itself. However, it became clear individual faculty members (and staff) were mentioned by many different students over the course of decades. By switching the unit of analysis from the *students to faculty members*, I was able to locate the words of thanks offered by many students to individual faculty. The net result was I could say something about that person's particular contribution or mentoring style as well how intersecting groups of faculty, with differing styles and strengths, worked together as a team.

Similarly, in the Burden study, the obvious unit of analysis were the focus groups and their content. However, Debra and I became interested in the number of times, and variety of circumstances, the girls talked about *disclosing* their sexual abuse. We shifted our unit of analysis away from the focus group as a whole and to the *disclosure segment*. We isolated all the instances in which girls talked about disclosure. We subsequently treated *disclosure segments* as the sample for our study and thus our new unit of analysis. We ended up writing an article that was about the disclosure process even though the original focus groups were conducted to investigate a different topic.

Temporal or process ordering and feedback loops. My second technique is what I'm calling the *temporal or process ordering of information*, including potential feedback loops or other related implications. My examples come from the same two studies as above. In the Acknowledgement study, I initially created a descriptive list of the kinds of gratitude that students expressed, essentially grouping those lists by themes. Instead of stopping there, however, I came to realize that there was a *temporal nature* to the list. Not all types of gratitude attached to all steps in the doctoral process. For example, students needed to be inspired at the beginning of their studies but needed help with editing and formatting toward the end. Taken together, I ended up saying something about the support students needed *over the course of their doctoral career*. Therefore, I moved beyond simple descriptions of types of gratitude to say something about the nature of support necessary during their time as students.

Similarly, in the Burden study, we first identified all the types of disclosures the girls made. However, we came to recognize that the girls faced temporal and sequential decisions regarding disclosure. They often received different kinds of responses from adults following initial disclosure, sometimes supportive and sometimes not. These responses mattered in their future decision-making. So from a simple typological description of disclosure we built a theoretical model looking at the disclosure *process* and the implication of positive or negative feedback loops after disclosure.

Attending to the structure within the empirical evidence itself. My third technique is what I call looking at the *structure within the empirical evidence*. Although qualitative researchers often go directly to the substance of the information before them, sometimes they can learn something from the way the evidence itself is organized or structured. In the Acknowledgement study I came to recognize that an acknowledgement essay essentially constituted a *genre* of writing with a predictable organizational structure. Among other things categories of individuals were routinely mentioned such as families, friends, faculty, staff, and the like. Obviously, many categories remained constant over time. However, with dramatic advancements in technologies—such as moving from typewriters to large centralized computers to powerful laptops loaded with software and data—entire categorical groups began to disappear from acknowledgement pages such as typists, secretaries, people who entered computer data into central machines, statisticians and others. This observation coupled with increasing references to loneliness during the dissertation journey, led me to comment on the changing nature of social support in doctoral study. Where once there had been a team of experts contributing to the production of the thesis, it now appears to be a more individualistic and solitary experience for students. By noticing the structural difference in my data, I was able to make inferences about the social experience associated with the process.

Similarly, in the Runaway Study, I identified the generic narrative structure associated with *any* newspaper article about a runaway child (the journalist must say something about why a child left home, how far he/she went, how long he/she was gone, and whether he/she returned). From this structural analysis, I was able to notice the shift in narrative emphasis over time. Early stories were about little boys on great adventures that ended in a safe return home. However, by the mid-1960s, typical stories featured girls who left deeply troubled homes, turned to survival sex and prostitution and were frequently murdered. This shift in basic narrative emphasis allowed me to draw conclusions about how running away was being constructed as a social problem.

Institutional actors and relationships. Related to this structural approach to analysis is my fourth strategy, *looking at institutional actors by group and relationships*. In the Runaway article, by attending to the classes of people normally used as *sources* for journalists (youth, parents, police officers, mental health experts, etc.), I was able to examine the relative importance of the information contributed by each group to the integrity of the article. Over time, I saw the decreasing reliance on police officers as experts, and the increasing use of mental health professionals.

Similarly, in the *St Mary study*, it was initially tempting for our team to simply do a descriptive analysis of all the interviews. However, we eventually grouped our descriptions by professional role (judge, prosecutor, police officer, defense attorney, social worker etc.) and then considered the values and beliefs espoused by each group. This allowed us to understand the way values were being enacted. We were able to say something about the social fabric of the community and its response.

