

## A Collaborative-Comparative Approach to Learning Qualitative Data Analysis

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**ABSTRACT.** The literature on qualitative research offers the novice two strategies for learning analysis: (1) "trust" that you will "somehow" make sense out of qualitative material, or (2) follow a predetermined set of analytic steps and stages. A problem with the first approach is that it does not take into account the wide variety of qualitative analysis projects researchers undertake or differences in how individuals approach the interpretation of qualitative material. A problem with the second approach is that it does not maximize the learning potential possible from making explicit and sharpening the learner's own interpretive framework. In this paper we describe a third alternative: a collaborative-comparative approach to analyzing qualitative materials. This approach uses a group-based model of learning and explicitly capitalizes upon differences in group member interpretive styles to enhance learning qualitative methods of research. [Article copies available from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworth.com](mailto:getinfo@haworth.com)]

### INTRODUCTION

Analyzing qualitative data is often a lonely (Reinharz, 1979) and emotionally charged (Wax, 1971) process. Novice researchers may

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feel both fear and trepidation as they approach the task of turning their raw data into a research product that is both understandable and defensible. Some texts suggest that a key to successful analysis of themes<sup>1</sup> in qualitative data is the researcher's capacity to think in terms of "concepts," "context," "relationships," and "pattern," and to engage in sound deductive and inductive reasoning (for example, see Glaser, 1992; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lofland, 1971). The assumption is apparently that the researcher will draw on his or her own tacit knowledge and skills to develop coding and analysis schemes. At the same time, this individualized process is expected to result in interpretation and analysis that is "trustworthy" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 294). Can anything so individualized also be systematic and yield credible interpretations of unstructured, qualitative data? And perhaps more importantly, can the novice expect to receive any guidance in this process?

As participants in a social work seminar on qualitative research, these questions were of more than academic interest to us. In our search for "guidance," we encountered few texts or articles—within or beyond the social work literature—that explicitly addressed the topic of how to facilitate the student's process of learning qualitative data analysis. Indeed, if data analysis is the least discussed aspect of qualitative methodology (Miles and Huberman, 1984), how to teach and learn analysis is practically a nontopic in the literature. Moreover, we discovered that the few texts that do address the issue in some way seemed to offer either too little or too much advice. Most appear to err on the side of offering too little guidance, assuming that the student will "somehow" work out a comfortable and appropriate method of coding and analysis (e.g., see Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Glaser, 1978; Merriam and Simpson, 1984; Patton, 1980). Less frequently, qualitative analysis texts err on the side of offering overly prescriptive advice (e.g., Strauss and Corbin, 1990). A problem with overly prescriptive approaches, on one hand, is that they do not take into account the diversity of analysis projects or differences in how individuals approach/construct meaning from qualitative accounts. For example, texts that suggest coding should always proceed on a line-by-line basis—or that data can always be coded in terms of causes, intervening conditions, context and consequences—are not appropriate to every cognitive style and every qualitative

analysis project (see Glaser, 1992). The problem with the more typical, overly general approaches, on the other hand, is that they do not maximize the learning potential possible from making explicit and sharpening the researcher's own interpretive framework.

In this paper, we describe a third approach to learning qualitative analysis, developed largely as a result of our dissatisfaction with these existing options. We refer to our approach as "collaborative" because it employs a group- rather than an individual-based approach to learning. We characterize it as "comparative" because it emphasizes examining differences in group member learning styles and cognitive frameworks as a method for teaching and learning qualitative data analysis. We explain how we developed this alternative learning approach, describe its format and key learning processes, and share our insights into its strengths and limitations. We believe that our approach can offer some guidance to other social work educators and students (as well as colleagues in other fields) who wish to understand better and to enhance the process of learning how to analyze qualitative data. Such guidance is extremely timely, given the increased priority placed on teaching qualitative research methods in social work.<sup>2</sup>

