Ensuring (or restoring) the *'qualitative'* in qualitative research:

Reflections from field and seminar

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FAcSS

What makes qualitative research *'qualitative'*?

Mainly inductive rather than deductive logic

Flexible, non-standardised methods

Naturalistic rather than experimental settings

Concern with participants' meanings and perspectives

Generation of detailed complex data

Explanation in terms of possible influences rather than causes

So what is qualitative research good for?

Exploring perceptions and interpretations: what does something mean?

Examining in depth people's experience, attitudes, and behaviour: what it is like…?

Capturing language and narratives: how do people talk about this?

Describing contexts: when and where do these things take place?

Identifying processes: what is going on, how did something happen?
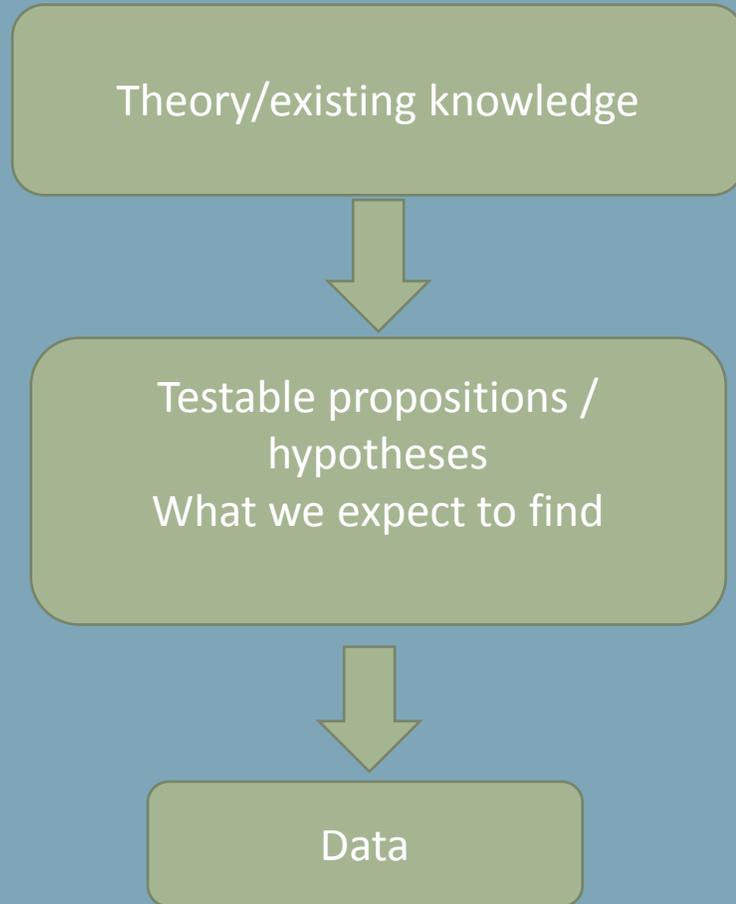
Generating hypotheses

So, how can it all go wrong?

- Some guidelines for staying on track:
  - ***At the outset, in the original conception of the project***
    - deal with dogmatism
    - mistrust 'methodolatry'

  - ***Along the way, during the conduct of the research***
    - care about creativity

