A Simple Card Trick: Teaching Qualitative Data Analysis Using a Deck of Playing Cards

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Abstract

Yet today, despite recent welcome additions, relatively little is written about teaching qualitative research. Why is that? This article reports out a relatively simple, yet appealing, pedagogical move, a lesson the author uses to teach qualitative data analysis. Data sorting and categorization, the use of tacit and explicit theory in data analysis, and discrepant case analysis can all be illustrated though use of a standard deck of playing cards. Use of playing cards appeals to those who learn best kinesthetically and is a welcome break from lecture-oriented, didactic teaching. It mirrors data sorting by hand and allows the instructor to highlight the importance of play in qualitative research.

Keywords

data analysis, teaching qualitative research, pedagogy

Why teaching? Why share out teaching tips or pedagogical moves with other academics? Teaching is perhaps the most important thing we do. My mentor, Harry Wolcott, shared this anecdote with me: Harry recounted how his mentor, George Spindler, was visiting when Harry came upon him early one morning going through the books and other papers in his library. After chiding Harry for not citing him in a particular piece of his writing, Spindler told Harry something to the effect that, "You know, Harry, after more than thirty years in this profession, I've come to the realization that it's really all about the teaching."

As I mature in my role as a university professor, I have clung to my early career identity as an elementary school teacher. (Harry inscribed my copy of his book *Teachers Versus Technocrats* [Wolcott, 1977/2003] to me in this simple way: "To Duncan: 'Teacher.'") Part of my maturation has been my working through an insecurity, reinforced by the norms of our profession and the wider U.S. society at large, concerning my teacher identity. Universities prize research above teaching. In the literature of our shared profession—that of qualitative research and qualitative research methodology—the theoretical and philosophical, even the procedural, are overly subscribed and the pedagogical is relatively underrepresented (Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011).

Though strides have been made relatively recently to fill this lacuna (e.g., Eisenhart & Jurow, 2011; Hurworth, 2008), there still remain unrecognized, unacknowledged, or ignored gaps in the field of qualitative research. As Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe (2000) remind us, an important part of a field, any field, is the recruitment, induction and incorporation of newcomers. In fact, it is the attractiveness of a field, its appeal, that is one important indicator of the field's health (Csikszentmihalyi & Wolfe, 2000; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001; Waite, 2005). Those already secure in their fields are responsible for the recruitment, inculcation, and socialization—in short, the education—of succeeding generations if the field is to remain viable and vibrant.

Credit is due to Eisenhart and Jurow (2011) for writing about teaching qualitative research and for sharing actual program and course objectives. Credit is also due to the editors of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) for publishing such an account. Still, most, if not all, of Eisenhart and Jurow's discussion focuses on what, in teacher parlance, we would call course and unit objectives, not what teachers refer to as actual lesson plans. But in the long and venerable tradition of teachers sharing their teaching practices with one another as personally and internally motivated professional development, I take this opportunity to share a pedagogical move—a lesson plan, if you will—that I developed and have used with some success to introduce graduate students to the concept of qualitative data analysis, one which, through the use of manipulatives and by engaging the tactile senses, captures

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the students' attention and allows a little respite from the overly cerebral mode of instruction found in most graduate school classrooms. It's something that students with vastly different learning styles can relate to. Also, as it uses playing cards, this lesson is appropriate for introducing or reinforcing the importance of play in doing qualitative research (as in playing with data; see also Ceisel, 2011; Hocker, 2011; Yomtoob, 2011).

The Card Sort

Try this simple activity I use with my qualitative research classes—both at the introductory level and the more advanced. Find a used deck of cards (if you use a new deck, shuffle the cards, all the cards—that is, everything included in the box, the pack, everything, before beginning).

I have enough decks of cards so that each person has one. With new decks like these, I shuffle all the cards, including the jokers and whatever "extra" cards there were in the pack (sometimes decks contain cards that explain the winning hands in poker, for example). I then place all the cards, now mixed up, back into their box (but still with the backs all facing the same direction). To start the lesson, I give each student a pack of cards and tell them to sort their cards. I ask that students just do as asked; no questions, no talking, working independently.

After the Task of Sorting the Cards Has Been Completed

Most students sort the cards into the four major suits—diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades. This is a simple sort.

