Combining approaches to qualitative data analysis: synthesising the mechanical (CAQDAS) with the thematic (a voice-centred relational approach).

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Abstract
In this article I discuss the challenges of managing and analysing qualitative data produced from in-depth interviews. I detail how two methods of data analysis have been combined to explore older women’s (over 35yrs) accounts of early pregnancy loss – which formed the data for the author’s PhD research. A computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) package, in this case NUDIST4, was a useful tool for managing the breadth of data, and permitted the initial coding in line with the objectives of a larger qualitative study. However, pertinent themes were obscured by the sheer volume of data that had been collected. In contrast, the voice relational method was of value in exploring the depth of the data, and the ways in which these women contextualised their experiences in relation to other aspects of their lived biography. Researchers new to qualitative data analysis are often concerned that CAQDAS techniques will in some way dictate how the data will be analysed. In this article I suggest that this anxiety is unfounded – as the analysis technique depends upon the researcher(s) and the theoretical perspective(s) that inform(s) the research process. I propose that CAQDAS packages are effective tools for data management, but a more theoretically informed means, such as the voice relational method, can augment the process of analysis. I suggest that it is essential that, whichever means we employ, as researchers we are explicit about how we actually do data analysis.

Introduction
In this paper I describe a novel approach to qualitative data analysis in a study that combined both computer-assisted data analysis (CAQDAS), and a more hands-on approach, based upon iterative readings of the data. While there are now many texts to guide the conduct of qualitative research, less has been written about what researchers actually do, when they analyse qualitative data. The research that I detail here concerns data collected for a doctoral thesis. The doctoral study was part of a larger qualitative study of women’s experience of pregnancy loss, linked to a large randomised controlled trial. Thus, while the methods available were bounded by the constraints of the larger projects, there was also scope for developing a methodology that reflected the specific aims of the doctoral study.

The aim of the doctoral thesis was to explore whether there were distinctive aspects in the experience of miscarriage for older women, and the implication of those experiences, in terms of both theory and practice. With the research having both practical and theoretical concerns, it was essential that the methods of analysis could tackle both the breadth and depth of the large body of data that was collected.

In line with the research aims of the larger qualitative study I used NUDIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) software initially to code the data, while I continued to conduct in-
depth interviews; and although this has now been superseded by Nvivo7 software, the points that I am going to raise remain relevant about CAQDAS more generally.

This approach allowed me to reflect upon the data that was being collected and identify broad themes; however, the results of the analysis were somewhat two-dimensional. As the research was concerned with early miscarriage, traditionally defined as a ‘women’s problem’, I also paid attention to additional research approaches that have generally been defined as ‘feminist’. Many of my concerns were raised in research conducted by Mauthner and Doucet (1998) regarding postnatal depression and the division of domestic labour. The voice-centred relational approach they employed appeared to have the potential to provide an additional dimension to my own analysis. In particular, while being both transparent and replicable, this mode of analysis also had the ability to explore the depth of the women’s accounts.

I propose that combining a voice-centred relational method and CAQDAS is an innovative means of analysing a large qualitative dataset. Despite recent debates regarding both CAQDAS and the voice-centred relational approach, a combination of the two approaches may be employed by other researchers who wish to explore both the breadth and depth of qualitative research. More generally, I request that researchers be explicit about both the mechanical and conceptual modes of analysis that they use, in order to advance actual modes of analysis as well as debates regarding qualitative methods.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an example of a novel analytical approach that combined both computer coding and iterative readings to contribute to ongoing debates regarding the nature of qualitative data analysis, in an attempt to demystify what ‘doing analysis’ involves.

Background

The empirical research presented in this paper, involved sampling 29 women from a broader qualitative study that explored 79 women’s experience of early miscarriage (Smith et al, 2006; Frost et al, 2007). This in turn followed on from a large quantitative study, concerned with women’s experience of the medical management of miscarriage (Trinder et al, 2006). This paper concerns only the methodological issues raised in the sample of women who were over 35 years of age (e.g. 29 women from the wider sample of 79) and who had experienced an early miscarriage, as my provisional analyses suggested that there was something significant in the ways that ‘older women’, that is those coming to the end of their fertile years, framed their experience of early miscarriage in relation to notions of ageing and degeneration.

