

Review: Áine Humble & M. Elise Radina (Eds.) (2019). How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens: Moving Beyond "Themes Emerged"

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Review:

Kelly O'Neil

Áine Humble & M. Elise Radina (Eds.) (2019). How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens: Moving Beyond "Themes Emerged". New York: Routledge; 238 pages; ISBN 978-1-138-04467-8 (pbk); \$42.36

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Abstract: In this article I offer a review of HUMBLE and RADINA's 2019 book, "How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens: Moving Beyond 'Themes Emerged'," a collection of commentaries from qualitative researchers discussing their approaches to data analysis. The editors describe the goal of this work as an attempt to lift the veil on research practices typically shrouded by space limitations in academic publications. Considered from the perspective of a new researcher, I examine the ways in which this book may support emerging scholars in their qualitative research work.

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1. Introduction

There is an anecdote I recall hearing in which a group of academics had been grappling unsuccessfully for a prolonged period of time with some obscure question of interpretation. In exasperation, one of them finally called out to the room, "Does anyone here know Latin, by chance?" to which, after a brief pause, one deadpan voice replied, "I know Latin. But it certainly isn't by chance." That story came to mind while reading "How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens: Moving Beyond 'Themes Emerged'," a fascinating exploration of the diverse and complex researcher processes hidden behind the "themes emerged" trope embedded in academic language (HUMBLE & RADINA, p.xxvii). [1]

The editors of this book (both academics and qualitative researchers themselves) state their purpose is to reveal the complexities of qualitative data analysis rendered largely invisible by space limitations in academic publications. In seeking to make these processes more transparent, the editors aim to insert the reader "in the moment with the researchers getting their own hands vicariously dirty" (HUMBLE & RADINA, p.xxiv). I had the good fortune as a new researcher to read this book while working on my master's thesis and encountering my own lack of clarity about what, precisely, one *does* in data analysis. (Full disclosure: At the time this book was released, I was a master's student in the department where Áine HUMBLE teaches, but was never her student, and receive no benefit from her for writing this review). I found this resource, which provides insight into fellow researchers as much as their research processes, to be tremendously useful. [2]

In this review, I provide a brief description of the book's structure and discuss some ways in which the editors achieve their goal of placing the reader "in the room with the researcher" (p.xxvii). I supply examples of how the featured commentaries from a range of qualitative researchers establish a close proximity to their work. And I discuss how the established sense of closeness to the researcher—through accounts of their analytical processes, movement through decision points, and struggles with doubts—together form a body of work that is particularly valuable to new researchers. [3]

2. Book Structure: Stories and Dialogues

This book looks closely at how qualitative social science researchers involved in family issues conduct data analysis within a broad range of methodologies spanning auto-ethnography, arts-based practice, indigenous, phenomenological, and content analyses, among other approaches. The editors invited contributing researchers to offer insights into their own practices with a focus on sharing stories unlikely to make it to print in academic journals. Researchers with varying degrees of experience representing large and small research projects responded with absorbing commentaries on some processes, challenges, and insights related to their work. [4]

"Stories," the first of two sections in this book, contains 13 chapters exploring unpublished details about researcher processes related to recently published qualitative research work. This section is followed by "Dialogues," four short chapters containing conversations among small groups of contributing researchers about some key themes to arise in the first section. A supplemental *eResource* provides actual examples of figures, charts, notes, and other tools used by the researchers in their analyses. [5]

3. Being in the Room With the Researcher

The editors' focus on placing the reader in close proximity to the researcher provides extraordinary insight into typically hidden aspects of social science research—most notably, the researcher's humanity. The human connection is an abiding feature, and it is what makes the book an especially valuable resource for new researchers. Being exposed to more experienced colleagues' perspectives and challenges; entering into their reflections on the meaning of their work; and feeling their deep sense of responsibility towards their participants is instructive in a way that more typical "how-to" texts on qualitative research can ever be. For the new researcher, this book provides a kind of virtual mentoring that instructs, encourages, and inspires the reader. [6]

