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Collective Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Current research policies create incentives for large collaborative research projects across disciplines, institutions and countries. Even though qualitative researchers are increasingly expected to be involved in research collaboration, qualitative analysis is mostly presented as an individual endeavour. The aim of this article is to contribute to the scholarly literature about qualitative analysis, by presenting a procedure that I call “collective qualitative analysis”. The method has four steps: First, the research group works through the entire data material by presenting abstracts of each interview. The second step is mapping data, and third step is about sorting data. The fourth step is to make a disposition and outline a workplan. I explain these steps by using examples from my own research projects. By engaging with collective qualitative analysis, we can make room for a creative analytical process where we can develop our understanding of empirical data and the process of analysis by learning from each other. I argue that it would be fruitful to further develop collaborative forms of qualitative analysis and aim to contribute to this endeavour.

Keywords

Collaborative data analysis, collective data analysis, collective methods, teamwork.

Introduction

In my work as a sociologist focusing on qualitative methods – and especially while working on my MA and PhD – I have often felt unsure of what I should do the day I completed, transcribed, and read through all the interviews. I've asked myself the question that Steinar Kvale calls the 1000-page question: "How shall I find a method to analyse the 1000 pages of interview transcripts I have collected?" and I recognise the overwhelming feeling behind the question (Kvale, 1996, p. 90–2). In the academic literature about qualitative methods there are several descriptions of uncertainty and confusion when confronted with the collected data (e.g., Johannessen et al., 2018, p. 278; Skilbrei, 2019, p. 8; Tjora, 2017, p. 196; Widerberg, 2001, p. 117). David Silverman for example, writes incisively about how ambiguous qualitative data analysis can be: "Data analysis can be something of a mystery. You have gathered your interview, selected your documents or made some observations. Now what do you do? [...] Beginning qualitative data analysis can seem like exploring a new territory without an easy-to-read map" (Silverman, 2014, p. 110). Especially when you are not familiar with qualitative analysis, you can become overwhelmed and unsure of what to do with all the data.

After several years in the field of research, I now have more experience and feel less unsure than I did as a student and PhD candidate. However, I have often wondered how other researchers handle their data. In the academic research environments I have been part of, the academic discussions first and foremost happen when we have written drafts for chapters or articles that we present to each other. Raw data is something we mainly keep to ourselves, and many of us carry out the first analysis alone and without enlisting another set of eyes. The discussion of methods also has the unfortunate tendency to circle around methodological approaches and epistemological prerequisites rather than the practical work of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2014, p. 42). Putting our process of analysis into words is a condition for being able to verify, criticise, and further develop academic analysis and methods. As many others have done before me (e.g., Album et al., 2010; Christensen et al., 1998), my desire is to contribute to developing methods through presenting and discussing concrete experiences and research projects.

In this article I describe a method I've chosen to call "collective qualitative analysis", and in this I'm following on from Karin Widerberg's (2001, p. 29, translated) urging that the collective "should and could be developed as a method in itself". In brief, collective qualitative analysis aims to gather a research group for a collective workshop where they engage in the work of analysis together. The method has four steps: 1) Reviewing the data 2) Mapping the data, 3) Sorting the data and 4) Creating an outline and workplan. I have developed the method in collaboration with colleagues as a part of the practical procedure during several empirical research projects. Developing a method was not part of the objective of these projects, but because a collective qualitative analysis was helpful for us, I would like to share our experiences. The method proved to be a very useful, thorough, and reliable way to start the process of analysis. Starting the process of analysis as a collective effort has been the basis for a creative collaboration throughout the rest of the analysis and writing process. As Aksel Tjora (2017, p. 251–2) has pointed out, analysing collectively can be a strategy for managing confusion and strengthening the quality of the process of analysis.

Firstly, I would like to start by discussing a few contributions to the literature about quantitative analysis. Existing literature indicates that there is a lot of room for development of collective methods of analysis. Furthermore, I will present the research projects that I draw on as examples, and the data that I have analysed as part of developing this article. The main part of the article is a presentation of the four steps of collective qualitative analysis: 1. Reviewing the data, 2. Mapping the data, 3. Sorting the data, and 4. Creating an outline and workplan. The examples I present, are mainly focussed on analysis of interview data, because this has been the most important source of data for the projects in question.

However, the method can also be used to analyse other types of data, and this is something I will return to in the discussion. I would like to emphasise that collective qualitative analysis is only one part of the process of analysis. Therefore, I have also included a discussion of the process of analysis before and after the workshop. To conclude, I discuss how collective quality analysis can contribute, and how the method can be further developed for research and supervision.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

The mere fact of two or more researchers collaborating on data collection, analysis, and writing is nothing new. However, as the research politics increasingly creates an incentive for large interdisciplinary collaboration projects between different countries and institutions, it is also beneficial to develop good methods for collaboration in all parts of the research process. In literature and publications on method, analysis is generally presented as an individual process, and collective analysis work seems to be the exception here rather than the rule (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 79; Hall et al., 2005, p. 394). Widerberg has pointed out that collective processes of analysis are important to highlight how our understanding affects our interpretation, but that the collective element is seldom included as a separate thematic in textbooks. Aksel Tjora (2017, p. 107–8, 251–2; 2018, p. 53–4, 85–6) has argued in several textbooks that the collective process of analysis can be useful and has referenced personal experiences as well as that of others in these processes. But he hasn't—as far as I know—systematically described how these processes of analysis can be carried out, or integrated the collective aspect in the description of the step-by-step deductive inductive method (SDI model) he has developed (see Tjora, 2017, 2018).