## THE COLLABORATIVE-COMPARATIVE CODING PROCESS

### Overview and Rationale

The collaborative-comparative approach to learning qualitative data analysis described here was developed by participants in a qualitative research seminar at the University of Washington's School of Social Work. Participants included seven Ph.D. students in social work, social psychology, and education. The seminar met once a week for 2.75 hours, and devoted a little over one third of the academic quarter (four weeks) to the subject of data analysis. In deciding how to structure these four weeks, we made three decisions that we believe set the parameters of our learning process. The group's first decision was to opt for a "depth" over "breadth" experience. Two participants (including the instructor) had previously taken introductory courses in qualitative analysis in which

the basic format was to spend a brief time analyzing a number of transcripts and/or segments of qualitative data. In this format, participants take turns sharing a segment of material from their own research projects, and receive advice and feedback from the instructor and fellow students. This approach gives each person direct assistance with projects and exposes participants to a range of types of qualitative data. However, it does not readily lend itself to in-depth analysis of any one segment of data. As the instructor noted, some of the more interesting—and difficult—problems occur once the analyst proceeds beyond the first few passes at coding. We thus opted instead to practice all coding and analysis on a single transcript, staying with one data segment for the entire four weeks. Although sacrificing assistance with individual student projects and the exposure to different transcripts, we reasoned that this strategy would increase our chances of experiencing a fuller range of coding and analysis problems and solutions. The limited time available did not allow us to move from the systematic "taking apart" of data to the ultimate goal of a producing a "larger, consolidated picture" (Tesch, 1990: 97). However, we were each successful at identifying sets of key data categories and themes and at least some ways in which these appeared to be connected.

Our second major decision was to reflect conscientiously upon and share how we were approaching the work and what we were accomplishing as we went along. Each participant agreed to come to each seminar session prepared to recount in detail how she or he proceeded through the coding assignment for that week and to share any products or "artifacts" from the process—for example, memos, charts, graphs, codes, and notes and "scribbles" on the transcript itself. We agreed to keep track of our own emotional and cognitive reactions/responses to "roadblocks," "dead ends," conundrums and puzzles as we went along.

Our third and perhaps most critical decision was to agree to serve as "peer reviewers," supporters and "plausibility checks" for each other's work. We agreed that, during the sessions themselves, we would actively assess each other's work—for example, ask questions, seek clarity about the reasons and logic behind key coding decisions, and offer suggestions for next steps where appropriate. This process of actively assessing another's process of qualitative

data analysis is perhaps best captured by Lincoln and Guba's concept of peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 308). As the authors suggest, peer debriefing can serve multiple purposes. Two in particular seemed important to us: (1) peer debriefing can help keep the researcher "honest," helping him or her to become more fully aware of implicit assumptions, weaknesses in logic, points where added clarity are needed, and so forth; and (2) it can provide the researcher with an opportunity for structured support and an opportunity to clear the mind "of emotions and feelings that may be clouding good judgment or preventing emergence of sensible next steps" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 308). Moreover, because in this instance all participants would be developing their own data analysis schemes for the same data, we believed that seminar members would be in a particularly good position to judge the "plausibility" of any particular scheme. We thus agreed to compare and contrast the interpretive framework developed by a participant to those developed by others in the group, as a kind of triangulated approach to assessing scheme credibility. The aim here was most definitely not to urge a convergence of methods or frameworks, but rather to ask, "are our various frameworks jointly plausible? Are there points of out-and-out contradiction?"

The reader will no doubt reflect that there are inherent dangers as well as advantages in involving peers in the analysis process (e.g., see Glaser, 1978: 23, 33-34; Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 308). We discuss these more fully in the closing section of this paper. Suffice to note at this point that we did not view sharing experiences with the group as a replacement for solitary reflection or "doing the work." Nor did we expect or hope that peer support would prevent feelings of frustration, "drawing blanks" or feeling stuck. Rather, we hoped that peer critique and conscious reflection of our own and others' interpretive frameworks and processes would provide insight into our own analytic strengths, blindspots and areas of weakness. We hoped this would help us to become more reflective and conscientious data analysts.

#### *Selection of Transcript and Delineation of Analysis Task*

The transcript used in the seminar was excerpted from an interview with an African-American mother living in a high-rise public

housing project in a large midwestern city. The interview was conducted by a doctoral student in social work from a large university in that city (a White male), as part of an intensive pilot study of everyday family life in high violence urban neighborhoods. The field guide for this pilot study had been developed by the instructor, who was also the principal designer of the pilot study and continues to supervise the data analysis. In the particular interview segment selected for use, the mother is asked to describe how she goes about accomplishing daily tasks (such as cashing welfare checks, grocery shopping, and doing laundry) and how family members carry out a range of daily activities—e.g., how children typically go to and from school and where and with whom they typically play. The instructor gave seminar participants a one page description of the neighborhood context and the study's overall aims. The pilot study is guided by several general study questions. In order to prevent undue suasion over our own analyses, however, we decided not to begin with these. Rather, participants agreed to approach analysis of the transcript with a fresh eye, asking, "What is going on here? What themes or categories capture these data?" and, to the extent possible, "How do themes or categories come together—what "patterns" are discernible in these data?" In general, our initial analytic strategy falls into the category of what Tesch calls the "discovery of regularities" in qualitative data (Tesch, 1990: 78).