I ask the students to think of the cards, all mixed up as they were, as their data set. They will need to sort their data. I tell them that they and they alone bring order to their data. Computer programs cannot do even this low-level analysis for them. That is, unless and until they begin defining the categories and labeling (coding) the data.

Some more ambitious types may have sorted the cards even further to order each suit. If so, usually the ordering is done like this: 2-10, jack, queen, king, ace. Or the further ordering may take this form: ace, 2-10, jack, queen, king for each suit (see Figure 1).

Once everyone has done this first sort, I take note of the way they have sorted their cards (the result) and add this kicker: "Okay, now sort your deck a different way!"

Once Students Have Completed Sorting Their Deck of Cards a Different Way

For this second sort, students take a little more time and put a little more thought and creativity into this different sort. It's hard to predict the results of this new sort. Some students will group all the cards with the same numerical value together; say all 2s, 3s, 4s, etcetera. Some group them according to the value they have in the person's favorite game.

Now, I ask my students why they sorted the deck the way they did the first time. Assuming your students are like mine—and like almost everyone else—and sorted according to either ascending or descending value, ask them why. Chances are their answer will be, "Well, that's the way the cards go." Or, "That's the way everybody does it." Or something along those lines. If you were to press them, as I do my students, "Why is that the way they go?" chances are they'll be at a loss for an explanation.

What this ordering according to the generally assumed common sense notion shows is what Maggie LeCompte (2000) terms the application of tacit theory to data analysis: My students usually can't articulate the theory they used to sort their deck of cards beforehand, and, most likely, they couldn't articulate the theory they used to sort the cards even after they did it. I try to drive this point home: that in the first sort they are applying tacit theories to their data.

Chances are, after the second, different sorting, students can explain why they sorted their deck of cards as they did. This illustrates what LeCompte (2000) refers to as the application of explicit theory or theories to qualitative data analysis.

We all make use of both types of theory, tacit and explicit, in categorizing or analyzing our data. The trick is to make explicit what it is we're doing. This explanation for the sorting becomes the characteristics of their categories. I have only recently come to the realization that I need to reinforce for students that they need to be just as explicit when distinguishing their data categories in their dissertation research as I've encouraged them to be, through my questioning, about their card sorts.

Discrepant Case Analysis

One more illustration from the card-sorting activity: I have my students look at their sorted deck of cards and ask them: "What did you do with the jokers and any other cards that weren't clearly part of a suit?" "Do you have any cards left over?" Generally my students have set these cards aside. I ask them why: "Were these not part of the deck of cards I gave you?" "Are they not cards themselves?" "If not, why not?"

I use the case of the card surplus to discuss discrepant case analysis. These "extra" cards in the deck don't clearly fit the pattern or fit into the categories my students have likely come up with. But they have many of the same characteristics as the others (and here I hold one up, showing my students the back of the card): "They are rectangular and constructed of the same material, aren't they?" "They have the same backing, right?" "So why don't they fit your categorization?" Answering this question—in the case of the