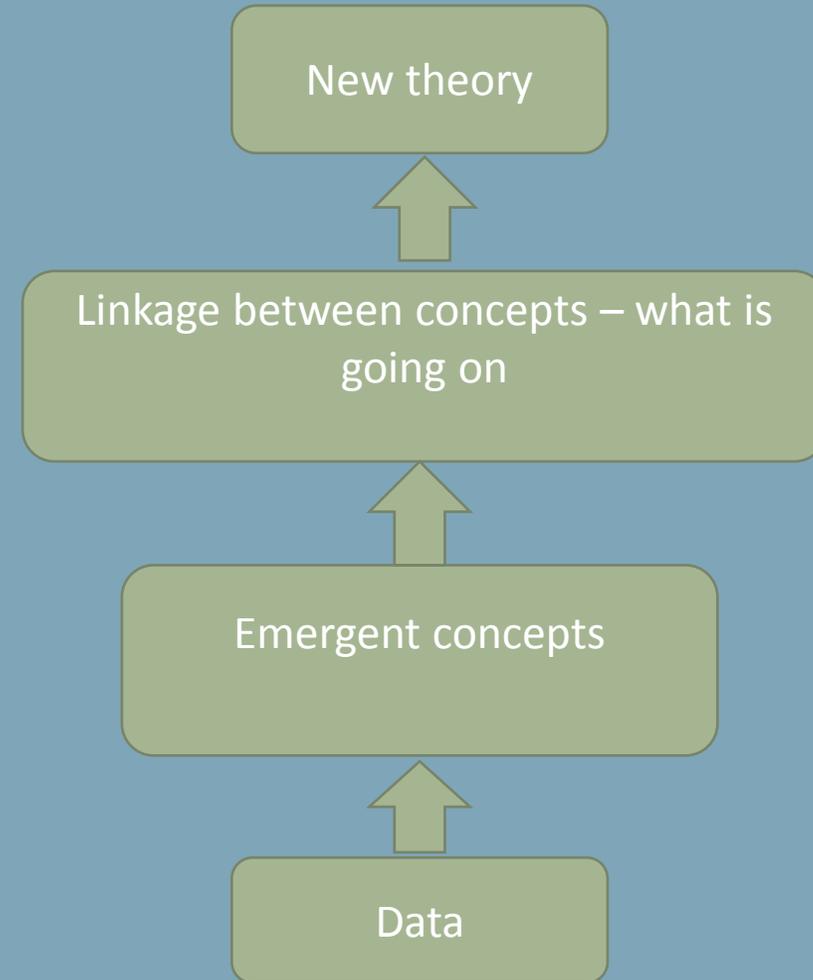 - ***At the end, when you review the work***
    - query quality

At the outset

Dogmatism: orthodoxy and conflicting paradigms

| THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD (THEORY DRIVEN) 'DEDUCTIVE' LOGIC QUANTITATVE RESEARCH	1960S GROUNDED THEORY (DATA DRIVEN) 'INDUCTIVE' LOGIC QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The Scientific Method:

Theory/existing knowledge

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Testable propositions / hypotheses
What we expect to find

↓

Data

Grounded Theory:

New theory

↑

Linkage between concepts – what is going on

↑

Emergent concepts

↑

Data

Dogmatism: pragmatism and a paradigm of choice

- Do we always have to choose between two conflicting models? (Patton)
  - **theory driven** and **deductive** vs **data driven** and **inductive**

- *Pragmatism* as a legitimate philosophical position:
  - adopting strategies and methods that are
    - appropriate for the research question or aims
    - responsive to research situations

