

# 24

## USING CHILDHOOD MEMORIES TO DEMONSTRATE PRINCIPLES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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*The activity described in this chapter provides students with an engaging introduction to qualitative research by having them gather narrative descriptions of early childhood memories. Students practice coding these data by using established systems or by developing their own frameworks to detect themes and patterns. The activity's instructions allow for adjustments to its length and scope to reflect instructor preference or time constraints.*

### CONCEPT

Qualitative research methods significantly expand the analytic toolkit of psychology researchers, but this topic is not consistently included in undergraduate psychology research methods classes. Activities that allow students to use qualitative methods can be especially helpful because textbooks often lack detailed coverage, and this approach could otherwise be confusing to undergraduates because of its different assumptions and distinct strategies in comparison to quantitative research. A qualitative approach to research can be useful for psychology students to learn because it provides rich data, facilitates theory creation, structures the analysis of case studies, and even illustrates findings identified by quantitative studies in mixed-method designs.

Instructors can emphasize the following five overarching concepts when discussing qualitative research (cf. Flick, 2014): (a) Qualitative researchers often examine interview, narrative, or observational data rather than responses to questionnaires or experimental task performance; (b) their studies often involve smaller samples that are characterized by significant depth of analysis; (c) they develop categories to code data that capture important themes; and (d) they search for conceptual linkages and connections within the data after they are collected, instead of using *a priori* hypotheses and inferential statistics.

This activity illustrates these overarching concepts by having students collect qualitative data using detailed descriptions of early childhood memories (ECMs). Using methods instituted by Freud (1910/1990), ECM data are interesting, relevant, and easy to obtain. Students code these data using either an established system or grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop categories for detailed analysis.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

The scope of this activity can be modified depending on instructor preference. In its limited implementation, students need access only to word processing software. For more thorough versions, required materials include digital voice recorders, shared access to computer files (i.e., cloud-based file storage), and qualitative analysis software.

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Students gather qualitative data for this activity by either describing their own ECMs or by interviewing others. The following question elicits the initial description of an early childhood memory (Clark, 2002): "Think back to a long time ago when you were little, and try to recall one of your earliest memories, one of the first things that you can remember." The three follow-up questions are (a) "Is there anything else that you can recall in the memory?" (b) "What part do you remember most in the memory?" and (c) "What feelings do you remember having then?" To obtain additional data, each student must describe two more ECMs by answering the same questions. Students are likely to demonstrate repeating themes in a series of recollections, which mirrors the use of ECM tests when used in research and clinical settings (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006).

There are two options for how the data can be recorded for this activity. The first option is that the ECM task can be presented as a written exercise to students, such that they write or type their answers to the prompt questions. The second option is for students to interview participants, record responses to the ECM questions, and then transcribe them. This approach is more labor intensive, but it is a closer approximation to how qualitative researchers obtain data because it allows for more detailed and natural responses.

In a brief implementation of this activity, each student serves as a sole participant, writes down his or her own ECMs, and subsequently analyzes these data. In a more extensive application, students obtain data from others (either inside or outside of the research methods class), pool ECM responses across multiple participants, and analyze data from this larger sample.

The most involved step of the activity is coding. This process allows students to organize, simplify, and capture important themes in the data. Students have the option of coding qualitative data using an established system or a manual. Although there are numerous scoring systems for ECMs, one that is well suited for this exercise is the Manaster-Perryman Manifest Content Early Recollections scoring manual (Manaster & Perryman, 1979) because it is intuitive and relatively easy to use. For each memory, students code the characters mentioned in the story (e.g., mother, father, siblings), the themes of the memory (e.g., birth of a sibling, death, illness or injury, punishment), the level of detail conveyed in the memory (e.g., attention to visual, auditory, and movement details), the setting of the story (e.g., school, hospital, at home, traveling), whether the person was active or passive in the memory, the level of control or responsibility that the respondent assumes for details in the story, and the predominant emotion or affect conveyed in the memory (e.g., positive, negative, or neutral tone).