There are several new contributions in academic literature available in English language where the authors argue for and describe how you can carry out collective processes of analysis (Bilda et al., 2006; Cornish et al., 2014; Lordly et al., 2012; McPhail-Bell & Redman-MacLaren, 2019; Pardee et al., 2017; Richards & Hemphill, 2018).¹ Some focus on the advantages and challenges of collaboration throughout the research process for projects that include several researchers—often from different disciplines and institutions—students or representatives for the groups the research projects are concentrating on (Allen et al., 2019; Cornish et al., 2014; Fernald & Duclos, 2005; Hall et al., 2005; Pardee et al., 2017; Potter, 1998; Sweeney et al., 2013). Others have focussed on how they have carried out one or several workshops as the backbone of a collective process of analysis (Bilda et al., 2006; Lordly et al., 2012; Richards & Hemphill, 2018). A common factor of these contributions is that they believe that a collaboration during the process of analysis can be challenging and time consuming, but that it is worth it because it strengthens the analysis. Collective analysis does not mean that you break with existing and more individually oriented approaches to analysis, but that you adjust and develop these to function as collective processes of analysis (Richards & Hemphill, 2018).

The research literature about qualitative analysis includes several different methodological perspectives and approaches, for example, grounded theory (see Skilbrei, 2019, p. 53–4), narrative analysis, phenomenology, institutional ethnography, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis. However, there are also those that focus on the common features in different approaches and argue for the benefit of combining different methodological perspectives in the same research project (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elliott & Timulak, 2005; Frost et al., 2010).

1. I used Oria and Google Scholar to search for research articles that contain the terms “collaborative analysis” or “collective analysis” + “qualitative”. Most of the hits were qualitative studies of collaborative processes from e.g., the health and education sectors, or empirical studies where the authors briefly refer to having done collective analysis without the process being the subject of the article. In the newest methodology articles that specifically deal with collaborative process of analysis, I searched for other relevant publications in the bibliography (snowball sampling).

I share this opinion and have worked with analysis in line with what Braun and Clarke (2006) call “thematic analysis”. Thematic analysis is a method to identify, analyse, and describe patterns (themes) of the data. Thematic analysis has six steps: 1. An in-depth review of the material by reading all the data, highlighting the text and writing in the margin, 2. Making a list of ideas about each theme you identify in the data, and working through the data looking for as many interesting themes and patterns as possible, 3. Identifying an overall theme and sorting all the subthemes and text extracts according to these, 4. Reviewing the themes critically, double checking if they fit the data and if necessary revising them, 5. Finding suitable titles for all the themes that capture the essence and give the reader an insight into what they are about, and 6. Writing the article (Braun & Clarke, 2006).²

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that a thematic analysis is a foundational method for qualitative data analysis that can be used across different methodological approaches. The method is flexible and can be used for both empirical (inductive) and more theoretically oriented (deductive) analysis. Furthermore, the method is suitable whether you have a constructivist or realistic approach to the process of analysis and whether you focus on analysis of experiences, opinions, discourse, or a combination of these (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Collective qualitative analysis in many ways resembles thematic analysis both in terms of the steps of the process and the flexibility. The most important difference is that we have conducted several of the steps collectively during workshops rather than individually.

Developing a Collective Qualitative Analysis

This article is based on experiences with carrying out collective qualitative analysis for several different research projects. The data is in the form of practical experiences from several project collaborations, collective reflections on these experiences, and documentation of the process of analysis. The documentation consists of two short blog texts about the process that were written shortly after they were carried out (Eggebo, 2015, 2018), photographs, minutes, and notes from the workshops, and conversations and discussions I have had with colleagues about the process of analysis. The process was best documented when working on the research project “Ageing at home: Innovation in home-based care for older people in rural parts of Northern Norway” and “Queer Migrants in Norway”. For this reason, I have chosen to use examples from these projects in the article and will briefly outline the goals, framework for and analysis of these two projects. In terms of recruitment, selection, data collection, and ethical issues my reference is the methodology chapters from the project reports (Eggebo et al., 2018; Munkejord et al., 2017).

The aim of “Ageing at home” (2016–2019) was to investigate what it is like to grow old in rural areas, and what types of specific challenges and possibilities they have in home-based care for older people in rural areas with sparse population. Two municipalities in northern Norway were collaborators in the project, and it was financed by Regionalt forskningsfond Nord-Norge. Managers, employees, users, and next of kin were interviewed, and the data consisted of 42 individual interviews, four group interviews and observational notes from relevant arenas for older people.

