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MQP Rumination # 8

Make Qualitative Analysis First and Foremost Qualitative

I am indulging in one personal rumination per chapter. These are issues that have persistently engaged, sometimes annoyed, occasionally haunted, and often amused me over more than 40 years of research and evaluation practice. Here's where I state my case on the issue and make my peace.

Here's the scenario. I've conducted 15 key informant interviews with executive directors of nonprofit agencies that receive funds from

the same philanthropic foundation. I'm presenting the results to the foundation's senior staff and trustees. I report as follows:



Most of those I interviewed report being quite frustrated with your evaluation reporting requirements. They don't think you're asking the most important questions and they are dubious that anyone here is reading or using their reports. Most said that they get no feedback after submitting the required reports.

I then share three examples of direct quotes supporting this overall conclusion:

- "I do the reports because we're required to, and we take them seriously and answer seriously. But there are important things we'd like to report and think they'd like to know that aren't asked, and there's no space for. That feels like a lost opportunity."
- "Look, I've been at this for years. It's very frustrating. We know it's just a compliance thing. No one reads our reports. We do them because they're required. That's it. End of story."
- "Truth be told, it's a waste of time, a frustrating waste of time." I then invite questions, comments, and reactions. The board chair asks, "How many said it was a waste of time?"

I take a deep breath, and bite my tongue (metaphorically) to stop myself from saying, "You have a problem here. Does it really matter whether it's 7 people or 9 or 12? You have a problem! It's not about the number. It's about the substance. YOU HAVE A PROBLEM!"

The Allure of Precision

This scenario occurs over and over again. It's the knee-jerk response to the ambiguities of qualitative findings: "Many said," "some said," "a few said," and so on. When presenting findings at a major international evaluation that involved 20 key informant interviews, the response from the conference chair was to dismiss the report as "evaluation by adjective." He wanted to know how many said what? "What are the percentages?" he demanded.

I refused. I invite you to refuse. Here are 5 reasons why. (Count them. There are exactly 5 reasons. Now I could have generated 10 reasons or just offered my top 3. But I decided on 5. Elsewhere, I've offered lists of 10, 12, or 3, but 5 struck me as about right for a rumination. So that's what you get: 5.)

1. *Open-ended interviews generate diverse responses.* That's the purpose of an open-ended question, to find out what's salient in the interviewees' own words. We then group together those responses that manifest a common

theme. The three quotes above all fall into a category of *Feeling Frustrated*. Only one person used the phrase "waste of time." Another said, "I put it off as long as I can and do it just in time to meet the deadline for submission, because I have a lot of more important things to do and it's not a great use of my time. But I do it." Not quite "waste of time," but pretty close. What responses go together is a matter of interpretation and judgment. Coding, categorizing, and theme analysis are not precise. The result is qualitative. Stay qualitative.

2. *The adjectives "most," "many," "some," or "a few" are actually more accurate than a precise number.* It's common to have a couple of responses that could be included in the category or left out, thus changing the number. I don't want to add a quote to a category just to increase the number. I want to add it because, in my judgment, it fits. So when I code 12 of 20 saying some version of "feeling frustrated," I'm confident in reporting that "many" felt frustrated. It could have been 10, or it could have been 14, depending on the coding. But it definitely was *many*.
3. *Percentages may be misleading.* With a key informant sample of 20, each response is 5%. Thus, going from 12 of 20 to 14 of 20 is a jump from 60% to 70%. In a survey of 300 respondents, a 10% difference is significant. In a small purposeful sample, it's not. Going from 12 to 14 is still "many."
4. *The "how many" question can distract from dealing with substantive significance.* I regularly conduct workshops with 20 to 40 participants. The workshop sponsors usually have some standardized evaluation form that solicits ratings and then invites an overall open-ended response. Over the years, a single, particularly insightful and specific response has proved more valuable to me than a large number of general comments (e.g., "I learned a lot"). The point of qualitative analysis is not to determine how many said something. The point is to generate substantive insight into the phenomenon. One or two very insightful and substantive responses can easily trump 15 general responses. Here's an example. I interviewed 15 participants in an employment training program. Two female participants said they were on the verge of dropping out because of sexual harassment by a staff member. That's "only" 13%. That's just 2 of 15. But *any* sexual harassment is unacceptable. The program has a problem, a potentially quite serious problem.
5. *Small purposeful samples pose confidentiality challenges.* When I'm reporting qualitative findings, I say in the methods section that I will not report that "all" or "no one" responded in a certain way because that would potentially break the confidentiality pledge. In the example that opened this rumination, all the 15 agency directors I interviewed complained about the

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foundation's evaluation reporting process, especially the lack of feedback. But I reported that "many" complained, and refused attempts to get me to provide a number (which would have been 20 of 20), so as not to put any of the directors at risk.