At the outset, we explicitly noted several limitations associated with choosing this transcript. For example, except for the instructor, seminar participants had extremely limited knowledge of the field and interview setting and study design within which the segment is embedded. This made judgment of bias/credibility of the segment itself extremely difficult. Moreover, since the interviewer was not part of the seminar, seeking additional data or clarity into the interview and its context was effectively precluded. The participants' discomfort was heightened by the general sense that, within the segment analyzed, the interviewer sometimes appeared to disrupt rather than support the interviewee's train of thought and did not always probe important themes and issues raised by her. As two participants noted:

The interviewer is not absent from this process. In the class exercise, I first had to struggle with the interviewer's framework and my feeling the interviewer did not catch the participant's meaning or elaborate on important concepts . . . (Graham, undated: 1)

These questions will never lead to a richer understanding of these lives if the questions are not asked in a manner that encourages lots of explanation from the interviewees, and they are not followed by appropriate probes from the interviewer. (Smith, undated: 1)

Despite these limitations, however, seminar participants judged that the interview sufficiently captured the interviewee's story and permitted her to express her own thoughts and emotions in her own words, and that a "third party" analysis of the segment was possible. As the two participants quoted above ultimately concluded:

Engaged in a participatory process, [the interviewee] is willing to make sense of the world for the interviewer and to lay out clearly the basic foundations of her life. (Graham, undated: 1)

After analyzing parts of this one interview, I think that the interview . . . allow[s] the interviewees to convey their experiences in meaningful ways. (Smith, undated: 1)

### *Format of Seminar Sessions*

In preparation for each seminar session, participants agreed to devote concerted time and effort to individual coding and analysis of the transcript. Participants typically spent between three and five hours per week on this individual work. In preparation for sharing the week's experience with the larger group, some participants recorded process memos and notes as they proceeded through the week's work. Each participant brought the manifest results of his/her week's coding attempts to the session. These ranged from session to session and participant to participant. Sometimes, participants brought extensive memos, notes, charts and graphics; at other times, results consisted only of sparse notes recorded on the transcript itself.

The seminar sessions themselves were conducted in round robin fashion. The instructor asked each participant to recount the week's work, retracing the analysis process and the work accomplished during the period. This individual debriefing began with the recounting of process. The instructor asked the participant to "retrace the analysis process"—that is, to describe, in detail, how he or she approached the analysis task that week. The participant recounted the week in his or her own words, with the instructor and other participants asking for clarification and probing for details ("So what did you do next?" "How did that work out for you?"). The group's role in the individual debriefing process might best be described as that of "midwife" or "coach." Group members saw their task as helping the participant to verbally recount process details, particularly those that reflected the participant's approach to conceptualization and problem solving. Thus, they probed for details regarding the approach to analyzing transcripts first attempted, where and when in the coding process the participant "got stuck" or hit roadblocks, what she did, thought, or felt at these points, where she attempted different approaches, how she recorded results of analysis, and so forth. During the individual debriefing process, the instructor sketched the participant's "analytic process" on the board in form of rough flow chart. She also recorded on the board any categories, themes, concepts and coding schemata resulting from process. At the same time, the participant shared with the group any "artifacts" of the week's coding sessions.

For the first few rounds of this individual debriefing, the group typically engaged in a brief discussion and summary of each participant's process and results. However, as additional rounds continued, our discussion generally grew increasingly lively as we began to compare and contrast our different processes and coding products. Although we followed no set format for these discussions, our dialogue consistently took a comparative turn, and tended to gravitate towards three themes: (1) the similarities across and differences between how seminar participants approached task of interpretation; (2) the similarities and differences in analytic categories and coding schemes devised by the different participants; and (3) the plausibility of these schemes. Before turning to these, however, we

note one very brief, unsuccessful, but instructive, transgression from the seminar format just described.

