Qualitative Data Analysis: Challenges and Dilemmas Related to Theory and Method

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The purpose of this article is to initiate a discussion of the struggles and challenges we encountered as we developed a method of analysis for a particular qualitative study. We present our thinking process showing the questions that arose, the theoretical ideas on which we relied, and the decisions we made at crucial junctures. Portions from several theoretical frames used as the basis for the analysis are presented and include Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative inquiry, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) and Charmaz's (2000) grounded theory, Riessman's (1990b) mixed approach to analysis, and Rosaldo's (1989) ideas on reflexivity. Examples from the study are used to illustrate points in the analysis.


Qualitative research studies have been found in occupational science and occupational therapy journals for a number of years, however, with the recent influx of such articles, there is an interest in public discussion about the data analysis process. This article explores the data analysis methods used in a study that we are currently conducting regarding the occupation of homemaking by lesbian couples. We hope to illuminate our challenges and thinking processes as we seek out the appropriate methods of analysis that will enable us to truly capture the rich insights of our participants. We hope that engaging in a candid discussion about these deliberations and efforts will: a) encourage others to share their analytical procedures so we can raise awareness about the variety of methods being used; b) broaden our ability to generate particular knowledge from the data to answer our research questions; and c) embolden occupational scientists to take new and varied approaches to data analysis so that we may discover useful methods.

**Background to the Study**

The purpose of the study described here was to gather information about the ways in which lesbian couples create a home through homemaking occupations. Gender ideologies strongly influence the management of household activities in traditional female–male relationships. By removing gender differences from the equation, we hoped to uncover other perspectives than those both knowingly and unknowingly understood and practiced in female–male partnerships. Not only was the study a pilot to ascertain the possibility and value of conducting a more comprehensive study, but we also used it to pilot different methods of analysis.

The participants in this study were 13 couples (n = 26) at least 25 years old, who had been living together for 5 or more years, were not full-time students, and had no dependents living in their homes. We located our participants using the snowball method, starting with two couples who were recommended by a col-

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league who, in turn, recommended friends. As a consequence of the participant selection method, a disproportionately large number of the women were over 50 years of age, were highly educated, employed in professional or white collar jobs, and earned more than $60,000 per year. Each woman was interviewed independently of her partner for about 1 to 2 hours, usually in her home; all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews were largely open-ended, however, we did ask questions on specific topics to ensure that we had covered certain content areas, such as management of finances, use of space, solitary versus coupled activities, decision-making, and influences on homemaking occupations. The global research question was, how do lesbian couples create a home through homemaking occupations?

We transcribed our own tapes in an effort to familiarize ourselves with the data. After the first four interviews, we held weekly meetings where we began the task of “making sense” of the data. Initially, it appeared obvious to us that we would code the data using a modified version of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998a) grounded theory method. However, shortly after we began the coding process, it became evident that we were shifting into other methods of analysis and that we needed to rethink what we were doing.

Background of Researchers

As researchers, we came together with varied previous experiences. For example, although the second author had been successful using the grounded theory method to describe the adaptive strategies of elders (Jackson, 1996), the first author had tried and failed at “pure” grounded theory because she couldn’t get to the point where the data coalesced into a theoretical construct. Both had experience using narratives but from completely different perspectives. The second author had used Polkinghorne’s narrative analysis approaches (1988, 1995) to reconfigure an occupational therapy session, thus providing a complex and transparent account of the event (Jackson, 1998). The first author had analyzed a short chunk of narrative taken from an entire interview and applied Labov’s (1982) linguistic method of analysis (Bailey, 2001).

We found that we interpreted differently even such basic grounded theory terms as codes, themes, and narratives and we shared our definitions endlessly in an attempt to reach consensus. We gained personal insight into the widely accepted notion that although the research question guides the choice of analytic methods, many qualitative researchers gain comfort and expertise in one or two particular methods and then use those predominantly in their own research.

Theoretical Foundations for Our Data Analysis

Although in the beginning of the analysis we felt we were doing modified grounded theory, the specifics of the procedure had slightly different meanings for each of us. For instance, what did “modified” mean? How exactly were we modifying grounded theory? How did we each understand grounded theory to begin with, before we started to modify it? Following numerous discussions, it became apparent that neither of us felt completely satisfied with this approach beyond the first step of coding. We were concerned that we were already losing the uniqueness of each of our interviewees.