Reasons Galore

So there you have 5 reasons to keep qualitative analysis qualitative. But maybe that doesn't seem like enough. Maybe you'd be more persuaded and feel more confident if I gave you 10 reasons. No sooner asked, than done. Here are 5 more rumination-inspired reasons to keep qualitative analysis first and foremost qualitative:

6. Because doing so demonstrates integrity
7. Because it reinforces the message that the inquiry is qualitative
8. Because it requires people to think about meanings
9. Because numbers are easily manipulated and analysis is corrupted under pressure to increase the number. (Hmmm, is that 2 reasons or just 1?)
10. Because meaning is essentially qualitative and about qualities
11. And a bonus item: *Generating numbers is not the purpose of qualitative inquiry.* If someone wants precise numbers, tell them to do a survey and ask closed questions and count the responses. That's what quantitative methods are for!

Pragmatism

Readers of this book know by now that I'm fundamentally a pragmatist. Thus, the prior points notwithstanding, sometimes numbers are appropriate, sometimes they are illuminative, and sometimes they are simply demanded by those who commission evaluations. My point is not to be rigid but to place the burden of proof on justifying *quantitizing*. Do not go gently down that primrose path. Use numbers when appropriate, and then in moderation.

Here's an example where numbers are appropriate. Psychologist Marvin Eisenstadt studied the link between career achievement and loss of a parent in childhood by identifying famous people from ancient Greece through to modern times whose lives merited significant entries in encyclopedias. He generated a list of 573 eminent people and did extensive research on their childhoods, an inquiry that took 10 years. "A quarter had lost at least one parent before the age of ten. By age 15, 34.5 percent had at least one parent die, and by the age of twenty, 45 percent" (Gladwell, 2013, p. 141). This conversion of qualitative codes to quantitative distributions is appropriate

because the sample size is large, the numbers are accurate, and the focus of the inquiry is on a single variable. When there is something meaningful to be counted, then count. As sample sizes increase, especially in mixed-methods studies, quantizing is likely to become even more pervasive. Now let me offer an example where quantizing strikes me as considerably less appropriate and meaningful.

Feeding the Quantitative Beast

The opening scenario in this rumination involved a board chair reacting to my qualitative presentation by asking how many said what. But those involved in qualitative studies exacerbate the problem by turning their reports into numbers even before being asked to do so. As I was completing this chapter, I received an analysis from a graduate student who had taken interviews I had given and counted how many times I used various words, a form of so-called content analysis that actually diminishes the meaning of both "content" and "analysis." Having counted my use of various words, he then correlated them. He was seeking my interpretation of a couple of statistical correlations that he couldn't explain. My response was that the entire analytical approach struck me as meaningless since I adapt my language in an interview to context, audience, and whatever I'm working on at the time. To lose the contextual meaning of words by counting them as isolated data points strikes me as highly problematic—and certainly not qualitative meaning making.

I receive a substantial number of qualitative evaluations to review each year. The most common pattern I see, and criticize in my review, is a qualitative study filled with numbers. Here's an example that just came to me the very week I was writing this rumination. I'm afraid my response was rather interperate.

Qualitative Report Excerpts

- Of the 20 students interviewed, 14 mentioned gaining leadership skills; 8 of 21 staff said leadership skills were important; 7 out of 13 field personnel said this, as did 4 out of 6 community leaders.
- Eighteen of the 20 students said they were more committed to scholarly publication; 2 said they didn't want to be university scholars.
- Two out of the seven program directors at different universities felt that the purpose of the professional development program was mainly to train advanced students how to write for academic publication; the other five emphasized writing for policymakers.
- Out of the 14 university researchers interviewed, 7 had no opinion about students becoming better teachers because they were not sure what the program was doing to train students as teachers. Four other interviewees claimed that combining teaching skills with research skills caused

confusion. Three said combining the two made sense and was valuable.

The 20-page report was filled with this kind of quantitative gibberish—I'm sorry, analytical reporting. Qualitative software easily generates such numbers, so that may feed this trend and give it the appearance of being appropriate

and expected. *It is not appropriate and should not be expected.* Indeed, I urge those involved in qualitative evaluations to make it clear at the outset to those who will be receiving the findings that numbers will generally not be reported. The focus will be on substantive significance. The point is not to be anti-numbers. The point is to be *pro-meaningfulness*. *Keep qualitative analysis first and foremost qualitative.*