

Commentary:

**METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS FOR
DISCURSIVE QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS: A REPLY**

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Abstract

In this reply to Goddard's (2022; see this present issue of JISS) commentary, I reflect upon and clarify several key ideas related to methodological issues apropos to discursive-based qualitative inquiry. They are 1) the problem of what he calls 'formal coding', 2) the alleged problems posed by the subjectivity issue within qualitative versus quantitative approaches, and 3) the issue of providing informal quantification in qualitative work.

Keywords: Discursive methodology, qualitative methodology, coding, subjectivity, informal quantification

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COMMENTARY

I deeply appreciate Alex Goddard’s (2022; see this present issue of JISS) commentary on my article, as well as this opportunity to reflect on several of its finer points. Goddard’s commentary is essentially a meta-reflection of various methodological implications that are tangentially indexed by my article. In this response, I have chosen to offer a few thoughts and recommendations related to several issues foregrounded in his commentary, namely: 1) the problem of what he calls ‘formal coding’, 2) the alleged problems posed by the subjectivity issue within qualitative versus quantitative approaches, and 3) the issue of providing informal quantification in qualitative work.

The problem of ‘formal’ coding

One of the first issues that Goddard (2022) highlights is the issue of formal coding. He refers to it as “...a problem with the formal coding of social-psychological variables in dialogue...” (p. 26). In the discursive work I am conducting, we must remember that we are coding discursive actions and that discursive actions are not psychological *variables* and thus should not be treated as such. Variables belong to positivism. They are phenomena that have an invariant, uniform, and quantifiable measurable structure (see Ratner, 2012). The nature of a variable does not change with context, only its magnitude does (i.e., variables vary quantitatively, not qualitatively). Discursive actions are social practices, not social-psychological variables. A discursive action (like teasing, for instance), has a highly variable syntactic construction with highly varying functions and sequential organizations across contexts. In qualitative coding, we can still refer to a range of various discursive actions as ‘teases’ without treating such actions as having the properties of variables.

Goddard’s central issue with formal coding is that coders are often overly formally preoccupied with coding at the locutionary level of the speech act (the meaning conveyed directly by the language of the utterance) rather than the illocutionary force (what the speakers intends) or the perlocutionary force (how the recipient interprets it) of the discursive action. The problem with attempting to code at the formal locutionary level is that the most interesting analyses look at the function and/or meaning of discursive acts within their contexts. These meanings are rarely directly conveyed by the syntactic or formal way the language of a speech act is built. For example, a ‘tease’ does not speak for itself in any formal syntactic way. Coders must either look at the way the discursive act is intended by the speaker (illocutionary force) or the way the discursive act is taken up or received by the recipient (the perlocutionary force).

Moreover, it is often problematic to try to code at the illocutionary level, since we rarely know what the speaker’s intend to mean when they speak in natural conversational interaction, unless we somehow go back later and ask, which would arguably be just another contextually-bounded set of discursive actions (in response to the question “tell us what you mean?”) rather than a straightforward veridical representation of some inner

reservoir of psychological motivations. Still, it is tempting to want to code at the illocutionary level, since there tends to be an implicit psychological preoccupation with the speaker’s intent. However, within CA-inspired discursive psychological work, it is the perlocutionary force of the discursive action that matters most when it comes to coding/interpretation. This is a massively important point within ethnomethodologically derived discursive approaches to conversational interaction. As Antaki & Widdicombe (1998) note, the force of a discursive action is in its *consequentiality* in the interaction. In other words, we are obliged to describe a discursive action not based on its syntactic construction nor by how we think the speaker meant it, but rather by its *procedural consequentiality*—that is, how that discursive action is oriented to and made relevant by the interlocutors within the interaction (see Schegloff, 1991). There is much to be unpacked by this idea, but the general thrust of it is the sanguine recommendation for analysts to have the discipline to hold off from interpreting a discursive action (like a tease) as being such and such because of the way it is built or ostensibly intended, and instead to code it/treat it as a tease because it is procedurally consequential as a tease (made relevant as such) by the speakers. Homing in on the visible consequentiality of a discursive action across and within a context is an enormously powerful analytic dictum.