We shared Riessman’s frustration (1990a) with grounded theory methods. She feels that the process does not respect the interviewee’s portrayal of their stories; the method fractures the data, thus limiting researchers’ understanding of the interviewee’s perspective and preventing them from portraying a participant’s experience in its fullness. This concern led us to an examination of other styles of analysis that would allow us to retain the integrity of each woman’s responses, and ultimately led to our desire to use several methods of analysis within the one study.

Concurrently we were asked to present our study as part of a panel on narrative analysis methods. That request begged the question, “What about our research analysis was narrative?” We expected that we would have some narrative data, but we were planning on coding not story building. We struggled with the concept of narrative and its variety of definitions and interpretations within the literature, and ultimately settled upon Donald Polkinghorne’s work (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Polkinghorne & Gribbons, 1999). We felt that his approach to narrative inquiry provided a framework for understanding the types of data we had received and the analytical approaches that were available to us. We will present some of Polkinghorne’s concepts in this paper to set a framework for the struggles and dilemmas we have encountered during our journey through the analysis.

Narrative data and narrative analysis. Polkinghorne calls attention to the fact that literature about qualitative methods muddles the concept of narratives. The confusion in part lies in the fact that the term narrative can apply to a) types of data and b) types of analysis. But first, Polkinghorne differentiates between non-narrative and narrative data. Non-narrative data are pieces of information that, from a temporal perspective, are in the moment and provide little to no sense of historical or future meaning. Their form is that of a chronological listing of events. An example would be, “Who does most of the housework?” “Mary

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does. She usually cooks dinner, vacuums, and takes care of the laundry.” If the question was left at this point, it would provide factual information but not contextualized information.

Narrative data, on the other hand, are given in storied form and provide information about connected events that have a temporal sequence and an intentional quality. Narrative data present people’s explanations about why and how things come about. As Polkinghorne (1995) points out, people will ordinarily share information through telling stories if the interviewer is a sensitive listener and does not interrupt. Here the term “narrative” refers to the data and not to an analytic process.

Moving on to process, Polkinghorne delineates between two approaches to narrative inquiry—“analysis of narratives” and “narrative analysis.” Drawing from Bruner’s (1986) work on cognitive modes of reasoning, Polkinghorne points out that each approach to narrative inquiry corresponds to a particular style of cognitive reasoning. Analysis of narratives is produced using paradigmatic reasoning, a logical way of knowing that uses classification systems to bring order to various elements in the world. Paradigmatic reasoning refers to the way people understand the world through “cognitive networks of concepts” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10). Analysis of narratives which emerges from paradigmatic reasoning reduces stories to their common elements thus producing general knowledge. Using this cognitive mode of thought, the researcher scrutinizes the data to discover categories describing common themes that appear across the stories and then through further analysis draws relationships between the categories. Polkinghorne points out that analysis of narratives requires methods similar to those proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their grounded theory method.

The second approach to analyzing narrative data is based on narrative reasoning, which is a way of knowing that operates by noticing elements of a situation that make it unique. Narrative reasoning answers questions about how a particular situation came about. It “retains the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11). Thus, when using narrative reasoning, the researcher engages in narrative analysis by pulling together the happenings and events that he or she has gathered from a single individual’s experience and constructs a coherent story that provides a new understanding of a particular situation. Narrative analysis seeks out the particulars of a situation and the complexities of an individual’s life. It takes into account the temporal dimensions of activities, the intentions of the actors, and the unintended consequences of action that may have a strong bearing on the outcome of the story. Narrative analysis is not simply a descriptive restructuring of the events but rather a higher order story that is informed by theoretical knowledge and actual events. Polkinghorne explains, “The final story must fit the data while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves” (p. 18). Polkinghorne stresses that both types of narrative inquiry produce valuable products but in different cognitive forms. In order to clarify for ourselves the elements of Polkinghorne’s two approaches, we produced a table summarizing portions of his thinking.

Using Polkinghorne’s model as a guideline, we returned to our transcripts to ascertain the types of data we had received. According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative data are necessary for narrative types of analysis. We found our data to be filled with narrative information because our research questions had demanded embedded information. Had we been examining solely the division of household labor, we might have been able to rely upon noncontextualized data. However, our real interest lay in the all-inclusive process of creating a home. The notion of process itself has temporal and developmental qualities and “home” is imbued with meaning. Consequently, even when we did elicit discrete bits of information during the interviews, we had probed until we found a contextualized story or episode.