Linking to external environments, culture, politics and other factors. My fourth technique involved recognizing that descriptive findings needed to be re-evaluated

(and then often reanalyzed) in light of the external environment, culture, or politics. For example, when I started the Runaway study, I initially thought that I might see influences of the 1960s student protest movement reflected in the evidence. My descriptive analysis did not support this hypothesis. However, there were references to the hippie counterculture movement. With this preliminary finding in hand, I went back to the articles, expanded my sampling strategy to include articles that encompassed the counterculture, and reanalyzed the runaway evidence I already had. It became clear that the social construction of the “runaway youth problem” was intrinsically linked the larger counterculture movement in the United States.

Similarly, in the Newsie Strike study, I started by describing the events reported in dozens of daily newspapers. However, I came to realize that some publishers stood to gain, more or less, from the strike. So I returned to the descriptive data keeping in mind the publishers’ agendas and their interpersonal relationships. In doing so a different and more complicated picture emerged about the intense competition among Pulitzer, Hearst, and another publisher named Bennett. Bennett stood to gain significantly from the public’s boycott of Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s papers. Bennett fanned the flames in his own newspaper by featuring numerous, and prominent, articles about the plight of the newsboys at the hands of Pulitzer and Hearst. His differential coverage of the strike, when compared with other editors, only became evident when my analysis went beyond describing the events of the strike and instead focused on the competition between, and among, rival owners.

Again notice that in both of my examples, it was necessary to start with a simple description about what was going on. However, the analysis didn’t stop there. The findings got more interesting—and hopefully more significant—as I linked the descriptions to larger cultural or political forces at play.

Capitalizing on happy accidents and recognizing unexpected gifts. My fifth offering is less a technique than a bit of advice and that requires some courage of conviction. I call this “technique” *capitalizing on the happy accident or recognizing unexpected gifts*. In the Recipe book manuscript, I worked primarily with the handwritten recipes. However, tucked in the book, or pinned to its pages, were additional sheets of paper, often an advertisement for a food product including recipes for using it. Instead of ignoring these extra artifacts, I traced all the information I could find about each and every advertisement. This took me on a journey of looking at the history of companies, manufacturers, and products.

In the Metalogue article, I originally submitted a manuscript focusing on peer review comments I had received in the past. However, during the review process, of course, I received additional, new, peer review comments. Among other things these comments served as *in vivo* examples of the process. So, with the permission of the editors, Roy Ruckdeschel and Ian Shaw, and the kindness of the reviewers themselves, Stanley Witkin and Nigel Parton, I incorporated the chorus of their comments into re-writing the manuscript under review. This changed the major focus of my article from the “peer reviewer process” to the discussion among reviewers, editors, and authors. The article took shape around capitalizing on

the “unexpected gift” offered by the reviewers and the editors. However, it also required flexibility and adaptation on my part.

Linking things that might not seem obviously related. One of the joys of qualitative inquiry is that it occasionally benefits from the unusual pairing of different kinds of ideas and sources. I call this technique—which should probably be used carefully and judiciously—*linking things that might not seem obviously related*. For these examples, I return to the Recipe book and *What remains*, my autoethnographic account. In the Recipe book, among the additional items tucked into the book, was a scrap of newspaper that had been crudely ripped out of a daily paper from the era. It contained a list of classified advertisements for medical doctors who specialized in “female complaints.” Rather than discount the advertisement as something outside the scope of my recipe investigation, I followed the trail. It led me into the sexual world of mid-to-late 19th century New York City. The doctors in question offered contraception and abortion services to upper class women. This discovery also led me down a path of learning more about the moral crusaders of the day and the social attitudes of high society. I ultimately sought to link this moral and medical investigation with the rest of the recipe book discussion. I did so by asking: why would I find this advertisement tucked in the pages of a recipe book? We will never have a definitive answer, however, I suggested that if the recipe book owner had wanted to keep this information secret, tucking it into the gendered space of her cookbook made good sense. If my speculation is accurate, it seemed particularly appropriate that the little recipe book had protected her secret for all eternity.

Finally, in my autoethnography, I linked the historical research I was doing on the Children’s Aid Society with events following my father’s death. In this piece, I used the case file of a single CAS client to link it to the process of selling my family home of 40 years and to unearthing family history. To some extent, I tried to *create* the life story of the CAS client from the physical remains of his case file while trying to *preserve* my father’s life story as the physical elements were being dispersed. In addition, I connected narrative features of my father’s life with that of the CAS client and my feelings about them.