#### *An Attempt to Use Strauss and Corbin's Framework for Open Coding*

Prior to our first session, we had agreed to incorporate an often-used qualitative research text, Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research*, into our process. We were aware from the outset that the book holds to some problematic assumptions. Most troubling to us, for example, was the authors' singular focus on the "paradigm model," which emphasizes analyzing data in terms of causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, and consequences (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 99). We understood that this framework simply does not apply to all qualitative projects.<sup>3,4</sup> However, some of us thought the book might offer helpful guidance to the novice on how to begin coding and how to move from initial to advanced stages of data analysis. We therefore agreed to use the Strauss and Corbin book as a general guide for getting started.

Immediately, however, we encountered difficulties. At our first debriefing session, participants noted a number of problems they experienced in trying to follow the authors' advice for "getting started." For example, in their chapter on initial or open coding, Strauss and Corbin suggest that one develops a category "first in terms of its properties (attributes or characteristics)," which "can then be dimensionalized" (i.e., located along a continuum). The authors provide the following example of "watching" as a category (1990: 72):

Category	Properties	Dimensional Range (applied to each incident)
"watching"	frequency	often _____ never
	extent	more _____ less
	intensity	high _____ low
	duration	long _____ short

We agreed that creating categories is a critical part of coding themes in qualitative data. However, most participants found that the authors' suggestion for how to go about developing categories did not facilitate coding and, in many ways, seemed to hinder it. In fact, only one participant managed to employ the coding framework developed by Strauss and Corbin; and she admitted that this application required "stretching" and "torquing" the case material. All other participants admitted abandoning the text's advice early in the first week. Likewise, participants felt that the authors' advice to approach the transcript by asking "who, when, where, what, how, how much and why" was overly prescriptive, too "microscopic," and generally unhelpful. While most found the authors' suggestion to begin coding by using a "line-by-line approach" to be useful, a few of us found this an impossible strategy. One participant in particular noted that going line-by-line was "totally frustrating" and resulted in his "producing absolutely nothing" (Uehara, instructor's class notes, 1993). As another participant recalled later:

My initial reaction to receiving over 40 pages of typed transcript to code . . . was a bit of anxiety mixed with excitement over what might emerge from the data. I took comfort in the knowledge that Corbin and Strauss would guide me through the process. However, actual attempts at following the procedures described in their book only produced more insecurity. Where were these categories supposed to come from? . . . (Morelli, 1994: 1)

At the beginning of our first session, we decided to abandon any further attempts to follow the Strauss and Corbin model.

Our entire four weeks consisted of intensive individual work and group participation. The first three sessions were devoted to sharing progress on transcript coding and category/theme development. By the beginning of the fourth week, however, participants felt sufficiently steeped in the analysis of the transcript to attempt an initial summary of work to date. We shared these attempts at qualitative summary at the fourth and last class session. This session was particularly exciting, since we were able to see the systematic coding and analysis on which each participant's summary was based.

Tables, graphs and charts developed to accompany these summaries captured well the fruits of the four weeks' work.

The seminar had been a profoundly exciting and fruitful experience for all participants. We gathered informally several times after the seminar to discuss what we had gained from the experience and why it seemed to have such potency. In the following section, we summarize our reflections on the process.

## REFLECTIONS ON OUR PROCESS

### *Insights into the Process of Qualitative Data Analysis*

*Appreciation of differences in interpretive frameworks and styles.* First and foremost, the collaborative-comparative format helped us to gain an experience-based appreciation for just how different people's frameworks and interpretive processes can be. Within our small group of eight, we witnessed a wide range of cognitive styles and approaches to coding. For example, many of us proceeded on a "parts-to-whole" basis, making sense of and creating categories as we went through the transcript, line-by-line. Some moved back and forth between an orientation towards "parts" and "whole." Still others proceeded on a "whole-to-parts" basis, only "making sense" of the data as a "gestalt" and generating categories once the whole was grasped. At this extreme, one participant was literally unable to make sense of the transcript or to generate even preliminary categories for three continuous weeks. Finally, during the third week of analysis, Rick came to "grasp the meaning of the data as a whole" and generated an elegant coding scheme based on three interrelated themes or categories. Unlike most of us, Rick did not consciously pass through an intermediate phase in which a plethora of categories is generated, then "ordered," and finally relations among them ("patterns in the data") discerned. Moreover, Rick's process did not appear to be a matter of choice or preference, but the only way he could imagine accomplishing the task.