The quantitative study, the Miscarriage Treatment (MIST) study took place between 1997 and 2001 and involved randomising over 1200 women across the UK to three management methods (Trinder et al, 2006). The women were all experiencing an incomplete miscarriage – whereby as well as experiencing bleeding and pain, the cervix had begun to dilate. Surgical management involves traditional dilatation and curettage; medical management consists of the administration of prostaglandins; while the expectant management involved ‘watchful waiting’.

Following on from the MIST study, the qualitative investigation concerned women’s experience of pregnancy loss more broadly (Smith et al, 2006; Frost et al, 2007). In the qualitative study, the trial population from the quantitative study was used as the sampling frame – an established method in health services research (Donovan et al, 2002; Murphy et al, 2003; Wass et al, 2003).

Earlier qualitative research has suggested that the effects of an early miscarriage may be enduring (Lovell, 1983; Cecil, 1994), emphasising that care and support can mediate what is already a potentially traumatic and significant experience (Oakley et al, 1990; Moulder, 1998). By contrast, the typical medical view of miscarriage is that it is a trivial or minor event (Reynolds, 2006), the outcome of which cannot be mediated by the application of science. The qualitative study was concerned with both women’s experiences of the three management methods, as well as exploring women’s experiences of miscarriage more generally, including their medical and emotional needs.
Employed as the Research Assistant on the larger qualitative study, I also had the opportunity to explore an aspect of the data as a PhD thesis. While interviewing women for the qualitative study I became aware that there was something unique about the ways in which ‘older women’ (those coming to the end of their reproductive careers) narrated their experience of early pregnancy loss. I therefore purposively sampled the accounts of the 29 women who were over thirty-five years of age.

To explore the accounts of women coming to the end of their reproductive functioning, my research question was: What, if anything, is distinct about older women’s experiences of early miscarriage, and what are its implications, in terms of both theory and practice?

However, such a bold question masks the complexities involved in providing answers. I was unable to find a unified body of research that adequately addressed and framed the issues that I set out to explore, and therefore attended to several bodies of research (motherhood, ageing, miscarriage, and embodiment), concluding that while all were relevant to my investigations none were wholly adequate. I contend that this lacuna is indeed a result of the taboo nature of both the experiences of older women and early pregnancy loss (Frost, 2006).

I was similarly surprised by my inability to find one explanatory and analytical framework to guide my analysis. Whereas my aims were exploration and deconstruction, the (traditional) research methods texts concerning data analysis emphasised the application of rigour and objectivity, while down playing issues of subjectivity and reflexivity, which were key to my aims (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). As Pfaffenburger (1988: 26) has noted, the techniques of qualitative data analysis rank among the least ‘explicitly formulated of all research methods’, largely due to their innovative, individual and exploratory aims. Similarly, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest that it is often difficult to translate the small amount of guidance provided by ‘methods books’ on data analysis into practical situations. In part, this is due to the problematic nature of articulating how we think about our research, particularly when analysing narratives that can be ‘read’ in a variety of ways (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998).

CAQDAS

While there is an abundance of qualitative texts dedicated to particular modes of conceptual analysis, it is only in recent years that contemporary methodology texts have included chapters regarding the use of CAQDAS (Murphy et al, 1998), although there are still few practical examples of the use of computers. Richards (2002) argues that this is because CAQDAS is generally employed by junior researchers who are actively encouraged by their supervisors to publish their research findings, rather than the methodological processes and problems that they encounter. Two notable exceptions are papers by Morison and Moir (1998) and Bringer et al (2004) which detail the synthesis of grounded theory techniques with the use of NUDIST and NVIVO software, respectively. Thus Thompson (2002: 1) asserts that the failure of researchers adequately to detail their use of computer technologies both contributes to notions that qualitative research is in some way less rigorous than quantitative techniques, and ensures that there are no detailed and transparent accounts of the research process for other researchers to engage with. Such failure can call into question not only the methodological but also the epistemological basis of the research (Lister, 2003: 48).

While the various CAQDAS packages have a range of specific tools and functions, the features that they share include: the creation and maintenance of a database or ‘project’; interactivity with the project; tools for exploring; coding and retrieving data; a structure that manages and organises the data; annotation systems; and different modes of data output (Lewins and Silver, 2005). Thus, Richards (2002: 274) contends that the appeal of CAQDAS to the neophyte researcher is its apparent ability to manage the ‘speed, efficiency, rigour and bulk data’ of a qualitative project.