Polkinghorne (1995), however, comments that a unique aspect of storied narratives (narrative data) is that they are not a mere listing of events but rather “are sustained emplotted accounts with a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 12). Whereas a few interviews did produce the type of neat data that are emplotted accounts with a beginning, middle, and end, for the most part our data were anything but neat. Upon rereading each interview we found that at times there were lengthy discussions about material that was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis of Narrative</th>
<th>Narrative Analysis</th>
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<td>Based on: Paradigmatic reasoning (e.g., the logical/scientific approach of Strauss and Corbin’s coding).</td>
<td>Narrative reasoning (e.g., Bruner’s “storied knowing”).</td>
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| Data: Collect stories as data. | Collect descriptions of events, happenings, and actions. |
| Analysis: Identifies aspects of data as instances of categories (e.g., coding). | Produces storied accounts. |
| Produces: Knowledge of general concepts that look across several people and several situations, and searches for commonalities. | Knowledge of particular situations and a particular person. Attends to differences between people. Describes the person and his or her situation in order to better understand his or her situation. |
irrelevant to the focus of our study. On the other hand, there were times when what appeared to be an irrelevant digression at the time, actually provided important insights into the context in which housework was shared or into the dynamics between the couple. There was also an interview during which the respondent rarely addressed any specific question or probe but rather told her own snippets of stories which, when transcribed and read, provided valuable information that was rich in metaphor and symbolic representation.

In the end we had accumulated all types of data, some narrative and some noncontextualized, factual answers. We had data that were clearly storied episodes, data that contained contextualized facts and emotion but without a sense of temporality, and we had rich stories filled with symbolic representation.

Given that we had acquired various types of data we had the opportunity to use multiple types of analysis depending on the type of outcomes we were soliciting. At this point in our process we were using a modified grounded theory approach because we had envisioned that we would find categories of activities that would contribute to a description and explanation of how lesbian women create home through household occupations. Thus, according to Polkinghorne’s framework, we were engaged in analysis of narrative taking a modified grounded theory approach. This led us to a greater exploration of the literature on methodologies within grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998a, 1998b).

Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2000) has written a thorough explanation and critique of grounded theory in which she states that although “Grounded theory served at the front of the qualitative revolution…at a critical point in social science history,” its “methods have now come under attack from both within and without” (p. 509). She describes grounded theory methods as “systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (p. 509). Glaser, cofounder of grounded theory, maintains that his theory is built on assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who “discovers” data in an unbiased fashion, a reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and an objective reporting of data (Glaser, 1978, 1992).

In their early text on grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed a set of guidelines for data analysis from which to build explanatory frameworks that illuminate relationships between concepts—a grounded theory. The strategies of grounded theory may be summarized as a) simultaneous collection and analysis of data, b) a structured data coding process, c) constant comparative methods for analysis, d) memo writing for the construction of a conceptual analysis, e) sampling to refine the researcher’s emerging theoretical ideas, and f) integration of the theoretical framework.

Several years after the publication of their important book in 1967, Glaser and Strauss had a major disagreement about the emergence of theory from the data analysis, Glaser feeling that “true” categories and properties will emerge if there is sufficient analysis of basic social processes in the data—the essence of discovering theory in the data. He believed that approaching the data with an open mind, devoid of preconceived notions, was essential to ensure that the final theory truly emerged from the data. Later, Glaser felt that Strauss and fellow researcher Corbin veered away from the principles of the original theory by gathering data under the influence of preconceived questions or frameworks, sometimes known as sensitizing concepts, thus biasing the emerging theory. Glaser (1992) declared that Strauss and Corbin use contrived comparisons rather than those that have emerged from comparing data to data, concept to concept, and category to category—the method of constant comparison.

As grounded theory methods evolved, some theorists departed from the original notion of “pure” inductive analysis, arguing that researchers inevitably bring their prior theoretical stance or research experience to the coding process (Boyatzis, 1998; Charmaz, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998b). Proponents of this view assert that researchers approach their data with a repertoire of knowledge that is embedded in their life worlds, knowledge from the multiple scientific and folk theories that are relied upon to make sense of human action (Bruner, 1986). This recent school of thought has led many researchers to acknowledge that sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2000), preconceived notions (Boyatzis, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998b), theory (Boyatzis, 1998) or logical possibilities (Polkinghorne, 1995) are brought to the coding process.