This brings me to the end of my musings, but by way of a closing observation for beginning researchers, I suppose I should confess that I rarely, if ever, stick to a single analytical technique from start to finish in my projects. In fact, my past is littered with aborted attempts at qualitative analyses. This kind of work invariably involves evolving, adaptable, iterative, and flexible processes. In my experience, it also takes a great deal of time. Nonetheless, I hope I have convinced young scholars that there may be a danger to stopping prematurely. You might be losing out on the rich and rewarding complexity that qualitative inquiry so often provides and which comes from the additional intellectual labor.

In this issue of QSW

As noted, this issue of *QSW* opens with articles by Jane Gilgun (2015) and Tina K. Sacks (2015). Their articles round out the trio of comments that expands on the

panel discussion about how we move beyond description in qualitative analysis. I hope readers will find both articles as rich and engaging as I did. Among other things, they should be very useful in teaching qualitative methods courses or mentoring young scholars who are beginning to wrestle with qualitative inquiry and analysis.

Interestingly, the articles which follow these pieces continue a trajectory of honoring mentoring, teaching, and transmitting intergenerational advice. The first of these by Mel Gray, Kylie Agllias, Leanne Schubert and Jennifer Boddy offers an exciting collection of feminist voices including that of a faculty member supervisor and a trio of doctoral students who individually and collectively examine what it means to actually do feminist research as well as the implications for mentoring and peer relationships during the process. This article offers something to all readers whether you approach it as student or supervisor. This article is followed by a work about teaching, in this case, how to improve the experience of undergraduates in Australia. The article written by the team of Howard, Agllias, Cliff, Dodds and Field reports on how engagement in cooperative research sought to improve the experiences of first year students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. In particular, these efforts focused on a study in which students were recruited to design and implement a project seeking to improve the experiences of entering students from low SES backgrounds. This research team reports both some of the rewards, but also some of the difficulties, associated with this kind of cooperative endeavor.

In the next article, Kennedy Saldanha continues along the path of finding ways to enhance cooperative inquiry in qualitative research. In particular, Saldanha reports on a method of capturing narratives called "scribing" in his work with homeless youth receiving special education services. Scribing is a particularly useful method of collecting data when working with vulnerable youth; the researcher can give the participants better control over the information gathered. Or, as Saldanha notes, they are better able to retain narrative power.

The final article in this issue of *QSW* comes from Korea. A team of researchers, three based in Korea and one in the United States conducted a photovoice project with a group of adolescent and young adult North Korean refugees who had resettled in South Korea. The study concerns itself with social exclusion and psychosocial adjustment. I personally have a fondness for photovoice projects and the powerful images that inevitably accompany them. In this article, the images produced called, *No geese in the sky*, *Lost green*, *River of memory* and *The road* are exemplars for this kind methodology and I found them to be beautiful, transcendent, and powerfully evocative.

I would like to draw special attention to the book review essays in this issue. Our book review editor, Deborah Gioia opens with her usual humility and grace writing a brief introduction on *Gifts*. Her piece is followed by a really exceptional extended book review essay spear-headed by Deborah Svoboda and Lisa Fedina, but which also weaves together the thoughtful comments of four social work practitioners. Together the scholars and practitioners read and reflected on a book by

Lesley Lang and Cathy Humphreys with Kate Cavanagh entitled, *Social work and Domestic Violence: Developing critical and reflective practice* (Lang et al., 2013). In my tenure as co-editor of *QSW*, this is the first time reflections directly from social work practitioners have been folded into a book review essay. I appreciate the time the social workers took to engage with this project and hope that we can use this review as a model for similar future partnerships.

Finally, as is our annual habit at the end of the year, we turn a spotlight on our extraordinary referees and reviewers who have given liberally of their time, energy and intellectual talents in order to provide peer review feedback to our submitting authors. Without their commitment and generosity we simply could not bring you these six issues of *QSW* each year. You will find their names at the end of this issue as our small gesture of tribute. I also want to take a second to offer a special word of thanks to our administrative assistant, Samantha McDermott. Sam has the unenviable job of keeping the editors on track as well as untangling technical glitches, solving internal problems, and serving as a public good-will ambassador with our authors. She is the glue that holds the operation together and we couldn't be more grateful that she continues on our team.

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