The interviews that I conducted generated a large amount of data and, because of the time constraints of the larger qualitative project (Smith et al, 2006; Frost et al, 2007) the use of CAQDAS seemed appropriate to my needs (Fielding, 1993a, 1995). For a range of specific reasons, NUDIST 4 was chosen. Firstly, despite my reservations that the computer would, in some way, ‘take over’ the analysis of the data, the literature assured
me that NUDIST 4 was merely a ‘tool kit’ which enabled the researcher to stay close to the data and in control (Fielding, 1993; Gahan and Hannibal, 1998). Secondly, the research generated over 2000 A4 pages of typed data, and NUDIST 4 has a facility that enables indexing, searching and annotation of large databases (Fielding, 1993a). Thirdly, NUDIST 4 keeps separate files of documents and coding, so that the decisions to code the data can be kept fairly fluid and open to review as new themes are identified from the data (Gahan and Hannibal, 1998). Finally, following training at the University of Surrey’s CAQDAS department http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/, I concluded that NUDIST 4 software was fairly easy to use.

It is only with hindsight that I can acknowledge my limited awareness of the ways in which my use of CAQDAS might shape the research product or outputs, my own role in their application and the epistemological and theoretical assumptions which accompany their use (Bringer et al, 2004). Some of these underlying assumptions behind the use of CAQDAS have recently been explored in the literature. For example, Coffey et al (1996) note that because many packages have a particular epistemological background, the use of CAQDAS may lead to the over-emphasis on specific methodology (e.g. grounded theory) while inhibiting the exploration of others. Similarly, Bringer et al (2004) proposes that the way in which the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) highlights that students should have appropriate CAQDAS skills is tantamount to an endorsement of their use. Indeed, Bryman and Beardsworth (2006) have Contended that prioritization of efficiency (which fuelled my own adoption of NUDIST 4) can be seen as part of the ‘McDonaldization’ of the qualitative research process; or what Morison and Moir (1998: 114) describe as ‘using the “cook-book” approach without adapting the “recipe” to suit the type of data and analytical purpose at hand’. However, Sandelowski (2002) maintains that this critique should not be reserved for CAQDAS alone, but should also be extended to other aspects of the research process, such as the reification of the interview, to the detriment of the inclusion of artifacts.3

Prior to analyzing the data, I undertook verbatim transcription to ensure that the women’s comments could continue to inform the ongoing data collection (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996; Fielding, 1993). I provisionally coded the interview material using crude categories to label specific text passages (Carey et al, 1996; Pfaffenburger, 1988), based upon the broad questions that the women were asked as part of the wider qualitative study, ‘free codes’ made up of what I thought were interesting but as yet unexplained aspects of the data, and any easily identifiable ‘themes’ (Lee, 1994). The coding categories for the larger qualitative research were agreed upon by other members of research team (Carey et al, 1996); and I coded the categories pertaining to older women’s experience, following a comprehensive review of the literature. Although Wilson (1996) warns that post-hoc coding can potentially bias the research, and make the process more time consuming, the degree of bias was reduced by using verbatim transcripts, and the ‘problem’ of the lengthy analytical process was offset by the quality of the data that had been facilitated by the use of open-ended questions. Pfaffenburger (1988: 12) describes this as the ‘cruel trade off’ between the richness of qualitative data and the tedium involved in analyzing it. However, it has also been argued that the application of computer-based coding provides the researcher with more time to think creatively about the meaning of the data (Morison and Moir, 1998).