Our Struggle With Inductive Coding Versus Theory Driven Coding

We began our quest for findings by transcribing the tapes into text and then coding the text, both by ourselves and together. Consistent with our initial plans to use a grounded theory methodology, we scanned through our interviews looking for concepts, processes, emotions, or any content that pertained to the notion of creating a home through household occupation.
Later, in a retrospective examination of our own process, we realized that we had struggled with the dilemma of whether or not to strive to perform pure inductive coding or to code the data driven by preconceived notions. Later discussions revealed we were using, but not articulating to each other, both schools of thought. One author focused on the data-driven, inductive method while the other tended to mix inductive coding with the logical possibilities or theory-driven method of coding. Charmaz (2000) offers a compromise between strictly inductive versus theory-driven coding. Although she advocates for inductive coding because it helps us remain attuned to our respondents’ view of their realities and deters us from imposing extant theories or our own beliefs on the data, she acknowledges that researchers use sensitizing concepts—those background ideas that inform the research problem. “Sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience; they are embedded in our disciplinary emphases and perspectival proclivities” (p. 515). She warns that we should use sensitizing concepts only as points of departure from which to study the data.

Acknowledging Our Reflexivity

During discussions on this notion of sensitizing concepts, we acknowledged that we had brought our own personal experience, both to the study and to the coding. There were many times while reading the data when we connected with our interviewees’ responses and found ourselves reflecting upon our own experiences with the occupation of homemaking. We acknowledged our reflexivity and were aware that we brought background and experiences to the study that influenced our coding. We reread Rosaldo’s (1989) vintage piece, and resonate with his view that “In contrast with the classic view, which posits culture as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns, culture can arguably be conceived as a more porous array of intersections….Such heterogeneous processes often derive from differences of age, gender, class, race, and sexual orientation” (pp. 20–21). In relation to a researcher’s reflexivity, he argues that “….a sea change in cultural studies has eroded once-dominant conceptions of truth and objectivity…Such terms as ‘objectivity,’ ‘neutrality,’ and ‘impartiality’ refer to…positions once endowed with great institutional authority, but they are arguably neither more nor less valid than those of more engaged, yet equally perceptive, knowledgeable social actors” (p. 21). We discussed our thoughts and feelings as they related to our own experiences while reading and coding the data in an effort to identify the influence they may have had on the analysis process.

Defining Codes

In spite of the initial covert discrepancy of our styles between inductive coding and coding according to preconceived notions, we eventually identified about forty codes with which we were satisfied, and our next step was to set about constructing definitions for those codes. Neither Strauss and Corbin or Charmaz overtly describe how they define their codes, rather they offer insights into how they develop codes into conceptual frameworks. Strauss and Corbin (1998a) introduce procedures for refining initial codes: dimensionalizing, axial coding, and the conditional matrix. These techniques make emerging theories denser, more complex, and more precise. In the beginning stages of initial coding, dimensionalizing and axial coding can lead to a thorough understanding of codes that have been derived from the data. Charmaz (2000) suggests developing categories by synthesizing and explaining data that have been coded. Categories often encompass several codes and lead to definitions that contribute to the conceptual analysis.

For our analysis, definitions of codes were a compilation of how a particular code was expressed in the interviews. For example, for the code Partnership Styles one person said, “It’s a partnership; we both share the housework evenly.” While another said, “One talks, one just does it.” These two phrases became part of our early working definition for partnership styles. Later, we added comments that had been coded Partnership Styles from subsequent interviews such as, “Mary doesn’t work, so she does all the housework.” “We try to make it fair and equal,” and “We try to avoid societal gender expectations and role playing around housework.”

