

7 Doing Ethnography III: Making Sense of the Data

Concerning data analysis, I agree with Hammersley and Atkinson who point out “that there is no formula or recipe for the analysis of ethnographic data” (158). They warn against the impression created in some literature that there is such thing as “a standard set of steps” the ethnographer should follow to make sense of their data. Rather, data analysis is a highly emergent, contextual, and immanently personal process (cf. Boellstorff et al. 159).

The realisation that data analysis is an emergent, contextual and personal process is one of the main conclusions of the critically-reflexive *Writing Culture* debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Also known as the *Crisis of Representation*, the *Writing Culture* debate brought to the fore how all science is a contextual and social practice of knowledge production – or rather, of knowledge construction (cf. Hess and Schwerl 2). For the discipline of ethnography, the US-American historian James Clifford in particular illustrated how the practice of representation and the concrete processes of ethnographic writing are processes of construction, are *partial truths* or *true fiction* (cf. 22).

Ethnographic data analysis is not a distinct stage in the research process. Rather, the process is circular and iterative, and begins as early as “the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research problems, and continues through to the process of writing reports, articles, and books” (Hammersley and Atkinson 158). This circular and iterative process of data analysis appears central to US-American sociologists Barney Glaser’s and Anselm Strauss’ approach of Grounded Theorizing.¹ In this approach to data analysis “[t]heory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and

1 Here, I take up Hammersley and Atkinson’s suggestion to speak of “grounded theorizing” as an activity, thereby distinguishing it from the outcome of this activity, that is, “grounded theory” (cf. 158).

Fig. 3: Phases of Fieldwork in the Research Fields

data collection” (Strauss and Corbin 273).² Thus, Grounded Theory is a general method of on-going comparative analysis. Unlike the common sequential procedure in testing theories or hypotheses (operationalization, data gathering, data preparation, evaluation), generating theory from empirical evidence requires recurring cycles in which fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation are tightly knit (cf. Mey and Mruck 15).

This circular approach to on-going comparative analysis is the main point I took away from grounded theorizing for my research. As one can see from Figure 3, periods of data collection, especially in the physical fields, alternated throughout with prolonged periods of transcription and preliminary analysis.³ The easy accessibility of the websites allowed for prolonged on and off engagement with the research fields.

I mainly analysed my data using the computer programme MaxQDA (VERBI Software), which made it easier to gather, organise, and analyse the data, which ranged from interview transcripts to screenshots, to images or power point presentations. While there is certainly the potential to lose oneself in “playing around” with the myriad detailed functions the software offers, it does greatly assist the researcher in the exploration, interpretation, categorisation, classification, and

2 Since their original publication in 1967, Glaser and Strauss have developed differing views on how to apply the Grounded Theory method, resulting in a split between their paradigms. However, for this study it suffices to refer to the overall concept. For an in-depth examination of the different nuances of Grounded Theory, see Mey and Mruck.

3 The bars indicate in which half of the respective year that fieldwork was undertaken. Notably the bars regarding fieldwork, especially in the physical fields of Friesland and Reykjavík, do not indicate the lengths of the stays. The hatching on the websites’ bars signifies the prolonged, but on and off character of fieldwork.

construction of theory from data (cf. Hilpert et al. 176).⁴ Many qualitative data analysis software programmers rely on grounded theorizing as the basic principle of data analysis (cf. Kuckartz 82).

4 Boellstorff et al. stress the problematic nature of using qualitative data analysis programmes in ethnography. These include “a tendency to believe that qualitative analysis software is somehow more ‘objective’ than hand coding and analysis”, as well as the fact that “the situated and contextual nature of ethnographic research and analysis defies standardization and mechanization. It is erroneous to assume that a piece of technology (which, incidentally, is made by people) can do the interpretative work of a thoughtful human mind” (165f.).