- A pragmatic model for qualitative research can include
  - a flexible approach to the role of existing ideas (Ormston et al)
  - **deductive**, **inductive** and **abductive** (**retroductive**) logic
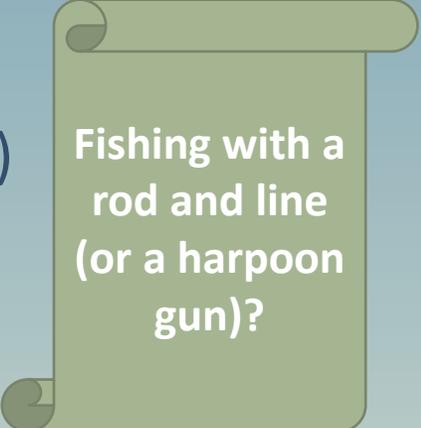
Fishing with a rod and line (or a harpoon gun)?
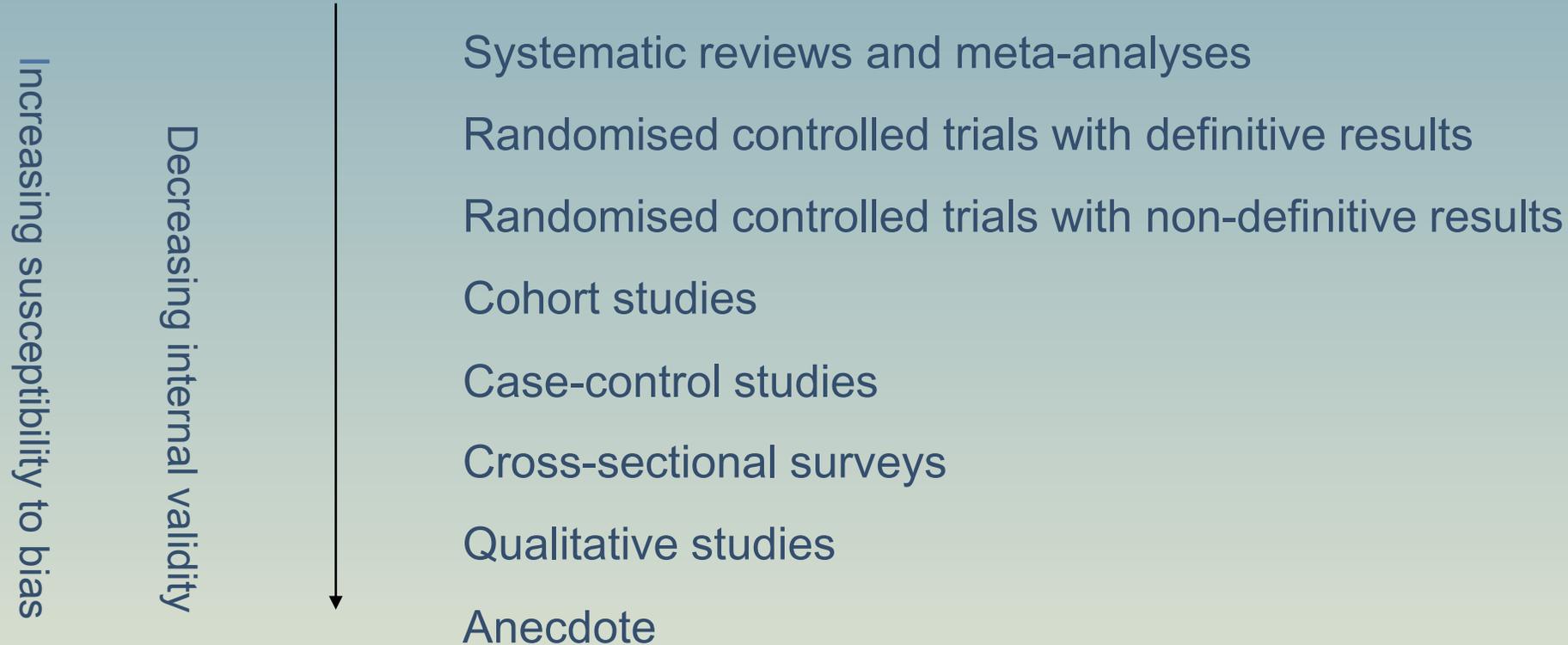
Fishing with a net?
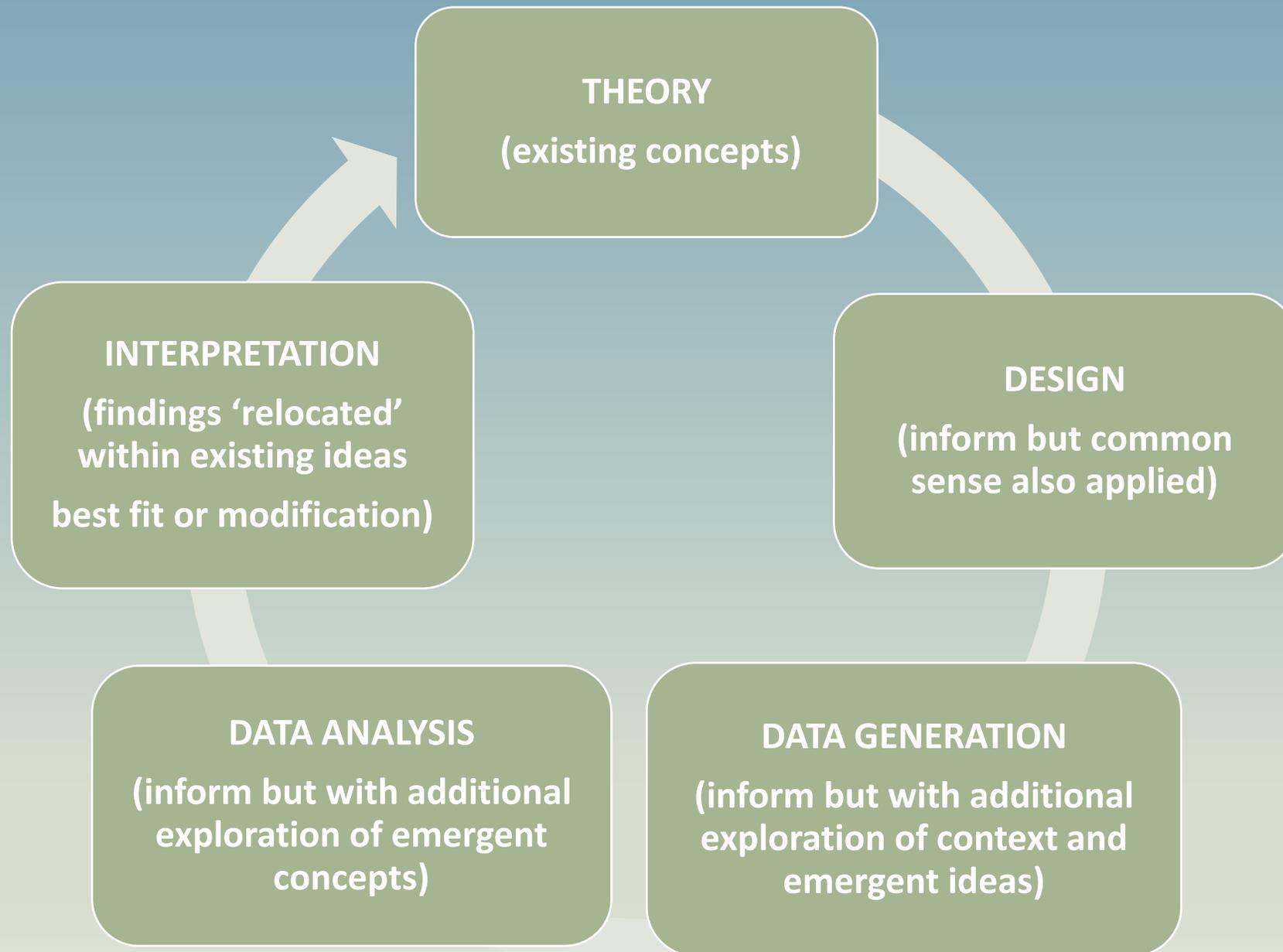
'Methodolatry': what is it?