After realizing that several of the developing categories were reflective of the main topics of our interview questions, we went back and used each interview question as a category for coding. During this process, we were using a theory-driven approach because we had used the literature to inform the content of our interview questions. Using questions as coding categories in addition to the original forty codes, led to a richer understanding of each topic across all individuals and couples. For example, the question, “Can you tell me something about your financial arrangements?” elicited a huge variety of responses across couples. To illustrate, Ellen (pseudonyms are used throughout), the older partner of one couple, supported herself and her partner through her work as an artist and by using money she had saved over the years, while the younger woman “kept house.” Ellen wanted it this way and encouraged Susan to “stay home and cook.” For several couples, there was a wide discrepancy in earning power between the women and the one earning more contributed more to the
household finances. In yet two other couples, the women's fortunes changed over the years and they alternated in supporting each other according to who earned the highest salary at the time.

The Struggle To Maintain Integrity and Context

In the grounded theory data analysis process, coding leads to the development of categories and the use of the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method is described as comparing different people in the study, comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time, comparing incident with incident, and comparing data across categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It was as we were engaged in constant comparison that we felt we were losing touch with the individuality of the women in the study. The content of each interview was unique, differing from the next in tone, emotional involvement, physical involvement (for example, tours of their homes and gardens; showing sacred places in their home), and the interviewee's choice of interview content. It seemed we were at risk of losing those distinctive attributes if we continued to pursue the grounded theory coding method. Furthermore, as we continued to reread the data we noticed certain stories leapt off the page—they wanted to be told. For example, we found a remarkable response from an interviewee who used the description of her home as a metaphor to represent the transitions she experienced during her 20-year relationship with her partner. Her story begged to be told as a symbolic representation and the data could not be fractionated if we were to understand this woman's way of creating home for herself, her partner, and her partner's family.

Similarly, we uncovered startling results when we put a couple's responses side-by-side. Reading the interviews in tandem provided important insights into the two women's occupational interactions around creating a home together. Not surprisingly, this method reveals different types of information than was identified when coding each woman's interview separately. The finding was particularly salient because our research question asked, “How do lesbian couples create home?” To illustrate these two findings we offer the interviewee who used the description of her home as a metaphor to represent the transitions she experienced during her 20-year relationship with her partner. Her story begged to be told as a symbolic representation and the data could not be fractionated if we were to understand this woman's way of creating home for herself, her partner, and her partner's family.

Home as a Symbolic Representation

Miriam and her partner, Phyllis, are both musicians in their late 50s. They have been together for over 15 years. Miriam's point of view is told here. Toward the end of her interview she states, “My home is a metaphor. I've built an estate all by myself, just by my wits and my talents.” In no other interview did the physical house so clearly stand as a symbolic representation of one person's struggle to create a home for herself, her partner, and her partner's children.

The 10-year project of building and repairing coincides with a somewhat tumultuous relationship in which Miriam created a steady, unaltering foundation while her partner attempted to raise her three children and come into her own. As Miriam states, “When Phyllis and I got together, she didn't have anything. She had left a marriage and she was just becoming an independent person—I mean, she didn't even have a career at this point.”

In 1986, Phyllis having recently divorced her husband, moved with her three children into Miriam's home to begin a new relationship. To accommodate her new partner and her children, Miriam began to rearrange the house both creating space for bedrooms and ultimately rebuilding the garage into an apartment and a music studio. Miriam scrimped and saved to add this extension to her home, reflecting her never-ending attempt to provide food and shelter for her acquired family.

Beyond the actual building of the addition, Miriam talks passionately about the memories that are literally embodied within the structure of the house. Speaking about the older son she states, “I have the scuff marks on the wall from his feet.” And about one of the daughters she states, “She was the only one in the household who had a private room—privacy. You know, she could close her door. We had no door to close.” For Miriam, her home exudes the family history, the scuff marks reminding her of the time she spent helping Teddy with his math homework, and the remaining boxes of Susie's belongings piled up in her old room as evidence of the 12 years she lived there. Despite the years of activity that went on in their home, it is only Miriam, and at times Phyllis, who can hear the walls whisper their history. In fact, Phyllis's son can not even remember living there. Miriam commented, “Um, it was pretty amazing…He was in such denial that he had a bedroom, you know. He just doesn't remember.” Miriam was the provider, the maintainer, the rock that held the family together, all tasks of which she is deeply proud. “I've actually provided very well for everyone's security.”

