QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

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Miles and Huberman's 1984 "sourcebook" presents a wide-ranging, creative set of ideas and strategies for analyzing qualitative evaluation/research data. A major message of this sourcebook is that important themes and especially patterns in a set of qualitative data can be effectively discerned, interpreted and reported via the use of displays. Matrix displays, in particular, are advocated for higher-order analyses of patterns in a set of descriptive results.

Examples of the matrix displays presented in this sourcebook include both descriptive and explanatory matrices, single-site and multiple-site matrices, those with both ordered and categorical dimensions, and two-way to N-way matrices. Entries in matrix displays include direct quotes from the data, data summaries, inquirer explanations, frequencies, and ratings or judgment.

This class activity is designed to give students practice in qualitative data analysis using Miles and Huberman's ideas about matrix displays.

MATERIALS

This activity is based on a hypothetical evaluation context presented in Handout 1. This handout includes four major sections:

1. Program context--a brief description of the evaluand

2. Evaluation context--presentation of the major evaluation question and a brief listing of the naturalistic evaluation methods used
3. "Final" category system for self-perceptions program outcome--results of a descriptive analysis of the data relevant to program participants' self-perceptions, presented as four major themes (The descriptive analysis here involved iterative data coding and development of a category system; see Lincoln & Guba, 1985, for this data analysis strategy.)

4. Further analysis via matrices or other displays--the target questions for this activity, e.g., "What kinds of matrices/displays might help further understand relationships of these [self-perceptions] data to program components, activities, processes?"

PROCEDURES

This class activity was designed for use toward the end of a "unit" on data analysis in a course on qualitative evaluation methods. Students should have done the relevant reading in Miles and Huberman ahead of time.

The procedures for implementing this activity are straightforward.

1. The instructor introduces the activity as practice in using Miles and Huberman's matrix display ideas for qualitative data analysis. The handout is reviewed with the students, in particular to ensure that they understand the third section presenting the hypothetical descriptive results.

2. Students are then divided into small groups of three to five each and asked to respond to the discussion questions identified by generating as many different matrix displays as possible in the time allotted. About 20 minutes works quite well for this small group discussion part of the activity. During this time, the instructor should circulate among the groups, answering questions and prompting creative thinking.

3. The class then reconvenes as a whole, and each group in turn is asked to share one or two of the displays they generated. As appropriate (e.g., for complicated displays), group representatives can put their displays on the blackboard for easier review. The instructor should focus discussion of each display thus shared around what questions it could answer, what patterns it could reveal, or what value it could have for this hypothetical evaluation context. The instructor should also provide some closure to the discussion by summarizing the major points illustrated.

This activity could be shortened (e.g., by assigning each group a different discussion question or by reducing the time allotted for the small group or whole class discussions) or lengthened (e.g., via more time allotted or by adding further questions).