2. In a Norwegian textbook Johannsen et al. (2018, p. 279–313) presented a four-step version of Braun and Clarke’s method: 1. Preparation, i.e., examining the data and taking notes, 2. Coding, i.e., highlighting and putting into words important points from the data by writing key words, underlining and writing down ideas and reflections, 3. Categorisation, i.e., sorting the data according to overall themes, 4. Reporting, i.e., the writing process.

All three of the researchers participated in the data collection. When all the data had been collected and transcribed, we organised a two-day workshop for the project group where we carried out collective qualitative analysis as a common starting point for the process of analysis. This process was mainly empirically driven; we focussed on exploring the data and adjusted and developed hypotheses and ideas for articles using the empirical analysis as a springboard. The further process of analysis formed part of the writing and mediation, where we worked on interpreting data in light of theory and previous research.

In 2017–2018 I led a research project about the living conditions amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people with migrant backgrounds in Norway (Eggebø et al., 2018). This was a commissioned research project financed by The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir). The aim of the project was to map living conditions, including crucial aspects such as education and employment, health, relationships and social networks, openness, discrimination and violence. The data consisted of a survey (N=251) and qualitative interviews (individual and focus group interviews) with 41 queer people with migrant backgrounds in Norway. After the data had been gathered, we organised a workshop where we looked at the quantitative material and another workshop with a collective qualitative analysis of the interview data. The analysis was first and foremost empirically driven and oriented towards giving as complete a mapping of the material as possible. After the workshop we continued developing the analysis—by interpreting data drawing on theory and previous research—as part of the writing process. This work was also collectively oriented; we organised writing seminars, took turns writing the different chapters, and conducted meetings routinely over the phone to discuss text and analysis.

The common thread in the above projects is that they were empirical research projects where individual interviews were a central source of data. Both the project groups consisted of three people who all took part in gathering the data. I acted as group leader during the workshops.³ Another common denominator was that both the projects had open and explorative designs and the analysis was empirically driven. In terms of other data sources, time frame, financing, themes, and hypotheses, the projects were different. Despite the differences, we used the same model for collective qualitative analysis and experienced this as useful and relevant, because it proved to be a flexible method and an efficient way to start the analysis. Moreover, our experience was that the collective qualitative analysis formed the foundation for the subsequent writing and analysis work also being collectively oriented. We explored the possibility of thinking and writing together, testing out analytical ideas, challenging each other, and further developing our thoughts using the tension that arises from different viewpoints and approaches.

Preparation

The preparation for the workshop had three main points: 1. Writing a summary of the interviews, 2. Reviewing the data and 3. Reading relevant research. As Skilbrei (2019, p. 182–3) points out, you should reduce data—in other words write a summary—before continuing with the analysis. This is a crucial step in the preparation for collective qualitative analysis, because we work from summaries, not full transcripts of interviews, at the workshops. The summaries were written during the data collection process, right after we had carried out an interview, and stored in a password protected shared access area for the research group. The summary was ½ to 1 ½ pages and included background information about the main themes in the interview. Here is an example of a summary from the project “Ageing at Home”:

3. For both the projects described here, I took the initiative to carry out collective quantitative analysis based on positive experiences from earlier projects and was given the responsibility of preparing and leading the process. Two colleagues and collaborators have used collective qualitative methods in projects I've not been part of. A closer evaluation of mine and my colleagues' experiences managing the process and group dynamics constitutes the framework for this article.

Interview with older married couple. He is 79 and she is 84 years old. They live in the municipality centre. They have both lived very active lives. He was a headmaster and politically active. She was a civil servant in the municipality and has chaired several clubs and organisations. They have two children who live in the south of Norway. They emphasise that they feel that's far away. They highlight that they don't like growing old. It's difficult to accept that you can't be as active as before and that your friends are dying. It's a bit gloomy, he said several times. They are interested in discussing what could have been done to make it easier to grow old. They receive assistance from the home care service. She suffers from dementia. He has struggled with depression and misses the counselling services available before, but that now have been shut down.⁴

We also noted down other impressions from the interview situation, such as how the house looked (pictures of the family on the wall, wheelchair access), what happened in the interview situation (the phone rang, a relative came by), and our own feelings and reflections around the interview situation. These summaries of the interview or observations, which also include reflections, analytical ideas and interpretations, are often called "memos" in methodology literature, and the term comes from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005).

Here is an example of a reflection I wrote down in the summary after the first interview of "Ageing at home": "Throughout the interview he talks a lot about WWII and growing up in his hometown. I understand that this is what he finds most important to talk about (...) Difficult to see how the interview provided much relevant information". The aim of the project was to explore people's experience with home care, but the interviewee barely answered these questions. Had I collected completely irrelevant data? Both during the field work and during the workshop I brought up this question with the research group. Through academic discussion we arrived at another interpretation: the fact that this informant – and several others – preferred to talk about the life they had lived instead of being reduced to a care recipient was an important analytical point (Eggebo et al., 2019a). What I at the time interpreted as a fairly irrelevant interview, was in fact a key interview for the further analysis.