Reflecting on her relationship with Phyllis, Miriam claims, “Well, we have a different skew on just about everything.” Throughout the interview Miriam tacks back and forth between concrete aspects of their home and symbolic meanings of the home to their relationship. She talks about the large discrepancy in their aesthetic tastes. “...the studio is my room. She has a room that she can do anything she...”
wants in. And then we have—the rest of the house is a joint house, that we have to agree on. So, I like more clutter than she does…not clutter, it’s different. I like frogs and I like to see things around that make me happy. So, she doesn’t particularly want frogs all over the house. So I have to keep the frogs in my space…she tends to like white walls, except in her room—she’s got pictures all over her room…I don’t understand the dichotomy or the discrepancy, but whatever—it’s her room, she can do whatever she wants in it. That’s ground central.”

Miriam goes on to talk about compromise: “After all these years, I guess we’ve learned to adapt our taste to each other a bit. I mean without compromising our own sense of aesthetics. We’ve discovered that we like certain things. I think that’s more it. We found the little spaces in between that we both like. I guess that part hasn’t been a compromise…the part that’s the compromise is finding the patience to look for those spaces where we meet.”

As the children were growing up “finding those spaces to meet” was difficult. Miriam indicated that the hot tub they bought became a physical spot designated as neutral territory where they could come together and “calm down.” Presently Miriam points out that as the children have grown and moved on with their own lives, Miriam and Phyllis have begun to reclaim the house and in doing so have reclaimed their relationship.

Their youngest daughter moved out about 3 years ago, and has finally removed all her belongings from her room. Miriam says, “So, now we’ve claimed the room—just recently actually, in the last few months. We bought some furniture…and now we can sit and relax in that room. Otherwise, we had no place in the house to relax except the living room and for some reason that didn’t draw us…but now we have a TV and a VCR, and a sofa bed, and a chair—and that seems to pull us in. We can sit and watch TV together…”

Again, the house symbolically and concretely reflects the shifts in Miriam’s and Phyllis’s relationship. Unlike years ago when Miriam engaged in an elaborate construction of rooms to welcome the family in, now the changes are about reclaiming the house and are designed to strengthen her relationship with Phyllis.

Ten years later, Miriam reflects upon the addition to her home. She states, “So, finally it was done, done, done. And I looked out here and I went, ‘I did this all by myself. I nailed every nail.’ And I felt like I would be OK.” In these comments, Miriam now depicts her home as representing security. House payments are covered by the person who rents the apartment, her own music studio provides a place of personal security and solace, and she is carving out a place for Phyllis and herself to build a secure relationship. “I feel content with even the little [amount of] time spent in my home. I don’t feel that I have to go looking outside my home for anything.”

Couples’ Stories

We had deliberately interviewed each member of all dyads separately so as to gain each one’s individual perspective and we wanted to retain those findings. However, as we reviewed each pair of women’s interviews side-by-side, we saw the dance of couples in the ongoing occupations of creating a home together. Examination of the interweaving of household occupations, the emotions surrounding them, and their historical and familial context produced fascinating stories.

As a very short example of a discrepancy in one couple’s story about finances, we offer Leila and Pam. One woman tended to be a careful and conservative spender while the other was a spendthrift, sometimes getting into debt. The way these habits and the resulting chaos were described by Leila and Pam, however, was totally different. Leila, the spendthrift, was interviewed first and she repeatedly stated that money was not important to her and that Pam managed all the household finances. She gave no indication that she is unable to handle money responsibly or that she had been in debt and that Pam had bailed her out many times. She simply repeated, “I’m not interested in money. You know, we meet some of these people and nothing bores me more than sitting around talking about investments. And where I came from, it was very bad form to talk about money.”

A little later, she took a different tack when she was describing how Pam is a good deal older than she is. She was looking to a time in the future when she will have to take over the couple’s finances and said, “I should know a lot more about our finances than I do, and some day I probably will be forced to. But until I’m forced to, I really don’t want to.”

When Pam was interviewed about a month later, we heard quite a different story. Not long into the interview, Pam mentioned that Leila was irresponsible and would keep spending even when she didn’t have the money. Leila works on commission and customers are often slow to pay up, yet Leila continues to spend even when times are lean. Pam said, “Leila has never saved a penny—ever. And is always in debt, and that upsets me. And the waste—even with food, you know; throw out this and throw out that. Plus, she works so hard to earn this money, and she’s always in debt and needs to pay off, you know? She’s done some very messy things with bank accounts, that now I’m very loathe to lend her anything.” Quite a different story from
the one told by Leila—not a disagreement between stories, but simply stories told from a very different perspective and with a great deal of omission. When we weave two women’s interviews together and view them as a whole, we are presented with a more complete understanding of their home-making occupations—how they create a home together as a couple.