- Privileging one method over another
  - usually RCTs

- Pre-occupation with methods over other considerations (Chamberlain): the tail wagging the dog (Barbour)

- The use of methodology as the 'armed wing of science', procedural rules to defend and justify rather than helpful guidelines (Seale)

- BUT qualitative research uses non-standardised methods
  - the importance of appropriate choices: pragmatism again

Methodolatry: a hierarchy of methods?
The influence of systematic reviews and the evidence-based movement:

Increasing susceptibility to bias

Decreasing internal validity

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses

Randomised controlled trials with definitive results

Randomised controlled trials with non-definitive results

Cohort studies

Case-control studies

Cross-sectional surveys

Qualitative studies

Anecdote

Adapted from: Guyatt et al (2000), 'Users' guides to Medical Literature: XXV. Evidence-based medicine: Principles for applying the Users' Guides to patient care. Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group', *Journal of American Medical Association,* 284: 1290-6.
Available at: www.shef.ac.uk/scharr/ir/units/systrev/hierarchy.htm

Methodolatry: a hierarchy of methods?

Research question	Systematic reviews	RCTs	Case control studies	Surveys	Qualitative research
Does this work? (effectiveness)	*	*			
Does this cause that?	*	*			
How does this work? (process)	*				*
What is it like to deliver this?	*			*	*
What is it like to undergo or go through something? (experience)	*			*	*
What do people think about this? (perceptions, satisfaction)	*		*	*	*

Methodolatry: the problem of 'isms' and 'ologies' (1)

Realism

Critical Realism

Idealism

Constructivism

Subtle Realism

Critical Theory

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis

Conversation Analysis

HELP!
Which version anyway?
What if none of these seems quite right?

Symbolic Interactionism

Discourse Analysis

Narrative Analysis

Grounded Theory

Methodolatry: the problem of 'isms' and 'ologies' (2)

- 'Ideological' researchers choose research questions to 'fit' their formal approach

- If the cap fits, go ahead…………. But if not …… (Dear Dr Patton)

Don't bully

Don't be bulied

- Pragmatic researchers devise an approach that is appropriate for the research question

- **SO** a convincing rationale for the research design and methodology is required

Methodolatry: a convincing rationale rather than a 'technical fix' (1)

Triangulation

- Triangulation as a 'technical fix', to justify mixed methods research

- Concept borrowed from surveying techniques to determine a single point in space with the convergence of measurements taken from two other distinct points

- More than one method or data source as a way of 'validating' or cross-verifying findings.

