

BOOK REVIEWS

Qualitative Data Analysis: A User Friendly guide for Social Scientists

Ian Dey, Routledge 1993 £13.99 pb.

Gail: Do you know the facts of life?

Carl: Some of them.

Gail: Which ones do you know?

Carl: Gravy. I know how that's made...

Victoria Wood, 1985, quoted p114.

Victoria Wood's sketches might not be the first data which come to mind to illustrate the "facts of life" of a research methods course, Ian Dey uses them extensively as source material in this introductory book on the analysis of qualitative data in the age of the computer. He admits that such humorous "data", supplemented by material from Woody Allen, was chosen for "entertainment value rather than any academic import" (xiii), but justifies its use on the grounds of its accessibility to students. His experience of teaching research methods - upon which this book is based - suggests that everyone (even international students?) can relate to and become familiar with such material, and so be taught more effectively his "recipe" for qualitative analysis.

As the title suggests, Dey sets out to be "user friendly" for those who are tackling qualitative analysis for the first time. The first five chapters introduce the distinction between qualitative and quantitative data, the uses of computing, and how a research project might "find a focus". Dey defines his vocabulary of "databits" (chunks or segments of data), and "categories" (codes), although these terms also appear in a glossary for anyone who needs further clarification. In the following chapters Dey suggests how to manage data (Chapter 6), read and annotate interactively (Chapter 7), create categories in order to classify observations and "funnel" the data (Chapter 8), assign categories to "databits" (Chapter 9), subcategorise and join categories or "split and splice" (Chapter 10), "hyperlink" databits which are conceptually related (Chapter 11), make new connections between categories by crosstabulation (Chapter 12), create maps and matrices to explore connections visually (Chapter 13), select alternative interpretations and corroborate evidence (Chapter 14). Dey also includes some

suggestions on "producing an account" of the analysis (Chapter 15). The chapters are full of suggestions about how a computer could transform this "recipe", but do not show examples relating to any particular package, or any set of possible computer commands.

Although Dey's book is a welcome contribution to the small literature on the potential of computers within qualitative analysis, I have some serious reservations about the book as a beginner's guide.

I agree with Dey that at the core of qualitative analysis are the dual task of categorising data and making connections between these categories. The best chapters are those which suggest how to generate categories which summarise or explain the data. However my concern is about the oppositional and exclusive definition which is presented here of qualitative data itself. Dey's definition states that "quantitative data deals with numbers, qualitative data deals with meanings" (p10), and although he tries to represent pictorially numbers and meanings as a "dynamic balance" (p28), the glossary entry for "quantitative data" and "qualitative data" repeat the exclusory opposition which I've quoted above. Paradoxically, and problematically, in later chapters Dey suggests that quantitative measures are integral to systematic analyse FO qualitative data, without discussion of the associated issues of randomness and sampling. In his chapter on "connecting categories" he advocates the use of "quasi-statistics" such as frequencies and cross-tabulations to categorise the data. He suggests we can find "evidence" and make "inferences" about the data based on these quasi-statistics of qualitative data. For example he explains how to read a crosstabulation table in the following way:

"if virtually all the databits are concentrated in the first cell, and display the suspected association between categories, then we will doubtless feel more confident in inferring a connection between the categories than if the converse hold true, and only a small minority of databits are located in the first cell. For each category, we can consider the proportion of databits which is associated with the other category." (p175)

Another problem is the assumptions which Dey makes about data collection as a separate activity to, and not an interactive process with data analysis. Dey assumes we have "data". This may be true if the reader is analysing transcripts of jokes or someone else's field notes or interview transcripts, yet I suspect the majority of those who recognise themselves as doing qualitative analysis are dealing with data which is freshly collected. Confusingly, Dey spends the whole of chapter 5 discussing how to "find a focus" for the analysis, therefore *after* data collection, suggesting that we draw upon "personal experience", "general culture" (7) and "academic literature."

His assumptions about the knowledge of research participants is also problematic. If the aim is to be "rigorous" and "logical", as Dey suggests, then he claims "we cannot rely on subjects to give a rational account of their intentions" (p37). This is his rationale for undertaking the qualitative analysis. In his words "we must insist that our mountain rises above the plain world of common sense to afford a more

'scientific' perspective" (p53). At the same time Dey relies on common sense examples for his own methodological explanations.

Although Dey does write in a chatty "common sense" style, using an eclectic range of similes such as baking bread, playing billiards, gardening, doing jigsaws - to name just a few - which some students may find engaging, I tended to be distracted by this mass of similes and was irritated by the constant use of the sketches as the data to show the process of analysis. I wondered whether all the examples would work quite as well with material which my own students are more likely to generate - about educational experiences or sexual violence, for example. There is no attempt to question how feminist and other critical epistemologies would change the way we think about analysis of qualitative data, nor does Dey tackle the potential changes in the social construction of knowledge which using a computer to perform these tasks might involve.

The explanation for some of these problems may be in Dey's attempt to provide an introductory textbook "relatively free from some of the more ideological and epistemological preoccupations and predilections dominating earlier discussions." (p4). There is no doubt that computers will transform the management and possibly the analysis of qualitative data, but surely we should think about how these developments engage with ideological and epistemological preoccupations, rather than ignoring them altogether.

Nina Wakeford

Guide to Economic Indicators, The Economist Books, 1992, pp 216, 16.50

The book under review comes from the The Economist stable of books, known for their right-wing political and economic commentary, yet plain-English journalistic style. Indeed, it is worthy of review as it provides a handbook of the most important economic indicators and discusses their use, interpretation and limitations, albeit from a conventional viewpoint. Students and socio-economic scientists entering this field have a useful reference book which contrasts in both simplicity and readability with the official 'sources and methods' publications. The book itself attempts to be a general guide to economic indicators relevant to all economies, although largely based on OECD experience.