Another important part of the preparation was to go through the data, that's to say read the interview transcripts, summaries, and listen to the recordings. This work corresponds to the first step in more individually oriented descriptions of the process of analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006; Johannessen et al., 2018). In "Queer Migrants in Norway" we initially limited ourselves to reading through the summary and listening to some of the interviews that we hadn't carried out ourselves. In "Ageing at home" we read through the complete interview transcriptions and summaries, both those we had conducted ourselves and those others in the research group had done.⁵ During the read through we noted several different themes, interesting sequences in the conversation, and the main story of the interview.

A third important condition for the analysis during the workshop, was to familiarise ourselves with empirical research and relevant theories in the field. In the project "Queer Migrants" the research group was familiar with theory and empirical work

4. Background information has been changed to maintain anonymity and the summary abbreviated.

5. In the projects "Queer migrants" and "Skeiv på bygda" (Rural Queers) we followed Silverman's advice not to transcribe all the data in detail from the beginning, but instead start the analysis and transcribe as needed (Silverman, 2014, p. 111). In "Ageing at home", which had a longer time frame, we had assistants to transcribe. In my opinion, you can make strong and solid analysis of qualitative data both with and without complete transcriptions. But if there's enough time and financially viable to transcribe everything, it's advantageous to do so.

at the intersection of gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and immigration and ethnic discrimination on the other. In the project “Ageing at home” I had a greater need to familiarise myself with previous research, and before the workshop I spent a lot of time getting an overview of the interdisciplinary research field of ageing and care. It was useful to get a certain overview of the research early in the process, but it is also important that the readings do not get in the way of making progress gathering data and planning the workshop. If you are going to perform empirical analysis, it can be more fruitful to familiarise yourself with the research literature after the workshop, as a part of the process of writing.

Step 1: Reviewing the Data Together

The first step of collective qualitative analysis is to go through the data as a group. In this way, there will be two reviews of the data: first individually as a part of the preparation and then as a group during the workshop. In this way, the whole research group gets a thorough insight into the data, both the material they collected themselves and the material collected by others. The presentation can be done in the following way: the person who did the actual interview or made the observation, presents the summary for the others, while one of the others notes down key words. Here is an example of this kind of record:

- Queer woman in her 40s, grew up in Norway, parents arrived as refugees from the Middle East.
- Racism and ethnic discrimination are the main problems with being a queer migrant.
- She experienced being different as a child and wanted to be normal.
- Racism in queer communities.
- During the interview she is interested in showing that homophobia also exists amongst ethnic Norwegians and not just in minority communities⁶

In the notes from this interview, we have identified background information, central themes, and the overarching narrative in the informant’s story: she presented a clear counternarrative to the understanding of homophobia in migrant communities being the main problem for many queer people with migrant backgrounds. Her message was that racism is the biggest problem she has as a queer migrant. The keywords contain not just the background information and experiences, but an interpretation of the interview.

We wrote down the keywords on A3 sheets of paper and put the sheets on the wall as we went along. We spent about ten minutes per summary, and a whole day going through all the interviews (33 in total). The result of this group review of the data looked like this:

6. Notes are redacted and shortened to safeguard anonymity.

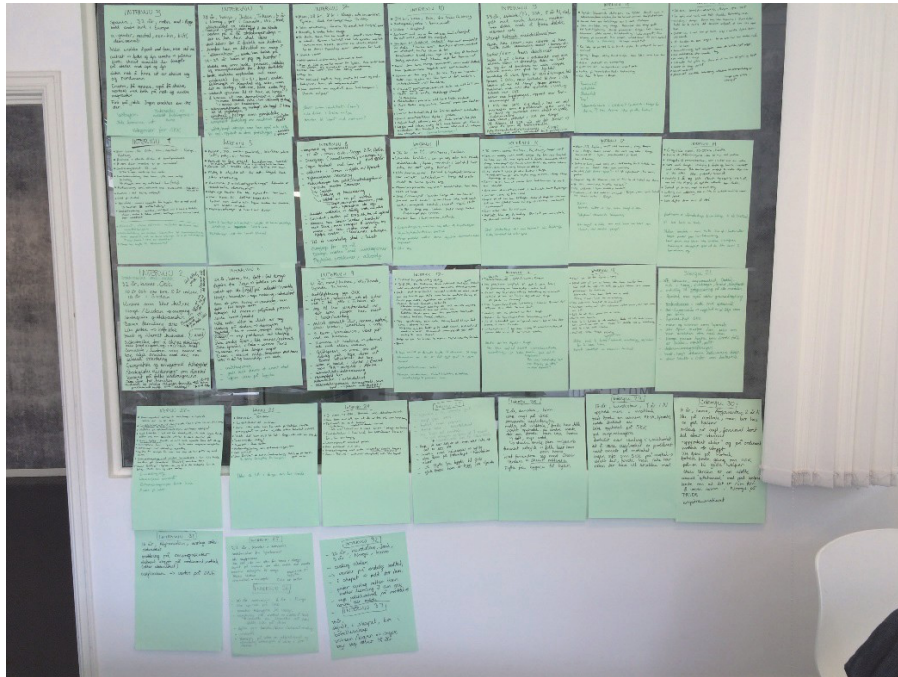


Figure 1: We've reviewed the interviews, written down keywords, and put sheets on the wall.