The issue of subjectivity in qualitative research

At various places, Goddard (2022) frames issues as a ‘subjectivity problem’ or an ‘objectivity problem’. Broadly speaking, I think the subjectivity/objectivity dichotomy is deeply problematic and ought to be avoided for many reasons. For starters, it is a false dualism. Every interpretation, regardless of the analytic method being used, involves a researcher bringing their perspective/positionality to the data, whether that perspective/position is in the form of rich and thick descriptions in the form of prose or is reflected by the choice of the researcher to capture participants’ perspectives on a Likert scale and then to adopt the (rather controversial) assumption that those scaled items lie on an interval scale (when they are actually ordinal data, at best) making them amenable to statistical analyses. Put simply, the researcher’s ‘subjective’ analytic predilections are unavoidably parasitic in both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

That said, not all subjective researcher predilections are created equally. The differences are reflected in the ways the data are collected and analyzed—i.e., the radically different *contexts* in which the participants orientations are collected and analyzed, and the degree to which those experiential configurations are amplified and teased out versus reduced, codified, and stratified. In short, it’s what we do with our data that matters. And it’s the peculiar contexts in which we seek out answers to our questions that matter. For example, is the relevant place to interrogate something like jealousy on a survey or in the everyday natural sorts of interactions in which jealousy organically emerges and is operative and consequential for people?

Goddard (2022) is especially concerned with embracing subjectivity in qualitative research, calling it “both a strength and weakness” (p. 27). I see it as neither. I see it as a misplaced concern not only for the reasons stated above, but primarily because in the kind of CA-inspired discursive work that Goddard’s (2022) commentary is reviewing, concerns about subjectivity are largely non-issues. In my study, the aim is not to explore the subjectivities of the participants nor is it to extol the benefits of critical researcher reflexivity. Rather, the focus is on describing the interactional nature of sociality and social phenomenon as carefully and systematically as possible. We are not interested in the private subjective experience of speakers, but rather in the ways they organize their interactions and relationships to engage in the social business of everyday life. The focus is on the interactional (not subjective) nature of social life. Adopting this perspective further circumvents the traditional problems that subjectivity poses for qualitative research more broadly.

Informal quantification in qualitative work

Goddard (2022) rightly notes CA’s general aversion to descriptive statistics as well as the potential confusion created when qualitative researchers imply quantitative findings without offering descriptive statistics. Goddard suggests that descriptive statistics are important to report when a quantitative finding is implied by a qualitative study because these descriptive statistics would help quantitative researchers develop testable hypotheses to important social problems. A couple rejoinders to this are worth noting. First, I would advise qualitative researchers to not feel pressure to provide descriptive statistics of any kind. The goal of a qualitative inquiry is to reveal particularity, depth, nuance, and contradictoriness, *not* to aid quantitative researchers in the development of testable hypotheses within experimentally designed experiments. In fact, there are many dangers in playing the numbers game. When qualitative researchers begin to provide frequency counts of contextually rich interactional or phenomenological datum, they are by necessity engaging in reductionism. At some level reductionism is inevitable since we are looking for patterns and likenesses. But it can easily go too far and become sloppy, especially when qualitative researchers feel an implicit mandate to quantify their findings.

Second, we must be very careful when we think about what qualitative researchers are doing when they speak in the language of quantification. For example, when CA-inspired discursive researchers use quantifiable language they are typically offering what is referred to as ‘informal quantification’ or ‘informal coding’ (see Schegloff, 1993; Steensig & Heinemann, 2015; Stivers, 2015). Informal quantification (referring to practices or patterns with terms such as *often, usually, frequently rarely*, and so on) is not formal quantification that lends itself to descriptive statistics. It is not a mathematically or statistically grounded process of counting. Informal quantification is not a count per se, but an *account* of the experience or grasp of frequency across a range of the researchers’ experience with the data (Schegloff, 1993). The aim is to get a sense of the extent to which

the practices identified correspond to (or deviate from) social norms within communicative communities.

Concluding remarks

I appreciate the invitation and opportunity to engage with some of what I believe are the substantive issues raised in Goddard’s (2022) review. In this reply, I have addressed the issue of formal coding by cautioning qualitative researchers against treating their data as ‘variables’ and I have recommended procedural consequentiality as a healthy and empirically demonstrable guiding principle for determining the level at which to make interpretations about discursive action. I have underscored the problems with the subjectivity/objectivity (false) dualism and have championed the CA-inspired discursive recommendation that qualitative researchers focus on the interactional/relational space rather than the subjective. And finally, with respect to the quantitative language that often creeps into qualitative results, I have urged qualitative researchers to not feel obliged to offer frequency counts or descriptive statistics and, when/if they do, to be theoretically very clear that what is being offered is informal quantification and to explain how that does not carry with it either the assumptions or expectations of formal quantification.

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