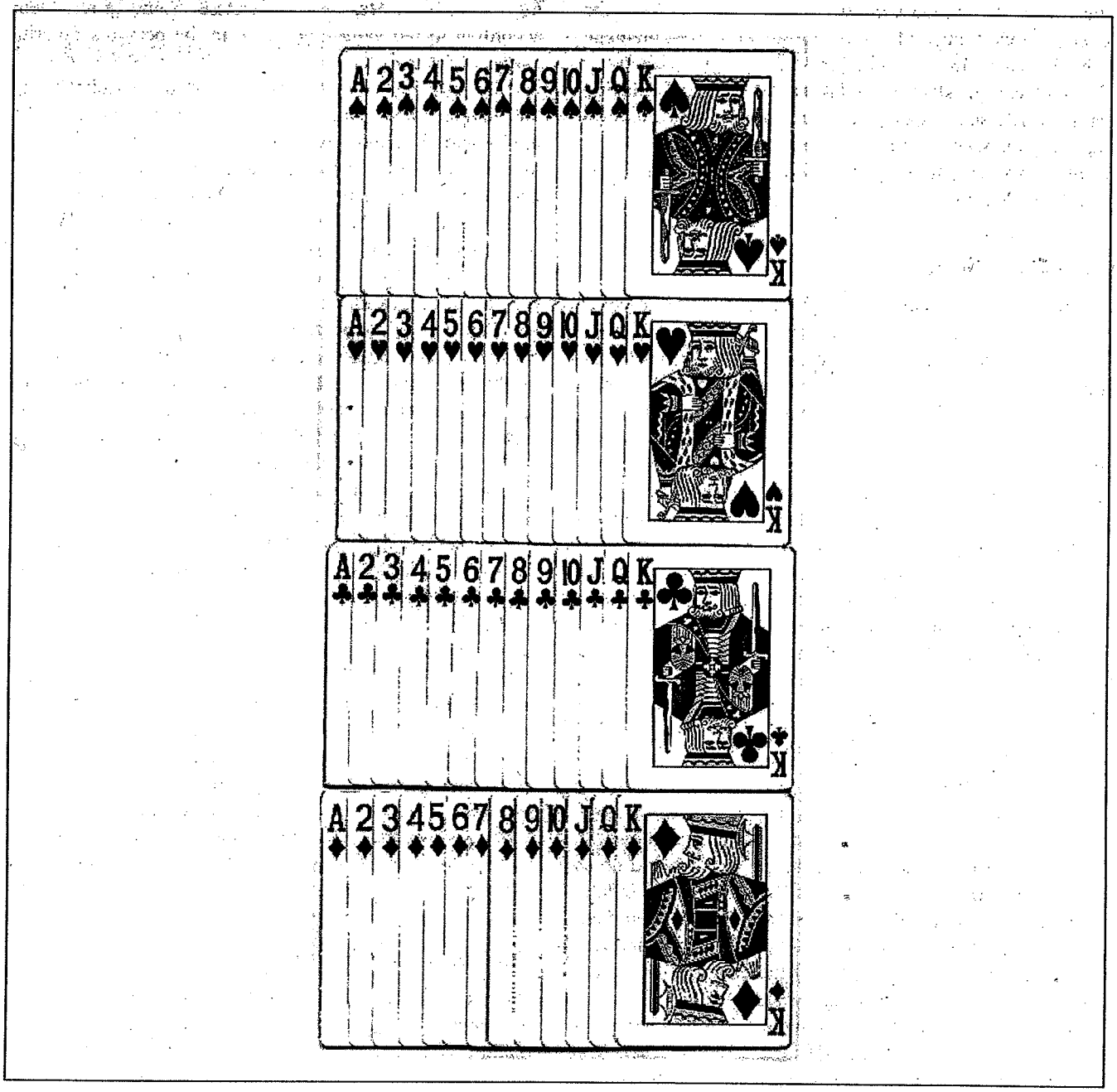

Figure 1. Card sort (U.S. standard)

card-sort activity discussed here and in their data analysis—encourages students to define and refine their categories and the essential characteristics they give to members of each category. I emphasize that defining and refining their categories and the definitions of the characteristics of the members of the various categories and of the overall set furthers their analysis. Through this process, I hope that students will develop their more explicit theories about what is occurring in the data they gather.

I let them know that they cannot simply throw out data that don't fit their neat categorizations. I tell them that somehow they need to account for these different data. I tell them that discrepant case analysis is a process (a type of sampling) where one might simply and only examine the outliers, the odd cases, with the expectation that these outlying cases will shed some light on the normal or mundane ones. And although the odd or discrepant cases or data don't need to be the focus of their study (for their analysis can

become a study in and of itself), I let them know that they do need to, first, acknowledge such extreme or odd cases, and, second, account for them or somehow relate them to their other data. It would be dishonest not to do so, and, as I've attempted to show above, these outliers can shed some light on what they think is their most robust data set.

Conclusion

Try this simple, fun activity. Likely you will find other uses for it, and maybe you'll see connections to other qualitative research concepts you're teaching. If you do, I hope you'll share those with me, and with others, and pass it on.

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Bio

Duncan Waite is a professor in education and community leadership at Texas State University, where he teaches qualitative research methods. He edits the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* and directs The International Center for Educational Leadership and Social Change. He has published in the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Teaching & Teacher Education*, the *Journal of School Leadership*, *School Leadership & Management*, *La Revista Española de Pedagogía*, and *The Urban Review*, among others. He has chapters in *The Handbook of Research on School Supervision*, *The Encyclopedia of Language and Education*, the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education*, and many other edited volumes.