An important point regarding reviewing the data, is that we don't invite comments and discussions at this stage. This is important for two reasons: firstly, we risk running out of time for the next steps of the analysis and not finishing within the time frame. Secondly, sticking closely to the empirical material will be an advantage and getting a total overview of the data before discussing it. So, at the beginning of the meeting we start reviewing right away.

Step 2: Mapping Themes

The second step of collective qualitative analysis is an open mapping of themes in the data. After collectively reviewing the data, we had made many reflections. To get started mapping the themes, you can formulate the following open question: "What is the material about?" (see Johannessen et al., 2018, p. 280), or ask "What kind of themes, ideas, thoughts, analytical threads, and questions are you left with after reviewing the material?" In "Queer Migrants in Norway" we organised ourselves so that one of us mentioned a theme and wrote a heading on a large piece of paper. Then we noted down bullet points and relevant interviews for this theme. This step of the process is what Johannessen et al. (2018, p. 282–4) has called coding—that's to say the process where you emphasise and put into words important points from the data. Although Johannessen et al. (2018), and contributions from many others to the methodology, describe this as an individual process, we carried out this work collectively at the workshop.

A theme that was raised by many informants in "Queer Migrants in Norway", was the experience of sexual abuse. On the theme page for "Sexual Abuse" we listed the following points:

- Occurs often in the material.
- During childhood and over time.
- Isolated incidents.
- The perpetrators are usually men, often several different men.
- The victims have multicultural backgrounds.
- Narratives about that they are queer due to the abuse, came up frequently in the material, both for men and women and informants from different countries, including Norway.
- Encounters with support network, mostly bad and some good.
- Negative consequences: poor results at school, mental health issues, partners leaving, virginity testing, shame.
- Important interview: 1, 4, 18, 8, 12, 17, 20. Especially 4.

Several informants said that they themselves and others thought that there was a connection between sexual abuse and sexual orientation: a man who suffered abuse from different men during childhood, had thought a lot about whether this was the reason he was gay. Women who were victims of abuse by men, pinpointed this as the reason they rejected men and sought out women. During the mapping we didn't get further than describing this as a theme of the material. In the subsequent analysis—during the writing—we worked a lot on interpreting the informants' own understanding in light of violence and sexual abuse (see Eggebø et al., 2018, p. 122–3).

During the mapping we found the following overarching themes: racism, living openly or closeted/stealth as queer, discrimination, homophobia, immigration experiences, places, religion, sexual abuse, law, encountering institutions, disappointment with Norway, family, isolation/loneliness, love/partnership, queer networks, health, and reflections on methodology. Here is a photo illustrating the mapping process:

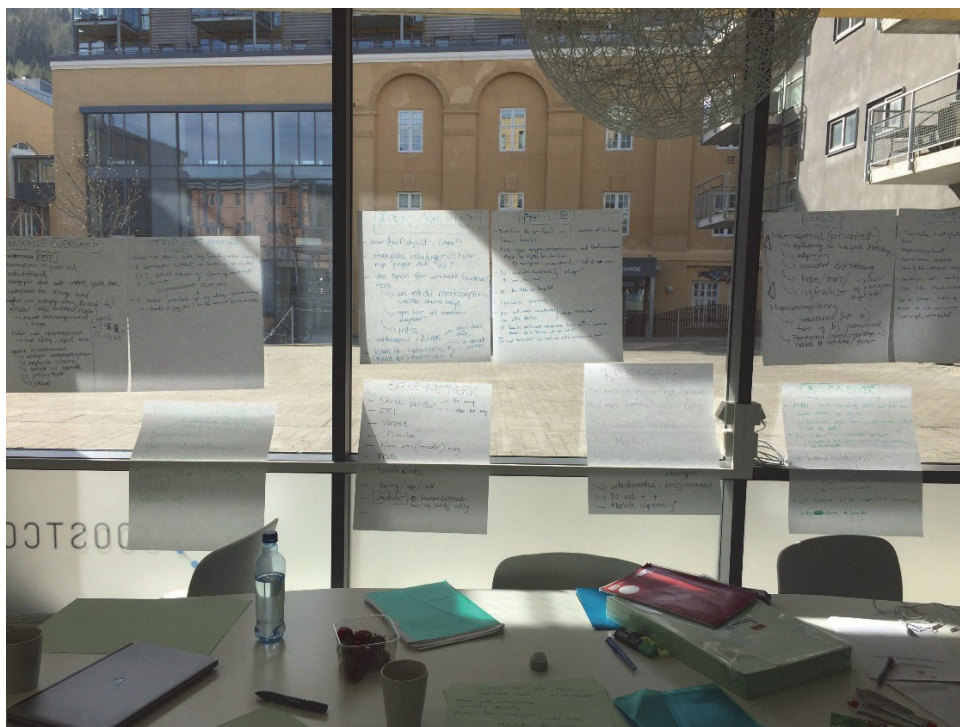


Figure 2: Mapping themes (step 2) during the analysis workshop we organised in Trondheim, May 2018, as a part of the research project “Queer Migrants”.