The book consists of four introductory chapters on conceptual and methodological matters and then a further nine chapters devoted to a postulated primary group of economic indicators: population, fiscal matters, consumers, investment and savings,

industry and commerce, balance of payments, exchange rates, money and finance, and prices.

The first chapter introduces indicators, their interpretation and the important questions such as what they relate to, coverage, start and end points of a series. The second is a particularly useful chapter for the non-mathematical which provides a step by step guide to working out compound growth rates, constant price data, index numbers and their chaining and an introduction to decomposition through moving averages. The third chapter introduces the main aggregates viewed from the point of view of output, income and expenditure and a discussion of what GDP includes and leaves out (but see below), the hidden economy, pricing and a discussion of reliability. This gives a ranking of government statistical agencies which places the UK ninth out of ten, although this tells us little about how 'good' each are but merely who has to revise most - yet it is probably close to where many would place UK economic statistics!

The fourth chapter is worth drawing attention to as it is an important area neglected by many in business and Government - growth trends and cycles. Taking GDP as the reference business cycle, some indicators have cycles which roughly coincide like retail sales, some which lag such as investment and (un)employment cycles, and some such as certain financial indicators, profit and profitability lead by variable periods.

The remainder of the book has a very clear and user-friendly format which lays out each indicator first by summarising its most salient features and then devoting a section to further discussion. The summary highlights what it measures, why it is important, how it appears in the various publications, what it is important to look at, a typical reference comparison and finally how often it is released. To make this more concrete, population as an economic indicator measures total number of people in a country, it provides a basis for potential output, it is given as a head-count, it is important to look at trends and age structure, as a point of reference the OECD grew at (unweighted mean) of 0.7% per annum in the 1980s and figures are usually released annually. Then the further discussion considers why population growth or structure changes are of significance.

Despite the book having much to offer as an introduction to economic indicators, two specific comments seem necessary. First, concerns the critical questions regarding the validity and reliability of concepts utilised in - and implicitly accepted in - the book. Second, this accepted, what use may be made of them.

In the first case, many official statisticians frequently argue that those of us who do see shortcomings have some latent superior ideological or ethical framework in mind. Yet the point is rather that inappropriate concepts can critically mislead us to focus on the wrong things and as scientists we are attempting to get at 'reality'. Moreover, the power structure in society is part of this assessment and in particular the way in which this utilises concepts which are driven by vested-interests, contrary to the impartial presentation that they are given. The Register General's definition of occupations combines disparate groups - indeed misses many important groups - which some

researchers have valiantly used as measures to assess inequality in different areas. Consumers are consumers, but the majority live off wages or salaries, pay interest, while a minority live off various categories of unearned income, and most important, manifest different consumption patterns. Information on the poor is sparse, but pretty good compared to that of the top of society, and in this context some of the constructs such as property income are mumbo-jumbo. These present a barrier to understanding and the ability to provide adequate modelling systems.

To some extent it is possible to 'correct' for shortcomings. Yet the difficulty is that while it is possible to point out many difficulties and produce a useful critique at a philosophical level, as empirical practitioners with the constraints of resources and time we usually have to make do with what we have.

Therefore, with the various 'missing' categories and limitations such as those outlined above, how does this book help us to use the available socio-economic indicators? It does bring out quite well some of the statistical characteristics of indicators. Perhaps they may be divided between socio-economic indicators which reflect aspects of the environment, and performance indicators which reflect policy issues on which decision-centres such as corporates and Government act. Indeed, the latter - unlike the artificially created directive-indicators set up to enable local management to cutback public services under the guise of efficiency - concern profit ratios, debt and various imbalances and are of particular importance in socio-economic forecasting.

It is worth emphasising the view of reality that indicators provide which runs contrary to the simplistic, crude and patently political use that has made of them in the public sector. There are three aspects to indicators which the book under review points to which are worth clarification - first their role as proxies, second their functioning as part of a system and third their cyclic, dynamic, characteristics.

First, indicators are at best proxies - with certain distributional characteristics - and often only reflect an aspect of what we attempting to measure. When an investment is made it is difficult to measure its innovative advantage directly so labour productivity is used which may be short of the mark and would require further analysis to look at other indicators. Many economic aggregates need to be expressed in volume terms which entails re-calculating in constant prices, yet if current inflation is rising rapidly we get an under-estimate, if it is rising slowly an over-estimate. Again these are not minor matters and can be seriously misleading.

An economic sector is essentially a complex ecosystem with numerous integrated components which operate together and often give conflicting signals. One indicator cannot be taken in isolation and a listing of indicators requires some hard conceptual work in organising the levels in the structure to uncover something meaningful. Moreover, in the case of time series, the structure itself shifts over time as a high correlation in one period is replaced by little in another and vice versa frequently resulting in discontinuities much to the surprise of those who use them as simple, blunt, instruments.

Finally, many indicators are cyclic and rise and fall at different stages, combine with other indicators to modify periods, peaks and troughs and start and end points. This may mean that an inadequate appreciation of what is going on such as falling indicators by management or ministers as signs of decreasing efficiency can and frequently does set in motion counterproductive policies which create havoc at a later stage. The upshot is then that the book under review introduces a considered element of reality into an important area which takes us beyond the simplistic and myopic treatment given to indicators of late for narrow political reasons.

Andrew Philpott Morgan, Economic Subgroup