CHAPTER 8

COLLECTING AND ANALYZING DATA

COLLECTING DATA

Once ethics approval has been granted, and the supervisor and committee agree to the merits and feasibility of the proposed research, data collection can begin. Collecting the data, or actually doing the research, is the most exciting part of graduate school. However, even when armed with the best question and research design, things do not always go according to plan. This chapter begins with a discussion of the challenges students can encounter when collecting the data. It then turns its attention to methods of analyzing qualitative data collected. Yin (2009) notes, “Unlike statistical analysis, there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide the novice” (p. 127). The chapter puts a greater focus on qualitative research because coding and analysis is interpretative and students are often on their own to make sense of the enormous quantity of data they have collected.

Recruiting and Retaining Participants

Students cannot recruit participants before obtaining ethics approval, so most operate on faith that others will be interested and willing to participate in their study. Many discover this is not the case and panic when recruitment ads bring fewer participants than expected or people do not take the time to answer even the most well crafted questionnaire. I advise students to be patient, and to widen the net. They may have specific participants in mind for the study, but others may provide equally valuable data.

Most students, at some point during their study, learn that they are more invested in their research than are their participants. Participants may start the research with excitement, but their interest may wane as time goes on. The thesis is not the participants’ main concern, even in PAR, which is intended to benefit them and their community. They may embrace the action phase of research, but lose motivation when it comes time to analyze the data. A doctoral student who worked with several colleagues to conduct action research to “green” their curriculum discovered this. Her colleagues
were fully engaged during the development and implementation phases, but were not involved in the reflection and data analysis. One teacher made this point clearly, stating, “This is your thesis, not mine.” This point is well taken. While the ultimate goal of the graduate student is to produce a thesis, it is not the goal of the participants, nor do they have any responsibility to ensure one is produced.

Participants can drift in and out of a study, or drop out altogether. This is not the same as withdrawing, in which a participant makes a conscious choice to not be part of a study. Participants may leave for personal reasons, some unrelated to the research. Usually, researchers can use data collected from participants who drop out and that data can be very useful.

Dealing with Unanticipated Ethical Issues

Although university ethics approval protocols attempt to address issues such as “heinous discovery,” “deception,” and “right to withdraw,” once researchers are in the field collecting data, ethical issues emerge. Problems are more prolific when dealing with other people’s lives and stories. Students find themselves confronted with issues that were never covered in their methods courses. Many post-thesis publications posit, “No one told me this would happen” or “what I wish I knew before I started this research.” Researchers cannot anticipate what will happen, and these papers attest to the transforming power of research.

Simply being in the field raises questions of identity. How do researchers present themselves? How does the researcher’s appearance impact the research? Does one try to blend in, and appear like an undercover policeman? Identity goes beyond appearance and is concerned with the researcher’s actions. For example, should a researcher go out for drinks with participants?

Money is at the root of some ethical issues. Students often view themselves as poor in society, and for good reason. Many are living below the poverty line, but this is a temporary (we hope) situation. However, compared to some of their participants, graduate students may be viewed as financially well off. Should the researcher reimburse participants for their time? Many university ethics offices may have guidelines concerning this, but they do not cover all possibilities. For example, should a researcher take participants places by car? Pick up the tab for groceries? Buy cigarettes and alcohol? Pay for lunch during an interview? Participants, too, can feel that the research is costing them. They may feel a responsibility to provide food and accommodations for the researcher, which can come at the expense of the needs of their family.