During the mapping phase we only opened slightly for discussions around what could be important themes and relevant interpretations. We focussed on listening to each other and collaborated to put words to as much as possible of what the material could shed light on. As Widerberg (2001, p. 120) also has described it, we wrote down everything we saw as interesting, without systematising or evaluating in terms of importance.

Even though the mapping was empirical it is important to emphasise that the mapping process was also informed by theory in the sense that the research group was well oriented within the relevant research fields. In the project “Ageing at home” we made theory and previous research into an explicit part of the mapping phase. I presented main points from the research I had read up on from the field of ageing and care and summarised with the following list of keywords:

Sociological literature about ageing, sociological theory about individualisation, risk, body, agency and care used by studies on ageing, network theory, research on care, gender perspective on ageing, multicultural perspective on ageing, gerontology (medical, social, critical), “ageism” (alienation, stigma, and stereotyping), empirical analysis of older people’s perspectives on ageing, “the third and the fourth age”, social politics and care politics, “disengagement” theory, professional perspectives, geographic perspective on ageing, welfare technology, innovation, and “successful ageing”.

We used a part of the contributions from the first mapping of the research fields when working on the articles from the project. Other contributions proved to be less relevant and, in any case, we worked thoroughly through several other contributions in the continued writing and analysis.

Step 3: Sorting Themes

The next step of the collective process of analysis was a discussion of how to group the themes we had found in the mapping phase. This step in the process is equivalent to what Tjora (2017) called “code grouping” and Johannessen et al. (2018) called “categorisation”. We can start by asking: Which of the mapped themes belong together and what is the connection between them? What is an important and overarching theme and what are the subthemes? (See Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). In “Queer Migrants” we continued working on grouping the theme sheets from the mapping phase. We moved the sheets from one wall to another and discussed the connection between the different themes. Tjora (2018, p. 53–54) has pointed out that it can be useful to do the grouping work collectively, write on sheets and physically move around notes and paper, which was also our experience. Moving paper around can look like more of a practical than an analytic exercise, but in fact moving the theme sheets—and moving around physically in the room—felt stimulating in terms of the thought processes. Here is a photo illustrating the work process:



Figure 3: The author at work during the theme grouping (step 3).

We grouped together isolation/loneliness, love/partnerships, family, and social networks because the main theme for all of these is relationships. Encounters with institutions, the law, disappointment with Norway, we grouped together because the disappointment that several informants expressed centres around laws and regulations and how they were met at different institutions. Sexual abuse and health were grouped together, because abuse to a great extent leads to health problems. Racism, discrimination, homophobia, and living openly or closeted/stealth as queer were grouped together because they are about the two dimensions of discrimination that form the focus of this project: migrant background on the one hand, and gender and sexual orientation on the other. Experiences of migration and stories of places were grouped together. We chose to place religion as a sub point within several of the other groups of themes.

A key point in this phase of the analysis work is to be open to discussion, disagreement, and different interpretations of the material. During the processes of analysis that I have taken part in, the participants have had many common academic frames of reference. The discussions were mainly characterised by continuing to develop each other's points rather than any direct disagreement. But it is not difficult to imagine that if you come from different disciplines, with quite different theoretical perspectives and academic interests and with obvious differences in the participant's status, the process could be much more frustrating (see Bilda et al., 2006, p. 228; Cornish et al., 2014, p. 10–2; Potter, 1998, for a discussion about trust, differences in disciplines, participant's status and positions of power). However, frustration about differences of opinion and a lack of understanding can also be productive, as I experienced in "Ageing at home". One of the members of the research group had a background in social work and entered the project wanting to explore social care. At the beginning I found it difficult to understand what he meant by this, and I didn't see the research articles and definitions he referenced as elucidating. But as we continued working with the empirical material—first during the workshop and later during the writing process—the concepts made more sense to me. Collectively, we developed our own definition and understanding of social care, and this concept became one of the main points in our analysis (Munkejord et al., 2018).

Step 4: Outline and Work Plan

The last step of the process was to make an outline and work plan for the writing. In “Queer Migrants” the aim was to map several different dimensions of living condition amongst queer people with migrant backgrounds in Norway. Therefore, we chose to look at one theme per chapter, and use the theme sheets as a starting point for finding headings and research questions. We wrote down suggestions for chapters based on themes on A3 sheets and put them on the wall.