Alternatively, you can design the activity so that students determine themes within the data by examining the responses, develop descriptive codes based on close reading, create a codebook, and then apply the codes to the ECM data to discern patterns of associations. This approach is consistent with grounded theory within qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which emphasizes that participants' experiences and perspectives should be given priority over preexisting theory or researchers' expectations.

A code sheet can facilitate analysis, especially if students are using an existing scoring system. Students can also code the responses with the assistance of word processing software. Character formatting (e.g., colors, bold, italics) or the Track Changes function in Word can indicate coding or comments. La Pelle (2004) described how to use tables so that one column contains the source data and adjacent columns can be used for the codes that subsequently can be sorted for retrieval and analysis (see Table 24.1 for a

Table 24.1 Data Table Excerpt

Part No.	Male (M) or female (F)	Age in story	Segment No.	Response	Codes
1	M	3	1	It was my third birthday party. I remember being excited and I was looking forward to eating my birthday cake. <sup>1</sup> Several of my friends were there who lived in my neighborhood. My mom, dad, and sister were there as well. As they started to sing "Happy Birthday," a clown came in and started to sing along. I guess he was there to entertain all of the kids later in the party. I didn't expect the clown to be there and it scared me. <sup>2</sup> I remember that I started to cry because I was so freaked out. I was upset for the rest of the party. <sup>3</sup> <i>"Is there anything else that you can recall in the memory?"</i>	<sup>1</sup> Positive emotion/excited/event <sup>2</sup> Negative emotion/fear/stranger <sup>3</sup> Negative emotion/sad/event
1	M	3	2	I remember that my mom tried really hard to comfort me. <sup>4</sup> She assured me that the clown was friendly, and that he was going to do cool tricks with balloons. <sup>4</sup> I ran off to my room and stayed there until the clown left the party.	<sup>4</sup> Positive emotion/comfort/parent

simplified, illustrative analysis). Students ultimately are asked to find text illustrations of the codes, discern patterns among the codes, and determine how themes vary with other constructs of interest (e.g., participant gender, age at the time of the memory). You can also use dedicated qualitative data analysis software to assist with more complex analyses (see the Additional Resources section at the end of this chapter).

#### ASSESSMENT

You can use simple assessment strategies, such as measures of student satisfaction with the activity or a self-assessment of its effectiveness. Another option is to include administering an objective test of knowledge about qualitative research before and after the activity has been completed. Additional assessment opportunities include evaluating students' learning products from this activity (e.g., coding manual, summary of the results and analyses, poster presentation) and having students design a novel qualitative study so that the transfer of training can be assessed.

#### DISCUSSION

Students generally find this activity enjoyable because the content is personalized and connected to their experiences. The ECM data are easily understandable and allow students to gain an awareness about themselves and their peers. Nevertheless, there can be potential barriers. For example, some students can have difficulty recalling specific ECMs. This could reflect ambivalence about the task, or it may reflect actual memory limitations. Although in clinical and research settings participants are asked to recall an

incident in which they were younger than age 9 years, the activity will still be valuable if they recall a more recent event.

In addition, some students likely experienced highly distressing events or trauma during their childhoods. Because of this, you can opt to modify the instructions to include a disclaimer about potential distress, or you can state that students can selectively choose or edit any memory that they share. This concern, as well as the previous one, can be mitigated by having students analyze data from peers rather than requiring all students to generate or examine their own data. Although this alteration may reduce the self-awareness generated by the activity, exchanging or pooling data will likely reduce any self-serving biases as well.

Finally, this activity allows instructors to use ECMs as a means to connect with related topics within the psychology curriculum. These topics include long-term memory limitations and childhood amnesia, stages of child development that parallel the time frame of the ECMs, and how psychology theorists and researchers have viewed childhood experiences as determinants of personality and/or psychopathology.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Instructors can share examples of published qualitative research from peer-reviewed journals with students. Exemplary studies can be found in issues of *Qualitative Psychology*, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, and *Feminism & Psychology*.

Instructors who want to introduce students to sophisticated software for qualitative data management as part of this activity have several choices. Some are open source or have free trial versions. Recommended options include ATLAS.ti (<http://atlasti.com/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>); NVivo ([http://www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)); QDA Miner (<http://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>); and Weft QDA (<http://www.pressure.to/qda/>).

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