Some of us thought and expressed ourselves most comfortably in words, others came to understand the transcript through a process of "visualization," while others moved between the visual and lin-

guistic. Thus Robin's "artifacts" were mostly organized around a qualitative presentation of concepts and their relationships, while Paula produced a series of graphics depicting actors, key ideas and relations in spatial, color-coded terms. Moreover, how we approached and interpreted the same data—what we saw as salient, what we defined as "figure" and "ground" in the transcript—differed considerably from person to person. For example, all seminar participants included in their analyses reference to a tragic incident recounted by "Cynthia" (the interviewee) in which "Sam," a 20 year old friend is "gunned down" and "stomped on" in an act of "revenge." Each participant gave somewhat different meaning to the incident. To illustrate this, we describe how the significance of the incident was constructed by Paula, Lisa, and Robin.

Robin organized her preliminary analysis around four types of "everyday violence" ("killings/beatings," "economic," "threats to safety," and "environmental"), providing several specific examples of each violent type. She interpreted the shooting/stomping incident as a "central event" ("death") under the first violence type, "killings/beatings"; and analyzed it in terms of the Strauss and Corbin paradigm—i.e., causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences. The segment of Robin's summary table, presented in Figure 1, illustrates her interpretation.

Lisa also organized her preliminary analysis around occurrences of violence. In contrast to Robin, however, Lisa defined such occurrences to be only those involving interpersonal violence ("friend killed," "pregnant teen killed," "8 year old girl beaten up," "man forced to jump from 4th floor window"). Personal and interpersonal characteristics of the victim ("who was responsible for act?" "[victim's] relation to Cynthia," "age of person") also play a much larger role in Lisa's framework than in Robin's (see Figures 1 and 2). Under Lisa's framework, the incident is analyzed in the column titled, "Friend Sam Killed." In Lisa's work, the terrible interpersonal reverberations of this incident are illuminated in the subsequent two columns ("Pregnant Teen Killed," "8 Year Old Girl Beaten").

In contrast to both Robin and Lisa, Paula focused her analysis on the various strategies the interviewee uses to try to avoid or mini-

FIGURE 1. Excerpt from Robin's Table

Everyday Violence		
<b>Killings and Beatings:</b>		
Frequency:	Occasionally to several times a week	
Intensity:	Extreme	
Duration:	Per incident, unknown, but seems to last several hours; Over time, ongoing, with one event leading to another	
<b>Causal Conditions</b>	<b>Central Event</b>	<b>Context</b>
drugs	death	revenge
gang affiliation	severe beating	
relation to someone	forced compliance	
perpetrator wants to hurt	(i.e., man jumping out of window)	
<b>Intervening Conditions</b>	<b>Action/Interaction Strategies</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
living in projects	stay away from people associated with past violence (i.e., April)	isolation from neighbors
being poor	dental of knowing too much	fear
past violence	stay away from places where violence has taken place ["Now they said nobody can come down in 140 or 150 or else they gonna get beat up too" (p. 5)]	denial/minimization of victims depersonalization of victims and perpetrators

mize the many risks involved in carrying out everyday tasks in a high violence neighborhood. She interprets the recounted incident as being contextual to these strategies. Paula draws from the narrative segment examples of eight types of everyday tasks (labeled, "desired action" in Figure 3), accompanying strategies reportedly used by Cynthia to avoid/minimize risk in carrying out those tasks, and "important information" which informs her formulation of safety strategies. In Paula's analysis, the incident is conceived of as part of the "important information" that Cynthia considers in formulating strategies ("due to a series of murders . . . bldgs. 140 and 150 are off limits"). A segment of the table Paula presents to summarize these is provided in Figure 3.