Photo below illustrates the process:

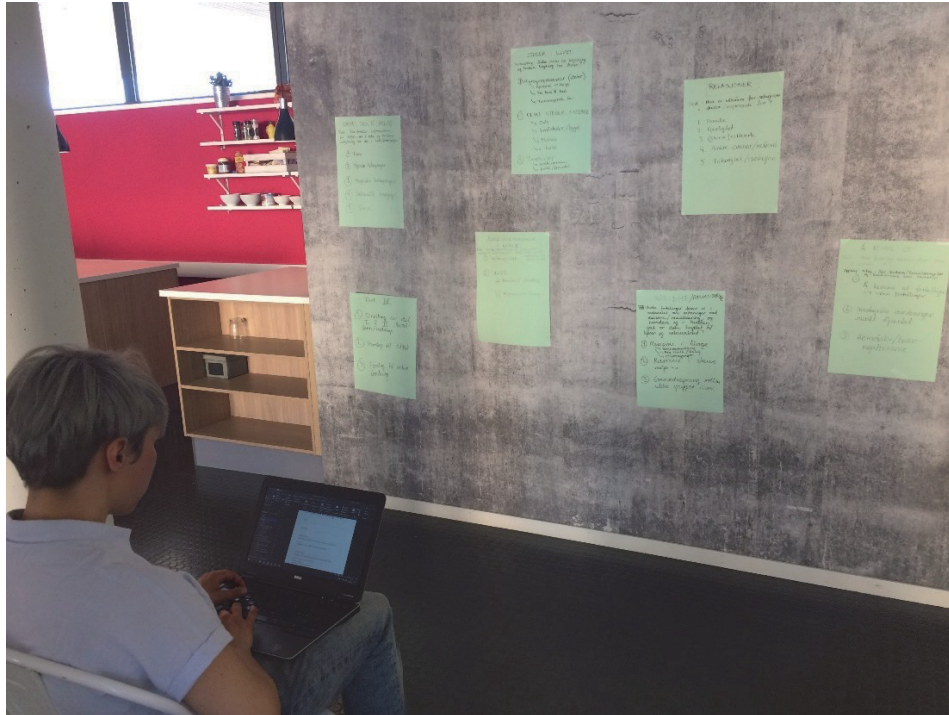


Figure 4: Elisabeth Stubberud taking notes from the process of making an outline and work plan (step 4).

After agreeing on which chapters to include, we discussed the order. Then we decided who should start writing which chapter and wrote down a detailed disposition with themes and hypotheses.

In “Ageing at home” we chose to write a report in Norwegian and several research articles. At the workshop we made an outline for the report and divided the writing tasks among us. In addition, we discussed plans for article publications and presented five concrete ideas for the articles to each other. Here is an example:

Taking a closer look at the concept of social care. In Norway, this concept is closely connected to the health care profession. The professionals we interviewed emphasise that something is missing, but it is not part of their job. But who should fill the gap? A model is needed that can get a foothold within the reality of the Nordic countries.

We continued developing this idea during our writing process. First through the work on the project report, where we wrote a separate chapter about the perspectives of the professionals in home-based care for older people. Later, we developed this into a research article and through this writing process the analyses were made more precise, nuanced, and connected to relevant international care research and theory.

Analysis after the Workshop

After the workshop, we worked separately reading through the material again, with a focus on the themes, chapters, and article projects we were responsible for. In “Queer Migrants in Norway”, for example, I first worked on the theme “racism and discrimination due to migrant background” and labelled all the data connected to this. We used the computer program Nvivo and worked in the same file so that everyone had access to all the codes.⁷ At the same time, I started writing the relevant chapter.

In my opinion, it is a good idea to start the writing process right after the workshop and not wait until you’ve gone through all the data again. This is because the continued interpretation and analysis to a great extent happens through the writing process (Skilbrei, 2019). Collective quantitative analysis was the starting point for the analysis. But the time consuming and difficult work finding strong analytical tools, by interpreting the empirical data in light of previous research and theoretical perspectives, was done mainly in front of our individual computer screens, combined with regular phone and skype calls and taking turns contributing to the different chapters.

In “Queer Migrants in Norway” both the authors wrote together from the start. In the articles from “Ageing at home” the first author wrote a draft and took the main responsibility for revisions, while the others wrote and commented on these drafts in several rounds. Collectively, we have tried different interpretations, changed the structure of the texts and scrutinised each contribution, and the collective process of analysis laid a good foundation for a collective writing process.

Discussion

Collective qualitative analysis has been useful and important in the research projects I myself and colleagues have worked on. Since we’ve all actively taken part in the analysis of the data, we feel confident that the results are not just the product of a single point of view. Collective qualitative analysis has also been a positive way to handle the feeling of being overwhelmed and confused when engaging with large amounts of qualitative data. Moreover, the method has proved itself to be an efficient way to start the process of analysis and we quickly began the process of writing. We have influenced each other’s thinking in the early phases of analysis and the process of writing has therefore been characterised by dialogue, which has been successfully incorporated. But most importantly, collective qualitative analysis has created a room for collaborative creative analytical processes where we feel we have reached exciting, nuanced, and valid interpretations. This has had a positive effect on the writing process, and I believe it has strengthened the quality of the publications.

