‘Good’ qualitative analysis – examiners’ views.

Abstract

This paper offers postgraduate candidates whose research relies on analysing qualitative data some insight into the ways in which examiners think when they assess such work. It does this first by summarising recent findings on examiners’ standards, then by comparing these findings with the views of a small and diverse sample of experienced examiners of qualitative research theses. The major finding is that examiners’ decisions are based on the way that the analysis is written as much as on what the analysis says.

Introduction

In 2010, 7403 students enrolled in Australian universities completed a higher degree ‘by research’ (HDR). (DEEWR 2011) That is a lot of theses! This fact, the evolution of the ‘enterprise’ university (Marginson and Considine 2000) and current regimes of ‘quality’ measurement mean that research into postgraduate research has burgeoned. In the 1990s, research on HDR concentrated on postgraduate supervision. More recently the examination process has been emphasised. This paper aims to offer postgraduate candidates who analyse qualitative data some insight into examiners’ thought processes. It does this first by summarising recent findings on examiners’ standards, then by comparing these findings with the views of a small and diverse sample of experienced examiners of qualitative research theses.

Examiners’ standards
While thesis marking has been called ‘assessment’s least mapped frontier’ (Holbrook 2001), the PhD Examination Project from Newcastle University’s SORTI research centre has coded and analysed the contents of a very large and varied sample of examiners’ reports on research theses, giving us considerable insight into examination reports as a genre (Lovat et al 2008). What we currently know about the standards and approaches of PhD examiners can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, examiners want to pass rather than fail theses (Johnston, 1997). This is reflected in the adage that ‘it’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize’ (Mullins and Kiley, 2002) and in relative rarity of failed theses. Secondly, while standards are implicit, examiners are much more often consistent with each other than inconsistent (Holbrook et al 2008). These points offer hope to those who are prepared to stick out candidature and produce a thesis, but they tell us little about what they can do in order to ensure that their work is favourably reviewed. The third main finding from the SORTI project offers clues on this.

That finding is that the dominant mode in the thesis report genre is technical criticism (Lovat, et al 2008). ’Technical’ includes comments on methodology, and on aspects of communication including grammar and spelling. In general, the latter predominate. Earlier research (Hansford and Maxwell 1993; Johnston 1997) supports the SORTI findings that the quality of ‘approach’ (method and methodology) is important to examiners. It constituted only 6.6% of the total comments coded but was mentioned in 60% of the reports. But ‘analysis and reporting’ occurring in 89% of the reports and making up 43.1% of the total comments, is the largest category in the SORTI data. It covers examiners’ discussions of ‘candidates attention to validity, reliability, veracity, robustness, accuracy strengths and weakness and so on’ (Holbrook et al 2004:134) plus comments on specific issues where the examiner might cite findings from new studies, comment the analysis or offer
other interpretations of data. Most (73%) of the reports mentioned ‘substantial issues of communicative competence’ at least once and 50% included editorial comments.

Thus the thesis examination report genre seems ‘disposed towards the technical and more often than not negative aspects of assessment’ (Holbrook et al 2008:11). Put crudely, the evidence suggests that content of the thesis is secondary to issues of technical correctness. Methodological and communicative competences are what examiners seek.

For qualitative researchers this finding may relieve some concerns but cause anxiety over demonstrating competence in analysing data. After all, there is no single rulebook setting out how rich messy non-numerical data should be handled. The extensive debate about what constitutes good qualitative research has reached the point of agreement on some ‘big tent’ criteria (Tracy 2010), but these are not precise. Tracy’s discussion of ‘rich rigor’ in analysis for example, prescribes ‘transparency regarding the process of sorting, choosing and organizing the data’ but does not spell out how to be transparent. Comments that ‘qualitative data is as much art as it is effort’ (Tracy 2010:841) may be dispiriting. If ‘the rules’ for good qualitative analysis are so general, how can postgraduate researchers know when they have successfully followed them? Data from examiners may be useful here; hence this paper.

The qualitative examination study

To find out about what examiners thought good qualitative analyses look like, in 2002-3 I sought opinions from experienced examiners of qualitative research theses. I used two email lists of qualitative researchers and also contacted some individuals. The response was not overwhelming – eventually 13 individuals emailed or were interviewed in person. Despite the small number, I obtained a useful cross section of examiners from Sociology Education, Health, and cross areas, most of whom them had marked at least five HDR theses.
Although the data do not allow me to distil advice specific to Sociology PhDs, the varied backgrounds of the examiners possibly reflects accurately the community that examines qualitative theses. Some projects need an examiner who can comment on methodology in addition to a discipline or subfield expert. In emerging areas, disciplinary expertise may not exist. In other disciplines, qualitative data is still a novelty, so a thesis using it will be assessed by a suitable methodologist to check on quality, ensure a sympathetically critical reading or both.