The book leaps into the personal realm of the researcher in the opening chapter, with Marcus B. WEAVER-HIGHTOWER's powerful commentary on his auto-ethnographic research documenting the stillbirth of his infant daughter. His startling question, "How do I get my readers to understand another way of being human?" (p.3) signals to those more accustomed to a dispassionate researcher voice that unfamiliar terrain lays ahead. A sense of the serious ethical considerations involved in conducting human research is impressed upon the reader through VESELY and colleagues' discussions about the need for "cultural humility" in working with participants (p.113) and ROY, HART and GOLOJUCH's framing of participant stories as "sacred ground" demanding something greater than "drive-by research" (p.98). In describing her wish to collect data from Inuit participants in a way that was "congruent with Indigenous storytelling traditions," Gwen Katheryn HEALEY reported, "I listened with an open heart and an open mind, as is expected in Inuit culture" (p.40). Some visuals contained in the book's *eResource* further entrench the reader's impression of the researcher as, first and foremost, a human being: notably, HEALEY's beaming photograph displaying her beautiful beadwork from a lived-in kitchen (Figure 3.4); and WEAVER-HIGHTOWER's paradoxically heart-wrenching comic describing the death of his child (Figure 1.3). [7]

3.1 Insight into researcher doubts, uncertainty

Another entirely human perspective to surface in researcher accounts is the reported struggle with doubts and uncertainties arising during data analysis. Evonne MILLER speaks frankly about her initial professional misgivings in presenting a research poem; H. Daniel CASTELLANOS describes his efforts to work through a stage of analysis that felt "overwhelmingly repetitive, chaotic, and onerous" (p.203). SPEIRS, VESELY and ROY talk about wrestling with how best to manage massive amounts of data; ROSENBLATT and WIELING (p.54) describe their approaches to working through "sticky coding issue(s)." Making these challenges transparent is enormously helpful, particularly to new researchers who may be encountering similar problems for the first time, and who lack the perspective and expertise of their more experienced counterparts. [8]

3.2 Going deeper with reflexivity

Some researchers dive deeply into what it means to be reflexive in their work, and effectively model their practices for other researchers by offering personal, poignant examples of how their lived experiences shape, or are shaped by, the work they do. In her chapter co-written with Karen ROBERTO, Katherine ALLEN's sharing that the death of her mother from cancer was an influencing factor in her research creates a personal link that normalizes researcher reflexivity. ROY, HART and GOLOJUCH's openness in discussing the personal discomfort and confusion sometimes generated by their work helps frame the experience as a natural part of the process for researchers wishing to bring self-awareness to their work. [9]

4. Working With the Data

4.1 When data analysis actually happens

Researchers' discussions about their communication processes raised the useful question of when data analysis actually takes place, an issue that arose for me early in my own thesis research. Contributors alternatively describe their understanding of where this process actually begins: starting with data collection as VESELY and associates or ZVONKOVIC and SWENSON suggest, or even earlier (as ALLEN and ROBERTO; CASTELLANOS or ROSENBLATT and WIELING describe) with the development of the research questions, in the adoption of a theoretical framework, or when conducting the literature review. ROSENBLATT and WIELING shared their views on how analysis is an ongoing process through data and writing up results, which JAMISON notes can highlight logic gaps or unsupported findings. ZVONKOVIC and SWENSON make the interesting observation that data analysis may continue after researcher analysis is complete through feedback provided at conferences or from colleagues. These discussions help ground the new researcher's conceptual understanding of the iterative nature of analysis in actual practice. [10]

4.2 Coding, memoing, and use of field notes

The editors are clear in their assertion that this book is not designed to provide a "how-to" guide to data analysis. That being said, researchers offer some helpful insights into their coding processes, including detailed rationales for specific approaches taken, such as ROY, HART and GOLOJUCH's strategic use of coding partners from diverse backgrounds to support reflexivity and interpretive reliability, and ROSENBLATT and WIELING's discussion about the decisions behind their division of coding work between two researchers. ALLEN and ROBERTO share their views on the importance of remaining close to the data during data analysis, offering strategies such as using participants' words to indicate codes. Other researchers discuss specifics about how they incorporate field notes into data analysis; for example, KEMP, BALL and PERKINS' distribution of field notes for discussion during team meetings and SPEIRS, VESELY and ROY's use of field notes to compile participant profile summaries. I found the field notes discussion useful, having struggled with strategies for incorporating this material as a novice researcher. Multiple interesting permutations of memo use surfaced in the book, including its function as a communication mechanism within researcher teams (KEMP, BALL & PERKINS; ROY, HART & GOLOJUCH) or to capture tentative theorizing (JAMISON). [11]