There has been some debate as to the extent to which data ‘coding’ and ‘analysis’ are synonymous. One of the advantages of using computers is that they can deal with large amounts of qualitative data and produce overlapping codes (Coffey et al, 1996); however, Coffey et al (1996) and Thompson (2002) contend that indexing data in this way has no ‘great conceptual advance’ over physically coding words with a pen and paper. Furthermore, coding with CAQDAS does not equate with analysis per se. For Thompson (2002: 2) computers are capable only of ‘storing, managing and presenting data’, and while ‘any computer can be programmed to do the mechanical part of the analysis … no computer can do the conceptual part’. Richards (2002) suggests that CAQDAS techniques were limited by their convergence around code-and-retrieve methods as a response to market forces, while the more advanced techniques, such as theory building, remained underdeveloped.4 In contrast, Thompson (2002: 7) asserts that employing computers for the purely mechanical aspects of research allows more time for the researcher to engage in the fundamental aspects of conceptual analysis; and Weston et al (2001: 397) similarly contend that data coding constitutes a critical part of analysis, such that there is a ‘reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon’.
It is the researcher, then, by virtue of just using the name of the computer package to denote ‘analysis’ (Thompson, 2002: 7), who stands accused of drawing a ‘scientific gloss’ across the research process (Coffey et al, 1996). This silence negates the extent to which ‘[t]he researcher must still interpret, contextualise, examine relationships, document decisions, and develop theory’ (Bringer et al, 2004: 249). Kelle (1997) has argued that this is only possible when the researcher knows how to use CAQDAS effectively, and for Richards (2002), it is only then that higher-order activities, such as theory-building can be undertaken competently. This is the realm of contextual analysis, and where, as a novice researcher with over 100 data ‘codes’, I felt at a loss. Although my application of CAQDAS had mined a vast amount of data in great depth, and despite my explorations of a varied and broad literature, I still lacked a suitable analytical framework, on which to hang my coded data. Saying that I had ‘used NUDIST 4’ did not situate myself, my interviewees, the aims of the project, and my concerns with ‘women’s issues’ (both practical and theoretical) as central to the analysis (Weston et al, 2001; Letherby, 2003).

In sum, utilising NUDIST 4 software while I continued to collect data, allowed me to reflect upon the data and identify tentative themes; however, the results of the analysis were somewhat two-dimensional, as both my respondents and myself were absent. While CAQDAS managed the breadth of a research project, I needed a more conceptual method to manage the depth of the data that I had collected. As such, I sought an approach that acknowledged both the subjectivity of the research participants and my role as the analyser.

**Voice Centred Relational Method**

It has been argued that in-depth interviewing produces more valid information than survey interviews, because they provide a means of getting beyond surface appearances and allow greater sensitivity to the meaning contexts surrounding speech acts – particularly concerning sensitive topics, such as women’s experience of obstetric and gynaecology services (Lee, 1993; Pope and Campbell, 2001). As pregnancy loss is often cast along with other reproductive issues as one of the ‘women’s complaints’ (Turner, 1997), I turned to ‘feminist’ methodologies, to guide my research (Stanley, 1990). In this respect, O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:125) suggest:

[F]eminists assert that the orthodox methodologist’s emphasis on control, hierarchy and the impersonal nature of scientific research reflects a masculine view of the world and of human relationships more generally.

Recently, though, there has been an acknowledgement that there is no ‘one way’ to do feminist research and, as such, a recognition that there are multiple feminisms (Letherby, 2003) and multiple selves (Collins, 1998). As such, it is suggested that attention should be paid to sources of heterogeneity, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and class (Bradley, 1996; Thorne and Varcoe, 1998). Indeed, all interviewers and respondents bring to the interview a set of beliefs expectations and subjective values (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994), and one of the aims of feminist praxis is to engage with, rather than negate, the problems of representing the subject (Stanley, 1990; Coffey et al, 1996). However, as with the use of computers, there is often a lack of explicit reflexivity in feminist analyses (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003).

In the interviews and my subsequent analysis, language was central. Women often commented that they felt as though the interview gave them permission to talk about their experience in ways that they didn’t normally do (Finch, 1993). This was usually because family and friends did not mention the miscarriage after a short period of time for fear of causing upset, whereas some women actually wanted to discuss their experience some months after the events. Because of this very taboo around pregnancy loss, I wanted to pay attention to the ways in which women ‘languaged’ their body (Ellingson, 2006). Where possible, I used the same words that the women had used to describe their experience, both to validate and clarify what it was that they were actually talking about (Denzin, 1970; Lee, 1993). Many of the women described what they had miscarried as a baby or child, rather than as a foetus, and by using their terms, this indicated to the women that I acknowledged their interpretation of their loss. This was fundamental to the aims of the research, as many women were critical of health care workers and family members who had described their loss in terms of a foetus or cells, which the women believed denigrated their experience. However, it was also the case that some women had difficulty finding the right words to articulate their experience (e.g. the words that would
represent the physical process of losing a baby, or the subsequent feeling of loss), in part because these kinds of words do not exist in everyday language (McCormick et al., 1998). Furthermore, and in keeping with earlier feminist studies, I found that the boundaries between researcher and subject are fluid. While many of the women offering me drinks and food, as they would do in an encounter with a friend (Finch, 1993); others questioned my own reproductive experiences (Oakley, 1981).