FIGURE 2. Excerpt from Lisa's Table

Violent Acts	Friend Sam Killed	Pregnant Teen Killed	8 Year Old Girl Beaten	Man Forced to Jump from 4th Floor Window
Extent	"gurned down" "stomped him in the ground" "torched his car"	"They stomped her baby outta her, she died the next day"	Beat her into a coma	Was given the option to jump from window or die
Reason for Act	Drugs? He was a gangbanger & a drug dealer	Her aunt, April, had Sam killed. Getting back at April.	Kin to April. Getting back at April	Unknown
Who was Responsible for Act	The person who shot him; NOT the person who stepped on him	"I don't know."	"I don't know"	Gangbangers
Relation to Cynthia	"friend"—they spoke to each other Lived in project	Didn't know her	in son's classroom	Lives in same bldg.
Age of Person	approximately 20 years old	teenager	8 years old	21-22 years old
How Long Ago Did Act Occur	2 weeks	10 days	Not clear	2 weeks
Location	Bldg. 150	Not clear	Not clear	Across Playground

In class, we discussed differences in how Robin, Lisa, Paula and others gave meaning to this particular recounted incident. For example, we noted that in Robin's and Lisa's analysis, the shooting/stomping incident is conceived of as a central event ("violence type" and "violence occurrence"), while in Paula's analysis, the incident is treated as contextual to the central event (creating risk-minimizing strategies). On the other hand, we noted that Robin and Paula both saw the location of the shooting/stomping incident as informing Cynthia's subsequent actions ("bldgs. 140 and 150 are off limits" . . . "stay away from . . . 140 or 150"), whereas in Lisa's analysis, "building 150" is treated as mere "location." Differences in how Lisa and Robin conceptualized violent acts/events were also noted. In comparing Robin's analytic approach to her own, Lisa

FIGURE 3. Excerpt from Paula's Table

Examples of Safety Strategies Aimed at Minimizing the Risk of Violence and Crime		
Desired Action	Safety Strategy	Important Information to be Aware of at All Times
1. Banking	boyfriend and children accompany Cynthia; dispersal of money w/children; leave area immediately	Fridays more dangerous many people receive checks
2. Drug store 20 minutes, walking	take a friend	
3. Shopping	when stores open 10 am or Saturdays before 5 pm or Sundays early	police around in early hrs.
4. Extra Shopping	Archie or Sheila may be sent to the store across the street; Sheila goes with friends	due to a series of murders and violent acts between April and Sam's friends, bldgs. 140 and 150 are off limits
5. Playing at Union Park in the summertime	the three oldest children may go with a group of children until 7 pm; youngest three may only go if Cynthia is with them	
6. Archie's activities	can play in front of the bldg. until 8:30 pm, summertime until 9 pm; not sent on errands after 5 pm; may go to football practice	
7. Youngest girls playing outdoors	may play on grassy area, where she can see them; must play with age mates; stay away from adult groups	
8. Safety when trouble breaks out around the bldg.	children will be immediately gathered up; get into apt. and lock door	usually someone will send out a warning of trouble

observed that Robin had taken a "wider view" of violence, going beyond the interpersonal realm to include environmental and economic violence, and had included more "macro" phenomena in her analysis (e.g., "living in a low income neighborhood" as causal/intervening conditions to certain violence types). Robin and Lisa speculated that their disciplinary backgrounds (macro social work/

sociology and psychology, respectively) no doubt shaped the "tacit knowledge" they brought to their analyses. At the same time, the group determined that all three interpretations were closely related to the story and to the transcript, and that none were contradictory or logically inconsistent with one another. And we strongly agreed that knowing each of these three interpretations expanded our own understanding of the multiple meanings and significance of the incident. As recounted by Cynthia and seen in the context of her narrative, the shooting/stomping of Sam was—all at once—just one concrete example of the many types of violence she experienced in the neighborhood, a tragic interpersonal event that had terrible interpersonal reverberations in her network, and a diffuse part of the context/environment that shaped the risk-management strategies she developed to carry out the "everyday tasks" of family living.

