Counting in Qualitative Research: Why to Conduct it, When to Avoid it, and When to Closet it

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Abstract

In this essay we discuss the issue of counting: the process of assigning numbers to data that are in non-numerical form. We review why counting is a controversial issue in qualitative research, and explain how this controversy creates what we call the “multiple audience problem” for qualitative researchers. We then identify the purposes that can be served by four different types of counting, explore when counting should be avoided entirely, and discuss when the results of counting should be concealed, or as Sutton put it, kept in the closet.

Keywords

research methods, qualitative research, qualitative data analysis, counting

In 1979, Miles, when lauding the strengths of qualitative data as “full, rich, {and} earthy” (p. 590) argued that it was an “attractive nuisance” because there was so little agreement, even among qualitative researchers, over how to analyze and write up qualitative data. Over 30 years have passed since he posed that argument, but recent work suggests that not much has changed. Although qualitative (and quantitative) researchers may desire to produce research that is well written, methodologically appropriate, and that makes a theoretical contribution, there is still no “boilerplate” for how to achieve these aims for qualitative researchers (Easterby-Smith, Gold-Biddle, & Locke, 2008; Pratt, 2009). One outcome of this lack of consensus is that qualitative researchers often face uncertainty about (a) how to conduct good research and (b) how to convince reviewers, editors, and the broader audience of readers of the quality of their work.

Ultimately, this general uncertainty manifests itself in more specific arguments about the merits of particular philosophical and methodological approaches. One such debate has arisen on the topic of counting: the process of assigning numbers to data that are non-numerical form. Some experts on qualitative research have written about the benefits that can come from counting, including its ability to help qualitative researchers produce more valid, persuasive arguments (e.g., Lee, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2006). As a result, qualitative researchers, as well as those who read and review qualitative research, can have a difficult time deciding when counting is and is not an appropriate approach to qualitative data analysis. The goal of this article is to provide qualitative researchers with advice to help them navigate this contested terrain.

Our approach was informed (and in some senses provoked) by Robert Sutton’s (1997) essay entitled “The Virtues of Closet Qualitative Research.” His central argument was that there are “… times when it is best to conceal or downplay the role that qualitative data played in developing an author’s ideas” (p. 97). In concluding his essay, he noted that it might be possible, though difficult, to similarly explore situations where closeted quantitative research might occur. In the present article we have explored one aspect of closeted quantitative research by examining instances where the counting or quantification of qualitative data is hidden. We have also gone somewhat further in two ways. First, we identify four different forms of counting and explore the purpose and potential benefits of each one. In addition, we suggest that there are times that the quantification of qualitative data should be avoided entirely, rather than conducted and then hidden.

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