4.3 Integrating theory with practice

As an evolving researcher concerned with integrating theory and practice, I found contributors' discussions about their theoretical perspectives helpful, particularly those in which researchers make explicit theoretical linkages to their analyses (JAMISON; KEMP, BALL & PERKINS). Researcher integration of theory and practice is the subject of detailed discussion by Andrea DOUCET in her evolving understanding of the listening guide. The in-depth description of a "profound ontological shift" in her thinking (p.86) that impacted her analytical approach was helpful in illustrating how theoretical understandings may be specifically linked to analytical processes and described meaningfully to readers. Feminist researchers Katherine ALLEN and Karen ROBERTO make connections to their theoretical foundations in their discussion of reflexivity and expressed wish to conduct research founded on equity, trust, and power sharing. This transparency illustrates for the new researcher how making explicit links to theoretical frameworks may deepen an understanding of research work. [12]

4.4 Managing data

This book offers interesting commentary about how diverse researchers manage sometimes copious amounts of data, providing engaging details about others' quotidian or daunting processes—WEAVER-HIGHTOWER's electronic "junk drawer" (p.7); CASTELLANOS' gradual working through of a potentially "terrifying" number of codes (p.198). SPEIRS, VESELY and ROY's account of being "lost in the data" (p.128) is particularly useful for the new researcher in describing strategies involved in moving past being overwhelmed in managing a large amount of data. Their detailed description of chunking data through the

development of summary documents more directly linked to their research questions provides a helpful view of the kinds of decision points involved in reaching a workable dataset; so too does ZVONKOVIC and SWENSON's generation of "face sheets" to encapsulate complex family profiles (p.176). [13]

Researcher discussions about the use of software in data analysis were also instructive in terms of the range of products used in analysis, and a reported tendency to go outside the software to work in programs like Word or Excel to better manage specific work at hand (ROY, HART & GOLOJUCH; SPEIRS, VESELY & ROY). From these discussions, new researchers gain a first-hand view of how more experienced colleagues incorporate innovation and flexibility in their use of software, which offers less experienced peers encouragement to think outside the box in working with available technology. [14]

4.5 A word about the eResource

Researchers' discussions about data management were enhanced through provision of data display samples used to support analyses; multiple examples are provided in the book's *eResource*. The editors requested screenshots, notes, or other images depicting contributors' analytical processes for inclusion in the *eResource*, which they felt would further enhance the reader's sense of being in the room with the researcher. This visual resource indeed reinforces the unique sense of immediacy and intimacy with the researchers by granting entry into both the physical and metaphorical personal spaces of contributors (HEALEY's kitchen and WEAVER-HIGHTOWER's comic book as noted previously; researchers' handwritten notations (Figures 5.4, 6.1, 6.2), and whiteboard explorations (Figures 7.3, 7.4, 8.1, 8.2). In addition to providing insight into contributors' individuality and approaches to analysis, the *eResource* contains SPEIRS, VESELY and ROY's beautifully concise graphical representation of the progression from open to axial coding which I wish I had seen before beginning data analysis for my thesis. This graphic could be adapted to provide a useful model for classroom instruction or for use by qualitative researchers (Figure 9.4). [15]

4.6 Member checking in the real world

Contributors' commentary on how member checking actually takes place in practice acknowledges the real world challenges researchers may encounter in seeking respondent validation. The observations provide useful perspectives for new researchers who may be contending with the complexities attached to research involving living, breathing humans. It is helpful to consider Evonne MILLER's pragmatic approach in accepting there may be factors beyond the researcher's control that impede respondent validation. It is also useful to reflect on how experienced researchers may conceptualize volatility and uncertainty in working with participants as all in a day's work, as ROY, HART and GOLOJUCH describe. As a doctoral student interested in doing community action research, I was excited to read VESELY and colleagues' discussion of incorporating participatory coding practices to support deeper participant engagement in the

research process, along with their commentary on some of the on-the-ground benefits and challenges in working directly with community. [16]