Methodolatry: a convincing rationale rather than a 'technical fix' (2)

Triangulation:

- If findings don't agree?
  - does not necessarily mean that some data are 'wrong'

- Anomalies or contradictions provide valuable pointers for refining analysis
  - triangulation better viewed as an opportunity for developing a more sophisticated interpretation than as a validation technique (Barbour)

- Spell out how different data sources can address your research aims rather than use 'triangulation' as a crutch

Methodolatry: a convincing rationale (3)

- How will chosen methods capture / provide appropriate data
  - Why observation?

  - Why documents?

  - Why interviews? What kind of interviews?
    - semi-structured or in-depth
    - chosen for the right reasons (topic, type of interviewee, fieldwork constraints, rather than concerns about comparability at analysis stage)

  - Why focus groups?
    - for scoping or strategic input – NOT for systematically capturing individual stories, beliefs or experiences

Along the way

Creativity: qualitative sampling
'Saturation' as a search for utopia (1)

- Saturation cited as the goal of qualitative sampling but what does it mean?
  - theoretical saturation: no more insight or development of theoretical categories (depth)
  - inductive thematic saturation: no new ideas or codes emerging (breadth)
  - a priori thematic saturation: all themes are exemplified in the data (breadth)

- Assumes an iterative design so new cases can be added until required saturation is achieved.

- Not all projects have open-ended timescales or budgets

- Are rules or formulae for sample size the answer?
  - specified number of repeats for minimum or maximum saturation? (van Rijnsoever)
  - suggested sample sizes regardless of research context, eg 25, or 30, or 40 interviews?

Creativity: qualitative sampling
'Saturation' as a search for utopia (2)

- Why take sample size as the starting point?

- **Composition**, not size, is the key in qualitative research

- Composition is tailored to the research question and research context - not a case of one size fits all

- Size is the **result** of decisions you make about the composition you want
    - selection criteria as the way to achieve appropriate composition

- Think in terms of social contexts and influences rather than 'variables'

'Notions like class, age, and gender are treated simply as traits that a person has in some form, rather than being regarded as features of a social landscape that facilitate or discourage, to differing degrees, in interaction with other aspects of social topography, the emergence of particular social patterns'. (Allan)

Creativity: topic guides as GUIDES

- The researcher is the primary instrument in interviews and focus groups

- Topic guides are
  - the ground to be covered rather than the exact questions to be asked
  - flexible documents that may evolve throughout the project

- Topic guides are not
  - standardised instruments
  - questionnaires with open-ended answers
  - long lists of things you (or the commissioners) want to know

- Put the 15 page guide in the bin

# Creativity: detailed data and faithful capture

- **PROBING:** the creative use of follow-up questions for greater depth and detail

- A honed (Olympic?) skill not just going talking to people

- Poor probing results in poor quality, thin data

- Poor capture results in poor quality, thin data
  - recordings? detailed notes? summaries written onto proformas?

Creativity: analysis is more than just the software

- Qualitative analysis is conceptually challenging

- The researcher is the primary instrument rather than CAQDAS software

- Software is a data management tool, an electronic filing cabinet

- Your analytic approach or process must still be clearly described

Creativity: navigating a conceptual hierarchy

Second level concepts or codes

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First level concepts or codes