The mechanical process of CAQDAS coding left my analysis somewhat flat, while in contrast, tending to feminist conceptualizations emphasized the roles of the researcher and the researched, and the ways in which data analysis leads to knowledge production (Weston et al., 2001). I found that the mainstream methodological guidance did not address the subjectivity present in the interview data, and failed to account for my own subjectivity in the analysis, and I therefore rejected Fairclough’s (1992) somewhat formulaic account of discourse analysis, which proposed specific questions to interrogate the text, in favour of a more fluid and reflexive model of analysis, which would acknowledge the subjectivity in the women’s accounts, and my own subjectivity in the analysis.
The reflexivity that I had been looking for was present in the work of Mauthner and Doucet (1998), who describe how they analyzed their own data – concerning the experiences of motherhood and postnatal depression, and how heterosexual couples allocate housework and childcare. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) suggest that there is a lack of literature concerning the early stages of data analysis because of the reflexivity that is required in this early stage. They suggest that because we do not know what the data means, that our tentative coding and analysis is informed by our ‘gut feelings’ about the research and it is therefore intuitive rather than scientific. This was certainly how I felt, as I tried to make my analytical connections fit my tentative codes and theories, and conversely match my reading of the various literatures to the lived experiences that I had collected. Rather than glossing over the issues of bias and individual beliefs, Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 122) indicated that a ‘profound level of self-awareness is required’ to unearth the lenses through which we view our own research. They propose that only when the researcher includes themselves in the analysis, and addresses the extent to which research ‘results’ represent only one ‘reading’ of the research, can we move beyond the notion that there is ‘one way’ of doing research (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 123). This suggested to me that my fears of producing a ‘biased’ account of the data that I had collected, were both to be expected and yet not easy to resolve – because of the very aims of my research, the methods that I had employed, and the extent to which I was in control of the data analysis (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994).

The more traditional approaches to data analysis propose a linear process of closely reading the data, gathering together segments of the data to form relevant categories, generating numerous themes, and comparing all of the data that has been collated within each category to arrive at a ‘meaning’ (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996). One of the problems with this approach is that attention becomes concentrated upon the multiple occurrences of a phenomenon to justify the production of a category, at the expense of the single occurrences, which may represent something significant (Seidel, 1993). As well as constructing broad themes, I was also concerned with the importance that individual women placed upon ideas about their age in relation to pregnancy loss, motherhood and embodiment, and it was important that I analyzed the data in a way that would focus upon individual accounts and experiences, rather than upon the creation of coding categories.

In contrast to linear approaches, Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 125) propose a circular and hermeneutic process of analysis, based upon the notion of ‘relational ontology’- that is, viewing an individual as embedded in a complex web of intimate and larger social relations. For Mauthner and Doucet (1998), this involves employing a ‘voice centered’ approach, which involves re-reading each transcript at least three or four times, in order to ‘hear’ the different voices that are being represented, including both those of the researcher and researched.

During their own doctoral research, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) drew upon a method that Brown et al (1989) had created to analyze narratives of moral conflict and choice, and subsequent resolution or tragedy. Brown and Gilligan (1991: 43) suggest that four questions are necessary to interrogate narrative data:

- Whose voice?
- In what body?
- Telling what stories about relationships?
- In what social and cultural framework?

To answer these questions Brown et al (1989: 146) developed a reading guide for researchers that was based upon the premise that ‘narratives reflect situational, personal and cultural factors, including issues of language, perspective and the relationship between the reader’s and the narrator’s language and perspective’. Rather than creating a linear causal narrative, this approach acknowledges that narratives are polyphonic (such that different voices may be heard concurrently), and that a sentence or statement may have different meanings depending upon the lens in which it is read (Brown, Depold et al 1991).
The key element of using the reading guide is to view the ‘text’, or narrative account, with one interpretive lens and then another. For Brown et al (1989; 1991) these lenses were employed to:

Establish the story being told,
Read for the narrator as active agent,
To track the ‘care’ voice,
To track the ‘justice’ voice.