4.7 Doing data analysis with a critic over the shoulder

It is encouraging to the new researcher, who is acutely aware of the potential critic over the shoulder at every stage of the research process, to recognize that this burden is shared by more experienced peers. Some contributors spoke about an awareness of how others might challenge the "correctness" of their approaches (ALLEN & ROBERTO; ROSENBLATT & WIELING) or talked of the pressures that may be placed on researchers by reviewers to avoid off-the-beaten track methodologies (JAMISON). SPEIRS, VESELY and ROY attribute their initial resistance to reducing an unmanageable sample size to internalized teachings that a large sample is always preferable. These perspectives help reinforce in the new researcher's mind that producing accurate and justifiable research may sometimes involve pushing the boundaries of accepted norms. [17]

5. Other Benefits of this Book

Two final points should be mentioned in terms of the inherent value of this book. Firstly, the collected insights introduce some less familiar methodologies and approaches that engage the reader and attract interest in learning more (MILLER's piece on research poetry; WEAVER-HIGHTOWER's autoethnography, HEALEY's application of indigenous knowledge to narrative analysis, among others). Secondly, the researcher-provided recommended reading is a valuable reference list of qualitative research methodology resources of benefit to new and experienced researchers alike. The editors note the fact that the majority of these works comprises books or book chapters as significant. They suggest this reinforces their point that the limited descriptions of methodologies available in journal articles are inadequate to the job of explaining the complex processes involved in conducting qualitative research. [18]

6. Some Small Recommendations

In anticipating future editions of this book, (which in my view, should become a staple in required reading for introductory qualitative methodology courses) I would make three small suggestions. Firstly, with a new researcher audience in mind, it might be useful to provide a tabular quick reference guide to help readers access discussions of key concepts which may be arising in their own work. For example, chapter links might be provided for scenarios typically encountered in practice such as "working in teams" or "use of memos." Bearing in mind that this book is not designed to be a "how-to" guide, there is still a lot of helpful on-the-ground information here that would be valuable to access by researchers tackling different facets of research in real time. Secondly, while it may be more of a reflection on the reviewer than the book, it took some searching to locate the link to the *eResource*. Perhaps listing this resource in the table of contents along with the chapters could be useful. And thirdly, after being deeply immersed in researcher accounts spanning more than 200 pages, the book feels like it comes

to a rather abrupt end after the final dialogue chapter. This sense may be a testament to the effectiveness of this book in creating for the reader an intensely relational space with researchers that is difficult to relinquish. A brief afterword from the editors, providing a rear-view perspective on the researcher contributions in relation to the book's stated goals might help transition the reader more smoothly away from the work. [19]

7. Conclusion

The editors of this book succeed in their goal of making qualitative data analysis processes more transparent in a way that is compelling, engaging, and highly readable. From the perspective of a new researcher, the insight this book provides into the inner workings of more experienced academics is as valuable as the descriptions of their methodological processes. Providing access to more established colleagues' research practices establishes a relationship with new researchers in ways that more typical texts on qualitative methodologies cannot. This book helps answer the question of how qualitative data analysis happens by providing lived examples of human grappings with the complex array of methodological, theoretical, ethical, and practical considerations which together constitute qualitative research. In so doing, this book highlights the "enormously laborious" (KEMP, BALL & PERKINS, p.172), sometimes "difficult, painful, and messy" (HUMBLE & RADINA, p.xxviii) processes at work behind the façade of "themes emerged." [20]

Author

Kelly O'NEIL is a doctoral student in educational studies at St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. Her research interests include empowerment of older women and community engagement, housing, and poverty. Her proposed doctoral work is to conduct critical action research supporting older women in becoming change agents through development of a community radio/podcast initiative.

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