For all participants, the structure of the seminar provided the opportunity to reflect on and thus gain greater understanding of individual style. For example, Paula became aware that her own interpretive style involves a high degree of visualization, and moving back and forth from "whole" to "parts" in a nonlinear way. She writes:

... An integral part of my learning process is forming an overall visual conceptualization of the phenomenon in question with fluid linkages to its various component parts. This "picture" results from on-going movement between the component parts and the larger view. I experience this process in a random fashion, utilizing instinctive and intuitive recognition of congruence between the parts, their meaning and functions. It literally starts with pictures in my mind of the situations described, which become translated into diagrams about the smaller component parts that lead to larger conceptualizations, but they don't necessarily happen in that order. At first, it really looks like a tossed green salad, the trick is making sense out of it. Thus, the diagrams [a mnemonic device she uses] merely represent the pictures in my head, and allow for a kind of temporary organization. (Morelli, 1994: 1)



Paula sees her way of making sense of the world as one that developed very early in her life:

I believe this "visualization" process stems from my early experiences with learning things without much reading; e.g., as a child, my grandmother taught me skills such as cleaning fish, cooking and sewing by having me watch carefully, then do it immediately; I also loved looking at pictures in books without reading the words to understand the story. It seemed to me that seeing a picture or observing an action gave a more accurate account of what was happening than reading it, furthermore, it was faster . . . (Morelli, 1994: 1)

*Greater confidence in our ability to judge the "trustworthiness" of diverse coding schemes.* The collaborative-comparative approach provided us with several useful strategies for evaluating the "trustworthiness" of coding schemes and summaries developed by each member of the group. For example, the seminar format called for participants to routinely share both the process and products of analysis, including all data reduction and synthesis procedures and products, as well as process notes and memos. This produced a kind of cumulative "audit trail" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) that other members could follow to determine just how an individual's process of analysis had unfolded. Moreover, because all participants were intimately familiar with the data, members could confirm or disconfirm whether an individual's findings were grounded (Are the findings recognizable in the data?); whether inferences made were logical/internally consistent; and whether coding categories were credible and powerful (How well does a construct, category or reflection fit with the data? How clear is it? How efficient as a means to organize the data?).

Although there were no incidences in which participant schemes seemed implausible to the group, our seminar structure gave us confidence that we would be able to detect if an interpretive scheme veered too away from the data. Reflecting on this part of the collaborative process, Lisa noted:

. . . it is possible that another researcher may find different themes in the transcripts, but I feel as if they can only be as

different as there are different ways of interpreting literature. One may have his or her own theoretical bent, and we certainly each bring our own experience and culture to the reading, but just as we can usually agree when an interpretation has moved too far from the text and when it is no longer true to the words on the page, I think that we can also see when a qualitative data analysis inference has been stretched too far from the person's words. (Smith, 1994: 2)

*Confidence in our own, individual approaches to qualitative analysis.* Engaging in a collaborative-comparative process helped each of us to gain confidence in our own, individual approaches to qualitative data analysis. While keeping track of one's cognitive process (i.e., reflective coding) helped build confidence, it was most often in the process of comparing and contrasting frameworks that each participant gained a deeper understanding of her own approach:

. . . before class I . . . felt some anxiety and frustration at not knowing whether what I found would be any "good." I kept thinking that I didn't know anything about this area, this topic. But as the classes went on, I became aware that what I saw in the data was there, and it was different from what the others saw in certain ways. It was as if we all saw the same occurrence from a slightly different angle. We had different takes on the data, but there were areas of agreement and similarity between us. The more time we spent going over it, the more I could see other interpretations and the more confident I felt in my own. The process validated my confidence in my own 'world view' but it opened me up to the other perspectives too. (Farris, 1994: 1)

When we met in class, I was amazed to hear the range of different approaches that everyone had taken. I felt somewhat jealous of the creativity of some of them wishing that I could think creatively like that, and others' approaches felt very foreign to me and I couldn't imagine being able to use that technique. I felt that we must be doing something wrong if all of us were analyzing the data with these very different techniques, but I could not imagine using anyone else's—mine just made so much sense to me and had come so easily. But when

we started looking at the categories or themes that people had started to develop, each of them seemed true to the transcript. None of them seemed to be putting inappropriate words in the woman's mouth. Not all of our themes were identical; each one showed our own personal experiences or interests. But they were all like slices of the same substance—we were just looking at the same substance from a different view. (Smith, 1994, pp. 1-2)

In sum, the comparative process was key to evaluating our own and others' approaches to qualitative data analysis.