Collective qualitative analysis has also invited a collectively oriented process in the analysis and writing after the workshops, and it has opened up for transparency in the data collection process, as well: in “Queer migrants” we first carried out a pilot interview each and then listened to each other’s interviews and discussed the interview situations and common strategies for further data collection. Sharing recordings and transcriptions made us vulnerable to criticism in terms of interview methods. But also made us better equipped to interpret each other’s interviews, because they gave us a deeper insight into the interview situation and

7. A technical limitation of the program is that we can’t work in the same file at the same time.

other ways of interviewing. At another workshop for collective qualitative analysis researchers or practitioners have been present who have not taken part in the actual data collection (Eggebo et al., 2019b; Stubberud & Akin, 2018). An important strategy can be for the participants that haven't collected data to listen to and read through a few interviews ahead of the workshop. But we have also experienced that it has worked fine for people to participate without knowledge of the empirical data in cases where the person is familiar with the field already. The person who has carried out the interview, will maybe always have a better insight into the actual interview situation than the others and in the writing process we have therefore provided suggestions, corrections, and nuances when others have analysed "our" interviews. In the groups that I and other colleagues have worked in, we have had positive experiences sharing and participating in analysing each other's interviews.

Together with the others in the research group, I have discussed the possibilities for further developing collective qualitative analysis. Firstly, I think that the method has potential for being used in supervision. As I wrote in the introduction, during my MA and PhD I felt insecure and alone when starting the analysis of the collected material. In this phase I think it would have been useful to have participated in collective qualitative analysis together with for example, my tutor or other researchers and students. A collective process would have made me feel more confident continuing the work and there would have been a lot to learn from analysing together with experienced researchers. Kvale has described this as practice based learning—that's to say the activity, in this case collective qualitative analysis, "is taught by exploring the activity in collaborative research practices" (Kvale, 1999, p. 149, translated). From the supervisor's perspective, collective qualitative analysis could give a more thorough insight into the data that you might otherwise have had, which probably would make the further tutoring easier and more interesting. It would also be easier to write a research article together with the student/candidate at a later point in time, if relevant.

However, it's worth bearing in mind that the status hierarchy between students and tutors can hinder the process, for example if the tutor has too much power to define and the student has little room to develop their own interpretations (see Cornish et al., 2014; Potter, 1998, for a discussion of status and power hierarchy in collective processes). Another challenge is that the workshop takes up a great deal of the time available for tutoring. One way to solve this challenge is to have group tutorials. The tutor could join in one of the workshops where you analyse one set of data, but where the whole group takes part in the process. Subsequently, the students could themselves organise the workshops where they analysed the data from the other students according to the model of the process the tutor joined. Students and PhD candidates can, of course, also organise analysis workshops without a tutor.

Another possibility for further development is to use collective qualitative analysis to include people that are not researchers or students in the process of analysis. They could be collaborators in the project or representatives for the groups being researched. In "Queer Migrants" we organised a workshop where we included people who are queer migrants to contribute to the first draft of the report. But it could also be possible to include them in the analysis workshop.⁸ As Widerberg points out:

"In this way, different forms of collectives could be used at different points to contribute to

8. If people who are not part of the research group are to participate in collective qualitative analysis, you would have to either anonymise the data or register them as part of the research group in Norsksenter for forskningsdata (NSD).

a richer interpretation. The research subject would be able to contribute, for example by clarifying the role our understanding plays in the interpretation of their statements” (Widerberg, 2001, p. 29, translated). Participating in the analytical process should also make people who are not researchers better able to use, discuss, and criticise research (Allen et al., 2019). A possible challenge is that the research subjects could experience the interpretations as problematic, and the question is how you handle this when they are invited into the process of analysis.

A third possibility for development is to use collective qualitative analysis to analyse other types of qualitative data other than interviews. In “Ageing at home” for example, we analysed—in addition to qualitative interviews—the field notes as a part of the process. I imagine it could be an idea to work in a similar way to the process I’ve described here, also if the data consists of observational notes, photos or texts (for example literature, textbooks, newspaper articles, social media and similar sources). You could also use other analytical strategies apart from thematic analysis. With a narrative analysis, it could be useful to present a few selected excerpts in greater detail, shown text extracts on screen, and discuss interpretations. I also think that collective analysis could be useful in analysing quantitative data, even though you would probably have to organise the process differently. In “Queer Migrants” we also started the analysis of the quantitative data with a collective workshop and in an ongoing research project about the living conditions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer people (LGBTQI people),⁹ we are planning to test collective analysis of quantitative data.

Collective qualitative analysis—as I’ve described it here—is a starting point for the analysis. It doesn’t provide any guarantees of good, interesting, and valid analysis. As Rapley has pointed out, good qualitative data analysis can never be summed up by “a list of specific steps or procedures that have been undertaken. Above all, you need to develop a working, hands-on, empirical, tacit knowledge of analysis. This should enable you to develop, what I can only think to call, ‘a qualitative analytic attitude’” (Rapley as quoted in Silverman, 2014, p. 115). In this article I’ve emphasised a thorough understanding of the four steps of the process, so that the reader can gain a clear understanding of how we’ve worked. The description might be slightly coloured by being a recipe, which is useful when you’re about to do something you haven’t done before (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dreyfus et al., 1980, p. 283; Johannessen et al., 2018). However, the aim of collective qualitative analysis is to create an analytic process where we can learn, correct, and develop the analytical attitude in dialogue with others. The aim of the article is to contribute to—and encourage others to take part in—the development of collective methods of analysis.

About the Article

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9. For information about the project, see <https://www.uib.no/lhbtis-levekar2020>

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