The interview and email data were coded seeking themes, and managed using Nvivo. The discussion below emphasises the major themes that emerged about analysis. Three stand out: that the data should not ‘just sit there’, that the analysis be reflexive and that should sensitively balance reporting and commenting on data.

**Data don’t just sit there**

This is the central requirement for good analysis according to the examiners. Good analysis moves beyond sorting and reporting data to create an argument. An interviewee noted that:

> He often finds that … the data “sits there” with no comment on its significance. He looks for how does the candidate “connect with the data” through comment on theory, or deconstruction of data that reveals respondents’ underlying premises, or theorising and connecting with other data to show themes and ideas emerging. In other words he looks to see how the researcher “sought for meaning” in the data… (Notes from Interview 3. ‘”’ indicate verbatim)

A participant said “I dislike qualitative data left at the ‘themes’ stage of analysis” while another stressed the importance of connection between the data and the research question:
What is being analyzed? Is there plenty of evidence that the data is detailed, clear, liberal in examples, and on target as far as answering the question posed? …clear evidence that the ideas presented are in fact “grounded” in the data. (Emailed response to invitation on list - RL 4. Emailed responses are given verbatim)

For these participants, a candidate must demonstrate that they can do more than describe their data, or chop their data up and describe the pieces. The data ‘don’t just sit there’; they do something, but what they do is not prescribed.

**Good analysis is reflective**

This relates to analysis being more than presenting data. It requires speaking about data, then reflecting on and justifying the speaking.

Reflection might address the extent to which the researcher’s position affects how the data can be trusted to support an interpretation, as noted by an examiner whose background included research with indigenous communities. He was sharply aware of the ways in which white outsiders researching black communities needed to be thoughtful about how their position influenced the production of data:

Good researchers are ‘reflective’ about, for example their own position in the community and re the data. …To be valid the interpretation must be justified reflexively. (Interview. 1)
Another examiner whose disciplinary experience recently included management, where qualitative researchers may still feel like a beleaguered minority, wanted what we might call ‘methodological reflexivity’. This is demonstrated by careful detailing of what had been done to the data.

the main problems associated with qualitative analysis need to be identified;
whether qualitative data is to be quantified or not (and connection back to approach and research strategy) and insight given into formal and informal methods of doing so; give some description of the alternative ways of coding/analysing (non-quantifying) qualitative data, e.g. ‘grounded theory’ or Schutzian constructs; some guidance for the reader on how the analysis may be evaluated/interpreted. (PI 2)

A health and education examiner sought what might be called ‘theoretical reflexivity’ which was broader than reflection on method or the status of data. It included:

recognition of possible different perspectives;
attempts to unearth different perspectives;
recognition of author's own perspective and how this has influenced the way the thesis has been approached, the analysis and the writing up;
(Email response to invitation on list -R 3)

Each of these examiners had a slightly different view of what kind of reflection was needed, but all demand that analysis include reflection.

Good analysis is Sensitive
‘Sensitive’ handling of data is certainly reflective. The interviewee who noted the need for writers to be aware of their own positions within the community being researched is calling for sensitivity to contexts. But sensitivity also means respect for respondents’ voice. Comments on this aspect stressed the need to balance respect for data and interpretation of data as in this example:

There is a consistent dilemma in qual research between respecting
respondents’ narratives and chopping them up. (Interview 3)

Overall, the examiners want thesis writers to think about what they do and to communicate their thoughts in the thesis. It is notable, however, that they do not require researchers to adopt a particular approach. The examiner who stressed the importance of connection between data and the research question noted later in her email that because she is ‘a grounded theory devotee’ she likes to see data represented visually. This is not, however, because she wants all students to adopt grounded theory. Instead of being evidence that the research is done following a narrow recipe, visual representations are ‘more evidence that the student has done the "cognitive work" involved in a qualitative research project’. (RL 4)

**Good analysis demands good writing**

So far, we have seen that the examiners in this project think of good analysis as sensitive, reflexive and much more than presentation of ‘themes’. Writing is integral to each of these aspects. If data don’t just sit there, the researcher must make claims related to data and get the balance right between presenting the evidence and discussing the warrant it provides for the claims. If analysis is reflexive, the author has the task of integrating the reflections, for example giving readers guidance on how to evaluate the analysis as requested by PI 2. Sensitive analysis demands careful use both of the researchers’ words, (so that respondents are respected) and of the quoted words (‘chopping them up’ as interviewee 3 said without distorting meaning.)
Examiners in my study had much to say about writing as an aspect of analysis. ‘Good writing’ for them had six related aspects: ‘a good read’ ‘authenticity’ ‘details stick in your mind’ ‘imaginative’ and ‘well presented/ well written’. I now turn to the examiners’ comments on the writing of analyses, attempting to show links between analysis and writing.