The Decision To Add Narrative Analysis

Certain aspects of household occupations such as: the give and take; the negotiations and stand-offs; the interplay of both members in their ongoing household activities; the emotions surrounding that interplay; and their historical and familial context are simply not accessible with thematic coding. Thus, we reflected back on Polkinghorne’s framework and began to appreciate the type of understandings that narrative analysis could bring us. We felt lured by the possibility of using narrative analysis to illuminate the more nuanced aspects of creating a home and to bring to life the characters and their interaction with one another. In order for us to portray the realities of creating a home as told to us by our participants, we needed a methodology that would allow us to bring into focus the complexity, dynamism, emotionality, and compromise that make the process of creating a home come alive. We believe a storied form of describing and explaining the process would more accurately portray the ongoing experiences of individual participants.

At the time of writing this paper, we plan to move ahead with a modified Polkinghorne and Riessman approach for the narrative portion of the analysis. Simultaneously, we intend to continue exploring the literature in order to gather further knowledge of the underpinnings and analytical techniques of narrative inquiry.

Should We Use a Mixed Method of Analysis?

While understanding the advantages of analyzing our data both thematically and narratively, neither of us had a model for doing so. We wondered how mixed methods within one study had previously been used. What authority might we use as a model? During this questioning period, we remembered a respected, qualitative researcher who used a mixed method of analysis that we felt closely represented what we wanted to do. Cathy Riessman has used two types of analysis in the study that resulted in her book, Divorce Talk (1990b). She and two colleagues interviewed 104 men and women about their experience with divorce. Riessman used classic grounded theory methods for the first two thirds of her data analysis, describing the procedure in detail in an appendix in her book. She describes reading and rereading the transcripts, developing a broad set of codes to the point of saturation, recoding several times in the light of new concepts, examining dimensions and parameters for the emergent category to uncover the meaning of divorce for women compared with men. She used tables to enumerate the frequency of topics and parsed the material by subgroups of interviewees to form further themes. At least three chapters of the book are written about the thematic results of this process.

But then Riessman notes that, “Although the approach of grounded theory proved helpful in making sense of the themes, it was not always sufficient. The method necessitates fragmenting the interview text into codable chunks that share a common content area or topic” (1990b, p. 229). She noticed interviewees stitching together several themes into long narratives and wanted to respect the way they organized their replies and “find an alternative to fracturing their texts” (p. 229). She ultimately used the work of Elliot Mishler (1986a, 1986b) and Susan Bell (1991) to find “a way into these texts” (p. 229) and wrote one chapter of her book using narrative analysis methods. Using extensive quotes from the interviewees allowed the individuals themselves to construct their accounts. Following this constructionist approach, rather than writing a report she felt disembodied the participants, Riessman allowed them to speak on their own behalf.

Turning to our own data, we felt that Riessman’s mixed method approach would fit our study perfectly. If we performed solely grounded theory methods, we would produce general concepts across several people and situations while looking for commonalities across the occupations of creating a home. If we were to use solely narrative analysis, on the other hand, we would examine and deconstruct the data from one person, attending to the uniqueness of that person; we then would describe that person's experience using reconstructed language to achieve a new understanding of that particular woman. Neither method used to the exclusion of the other, we felt, would allow us to fully mine the data. Therefore, as we move forward with the study, we plan to perform both thematic analysis and narrative analysis in order to fully represent the women in the study as both unique individuals and as a small group of lesbian couples who can teach us something about how they create home.

Summary

As qualitative research continues to be employed by occupational scientists and occupational therapists, it is our belief that more dialogue is needed to enhance the quality of the work being produced. In this paper, we have pre-
sented the process of analysis in which we engaged while carrying out a qualitative study about lesbian couples creating a home through household occupations. We confronted many struggles and challenges about theoretical approaches, methods, and outcomes while pursuing our original intent to apply grounded theory methods. In order to help with our struggles, we scrutinized the literature, recognized the unique knowledge that each method could give us, and realized our need to combine methods to represent our participants fully and fairly. We offer this paper as a way to open a dialogue with our fellow qualitative researchers and look forward to continued discussions about analysis methods used in qualitative research. ▲

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References