↑

Empirical examples
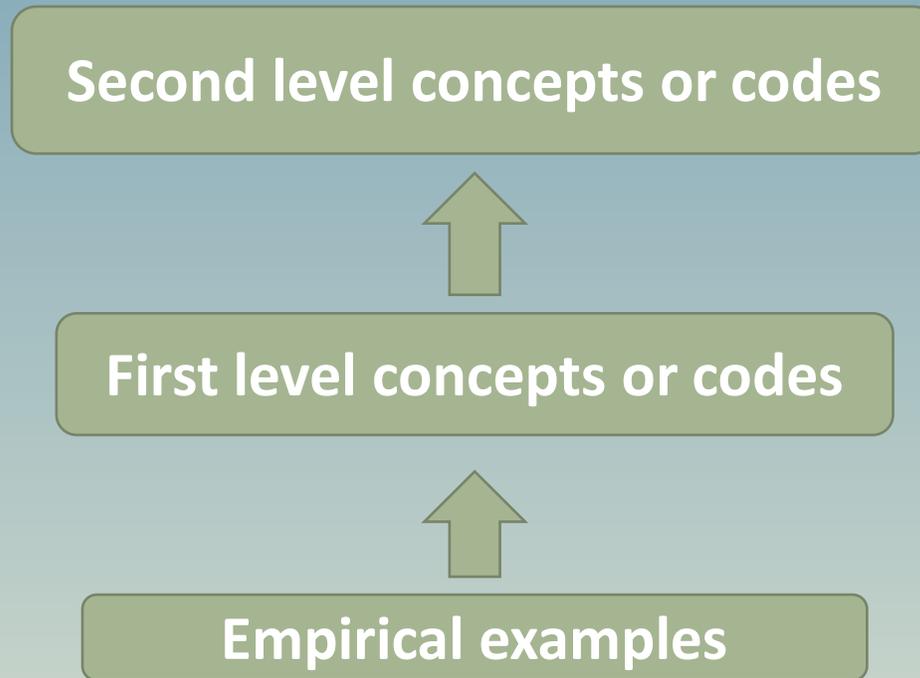
- At each level, the researcher is labelling (or coding) data
  - arranging things in a systematic order, making them part of a system of classification
  - organising and grouping similarly coded data into categories and families
  - using classification reasoning plus tacit and intuitive senses to determine
    - which data 'look alike' and 'feel alike' when grouping them together (Saldana).
- An interpretive rather than automatic process, involving conceptual agility

Creativity: understanding recurrence

- Does recurrence = the number of times a code or sub-code is used?
  - at what level?

- Software very seductive as it provides frequency counts for code usage

- BUT frequency may be taken to imply importance
  - is it the case? why?
  - the problem with Word Cloud

- Less frequently mentioned items may be more illuminating

- The value of outliers

- Recurrence more fruitfully understood as
  - broader themes that run through the data
  - underlying themes
  - overarching themes

- Mapping and illustrating rather than counting

Creativity: dispelling myths about quality assurance

- Inter-rater consistency or reliability not an appropriate 'test' of quality or reliability in qualitative research

- Applies to coding open-ended questions in survey research

- Should not be applied naively to qualitative labelling or coding with target consistency scores
  - researchers' use of codes may develop and change as their understanding grows
  - a 'second checker' cannot have this same journey or understanding
    - inter-rater consistency locks the idea of quality assurance at lower levels of analysis
  - a 'second checker' is better understood as a second pair of eyes or sounding board: a source of alternative perspectives (Barbour)
  - in teams, important to check coding and shared understanding

At the end

Quality: pursuing the holy grail - validity (1)

Difficult concept for qualitative research because traditionally refers to

- the validity of an instrument
  - does it measure what it purports to measure?

- the validity of a measurement
  - is it accurate?

HELP! Qualitative research uses flexible rather than standardised instruments

HELP! Qualitative research explores rather than measures

Quality: pursuing the holy grail - validity (2)

- Contradictory views in the literature but two key underlying concerns (Spencer et al):

- *Well-foundedness*
    - methodological rigour (thoroughness of data capture/faithfulness of representation
    - credibility (quality of the evidence to support analysis and claims)

- *Worthwhileness*
    - relations with / implications for participants

Quality: pursuing the holy grail - reliability

Another difficult concept for qualitative research because traditionally refers to

- replication of a study
  - would you get the same 'results' again?

HELP! 'Results' does not fit the interpretive analytic process

HELP! Qualitative research does not use standardised instruments.

Alternative conceptions

- consistency of coding (already questioned)
- the 'audit trail' and 'transparency' of conduct so the reviewer can see 'how the researcher got there'

Quality: pursuing the holy grail - generalisation or extrapolation

- Numbers as the non-generalisable part of qualitative research

- Types of **qualitative** extrapolation:
  - representational (mapping and illustrating the range of views, experiences, behaviour, needs etc that *exist*)

  - empirical (case by case transfer based on similarities and differences)

  - analytical or theoretical (developing powerful analytical concepts or locating findings back in a body of knowledge)

Quality

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