*Appreciation of supportive and fruitful potential of collaborative analysis:* Our experience in the seminar reinforces our confidence in peer interaction as source of emotional support to the qualitative data analyst. Moreover, our experience suggests to us the potential substantive benefits to be gained from collaborative analysis of qualitative data. As two participants reflect:

... We can receive a rich and complex but very real appreciation of another person's perspective just from reading a transcript. Just as the characters in a novel often are so real and full to us, the person that comes through the transcript is very alive and full of depth. I was amazed that as rich as that one slice of the picture can be, that when others participate in the process, the themes become even richer and I think that we obtain an even greater understanding... (Smith, 1994: 2)

... Not only did I learn a lot from the insights of other students in terms of how they approached the data, but it became clear that collective perspectives on the data yielded a far richer interpretation than did individual efforts. This was a refreshing antidote to individualistic approaches to research typical of most methods classes. (R. Bates, 1993:1)

#### *Our Reflections on the Potential Dangers of Collaborative-Comparative Learning*

As supportive and fruitful as it can be, there are several potential dangers in involving peers in the analysis process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher may come to feel that his or her prog-

ress or judgment is "not what it should be," or may become derailed or overly influenced by the opinions of others (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 309). Moreover, there is the potential that peers may serve less as "plausibility checks" and more as a force for promoting "group think" among members. To counter such tendencies, we believe that participants in a collaborative process must possess strong interpersonal skills and a high level of trust in the group process. The group's role in individual debriefing should be clearly established. Members should understand, for example, that they should explicitly avoid trying to persuade a participant of the superiority of an alternative process or framework, and should express feedback in positive, supportive and useful ways. The group believes that having an instructor who models the "midwife" or "coaching" role and appropriate debriefing skills and behaviors is important to establishing these roles and behaviors for the entire group. If such norms are established at the outset and adhered to throughout the process, we believe that the potential advantages to a collaborative approach such as we describe here can outweigh potential dangers.

#### CONCLUSION

The literature on qualitative research seems to offers the novice two strategies for learning analysis: (1) "trust" that the you will "sowchow" make sense out of qualitative material, or (2) follow a predetermined set of analytic steps and stages. In this paper, we have suggested the potential utility of a third approach: discover, understand and strengthen the interpretive schemata that you bring to the analytic process. We acknowledge that attending to one's own schemata is not the only task that beginning analysts need accomplish. However, it is an important element oftentimes overlooked in the literature on qualitative analysis.

Although the approach we describe here has little precedent in the qualitative research literature, it reflects several major insights from the adult learning and cognitive theory literatures. For example, our approach places the learner—not the instructor or research text—at center stage, emphasizes the importance of awareness of the learner's cognitive framework or schemata, and assumes that learning is

facilitated when learners are aware of their learning strategies and monitor their use (Svnicki, 1991). Moreover, our approach recognizes that the interpretive schemata that learners bring to bear in cognition and problem-solving are highly individuated and variable (Mishler, 1986; Jorgenson, 1989; Winfrey and Goldfried, 1986). Some people are comfortably "parts-to-whole" thinkers, others "whole-to-parts"; some tend to think in terms of words and concepts, others are more visually or graphically oriented; some favor a more linear problem-solving strategy, and others a more free-association or "stream of consciousness" approach (Solso, 1991).

Our experience suggests that a collaborative-comparative approach may be a promising vehicle for learning and teaching qualitative analysis. It offers some specific tactics for discovering and understanding schemata, critiquing the process and products of analysis, and judging the "credibility" and "trustworthiness" of analytic schemes. For the novice analyst, the collaborative-comparative approach also offers considerable guidance and support in what can otherwise be an unnecessarily isolated learning process. Contrary to the fears initially held by some seminar participants, employing this approach as a collective learning strategy did not result in extremely disparate products (but cf. England, 1993). Rather than ending up with "elephants, swans and peaches," we produced multifaceted, multitextured pictures of the same elephant. Moreover, these collective pictures were richer and more complex than any single individual's analysis.

## NOTES

1. As a reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper pointed out, the critique we present here is relevant only to research on theme analysis—i.e., analysis focusing on the content, rather than the form, of narrative data.
2. For example, current Council on Social Work Education's Accreditation and Self-Study Guides require schools of social work to teach both qualitative and quantitative research perspectives.
3. Strauss and Corbin suggest that the paradigm model represents the grounded theory approach to selective coding. However, Glaser takes issue with this suggestion, noting that "there is not just one theoretical code that is a must in all cases . . ." (1992: 28).
4. More flexible alternatives to the Corbin and Strauss approach exist. For example, see Strauss, 1987 and Charmaz, 1990.

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