A good read

One interviewee offered a literary standard as the very first of his criteria for good analysis:

How is [data] woven into the narrative? How well does it flow. Is it congruent [with theory …]? Do the respondents’ voices “help the thesis come alive”? “Does it read like a novel”? (Interview 1)

Another discussed examples of qualitative analysis as good or bad ‘reads’:

… stories are well told. An example of poorly told stories is [a book he disliked], which simply has “great slabs” of interview material without ‘subtlety and commentary’ (Interview 2)

A ‘good read’ here is one where the data and the claims made out of the data are integrated. The idea firmly links analysis where data ‘don’t just sit there’ with stylish narrative.

Authentic

A ‘good read’ also fits with the idea of an authentic voice, and the idea of authenticity is also found in much of the methodological literature. For the interviewee quoted above it refers to a sense that the reader gets of a truthful and convincing account:

Good research has an ‘assuredness’ of presentation coming from intensive involvement and the researcher feeling ’you KNOW’….One characteristic it has is that it offers detail, which sticks in the reader’s mind. (E.g. the vote
Again, the technical skills are both analytic and communicative. A mature authentic account will have a very different tone from that found in draft interpretations of data. It will be detailed and nuanced in response to complex data, but the details chosen for report will be carefully selected for their impact on the reader. Authentic writing contributes to data not sitting there but also, by implication, the authentic voice of the researcher is heard in the reflective passages, and resonates in the sensitive handling of data.

**Imaginative**

A good and authentic read is analysis that shares the enticing qualities of a good story and in that sense is ‘imaginative’, despite being based in reality. Good analysis is also ‘imaginative’ because it is conceptually innovative as suggested by these comments:

> An excellent piece of analysis will go ‘one step beyond’ the expected, the ordinary, the mundane… be lively and interesting  
>  
> (RL 1)

> I get excited by people turning something on its head and looking at it in a really new way. (RL 3)

Analysis being ‘lively/interesting/a really new way’ could describe both good use qualitative thinking and good literature. Again, ‘doing’ analysis is seen as strongly connected to ‘writing’ it.

**Presentation.**

Presentation may be a simple matter of physical layout and typography, as with the examiner who wrote that

> good qualitative data analysis should be well presented (no typographical errors, good margins etc) (RL 1)
or it may be a matter of showing one’s finding appropriately as it was for the ‘grounded theory devotee’ quoted earlier who like visual representations. Once more, a standard that is about writing is also about analysis.

Overall, it seems impossible to create a good qualitative analysis that is not also well-written. Diagram one, which grew out of the coding in my study, models connections between aspects of analysis and writing. Whether these connections hold for all examiners is questionable, but the point that I hope is clear in the model is the density of connections and the strength of the link between good analysis and good writing. You can’t have one without the other.

Diagram 1 here

Conclusion

Comments from participants in this small study are consistent with the SORTI findings, but add detail and nuance to the broad picture. The examiners in my project are certainly keen that researchers demonstrate technical ability and good writing is important to them, but they are not narrowly focussed either on any particular form of analysis or on well edited prose. For them, a good qualitative analysis is one where the researcher has worked hard to give a clear picture of how the data connect with the eventual propositions, one that is sensitive to the difference between the two, and reflexive about the propositions. The rich account that emerges will thus be an absorbing good read, authentic – examiners will read it as believable- and imaginative.

The implications of this go beyond the ideas that writing matters and it is sensible to have theses professionally copy-edited. In terms of practicalities, writing is integral to qualitative analysis and
the research process for qualitative projects must be planned and supervised with this in mind. This means not only allotting sufficient time for analysing data, but considering how to use that allotted time. The examiners’ comments I have reported suggest that it is ideal for postgraduate researchers to be producing successive drafts of analyses rather than segregating ‘writing’ as a final stage that follows ‘coding’ and ‘analysing’. Allied with this, supervisors would ideally be responding to iterative draft analyses rather than waiting to react to a draft full thesis and universities would be offering supports for writing beyond access to copy-editing help.

References

DEEWR Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (2011) Award Course Completions For All Students by level of Course, 199 to 2010


Diagram 1: Links between analysis and writing

This is not to imply that there are absolute standards for analysing quantitative data, but on the whole, I think that the ‘rules’ about issues like which measure of association is appropriate are presented more explicitly.

Qualsoft and the QSR list

I am hopeful that this is beginning to happen, with the growth of writing circles and other sorts of flexible support for candidates as the ‘write up’.