However, these authors (Brown, Depold et al 1991) recognize that as long as the guide is applied with openness and flexibility, it can be employed in a wide range of research situations.

While the approach adopted by Brown et al (1989) is concerned with the ways in which language can construct ‘reality’ (Coffey et al, 1996), Mauthner and Doucet (1998) are also concerned with the ways in which the ‘reality’ of the research situation can construct what is said. As such, their own reading guide involves:

Reading for the plot and for the researcher responses to the narrative,
Reading for the voice of the ‘I’ (how the respondent talks about herself)
Reading for the relationships (with significant others), and
Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures.

Thus, Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 126) propose that their adoption of the voice-centred relational approach is an attempt to ‘translate the relational ontology into methodology and into concrete methods of data analysis’ by exploring individuals’ narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to the contexts and discourses that they are subject to. It is only after this process of re-reading the data that Mauthner and Doucet (1998) propose breaking down the data into summaries and themes, based upon the categories generated from the four different readings, suggesting that themes emerge as a direct result of the labour intensive reading process. This approach has been adapted more recently to analyse the accounts of survivors of sexual abuse (Lister, 2003); explore anomalous (e.g. paranormal) experiences (Castro, 2005); and examine the narratives of professionals working with parents (Fairtlough, 2007).

Initially I had coded the data on the basis of the broad questions that the women had been asked, but was dissatisfied that these categories were too crude to represent the ways in which the women contextualized their responses. By employing Mauthner and Doucet’s approach (1998), I was able to develop my own ‘reading guide’ which – unlike my CAQDAS coding – reflected the key issues that I had identified from reviewing the literature, as well as the tentative themes produced by my coding with CAQDAS, but which ensured that the data categories remained rich, and the connections between the ‘stories’ were clear. My own ‘readings’ concerned:

Reading for the plot and for our responses to the narrative
For Mauthner and Doucet (1998), this involves reading for the overall story or plot within the interview, and secondly, reading for where the researcher is situated in relation to that particular story. I wanted to explore the key themes in the interviews, as well as my own role in constructing and responding to the stories.

Reading for the voice of the ‘I’
This is concerned with how the respondent ‘experiences, feels and speaks about herself” (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998), and involves listening for the particular woman’s public and private voices. I wanted to pay attention to the ways in which women constructed and gave meaning to their experiences.

Reading for the relationships
For Mauthner and Doucet (1998), this reading involves listening to how women speak about their interpersonal relationships with significant others. In my research, I similarly wanted to listen to how women spoke about their miscarriage, as well as their relationships with partners, family members, friends, work colleagues and health professionals.

**Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures**

In Mauthner and Doucet’s (1998) account this is concerned with placing the respondents’ accounts and experiences within a broader social, political, cultural and structural context; exploring structural and ideological factors which enable and constrain the women’s lives and thinking. I took this as meaning the discourses that impacted upon the women’s lives, and their roles within those structures; and I also sought to explore how the women variously felt about themselves, in terms of their identities as women, mothers, partners and workers.

In contrast to previous researchers who have developed and employed the voice-centred relational approach (Brown et al, 1998, Mauthner and Doucet 1998, List 2003), I synthesized my use of the reading guide that I developed with my earlier CAQDAS coding. Where Brown et al (1989) and Mauthner and Doucet (1998) had used coloured pens and text markers, I now had two sets of overlapping computerized data. Similarly to Morison and Moir (1998), I employed a recursive analytical approach which requires a constant synthesis of proposing themes (using the voice-relational approach) and checking codes (using the data coded with NUDIST 4).

**Combining CAQDAS with the Voice Centred Relational Method**

While my ‘reading guide’ allowed me to explore the themes in an individual account, NUDIST 4 allowed me to cross-reference these themes present in the accounts of other women. This approach allowed me to explore how women, individually and collectively, construct and reconstruct their experiences. Once I had identified a ‘theme’ by ‘reading’ the various narrative accounts, I then used NUDIST 4 to explore particular examples across the dataset, and interrogate themes in relation to women from particular demographic backgrounds, precise research questions and specific interviews. Thus I was able to move between the interviews, narratives and voices, and, as such, I will contend that employing CAQDAS and a relational ontology approach facilitated a form of data management that allowed the accounts to be compared and thematically developed without them becoming decontextualised from the women’s lived experience.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper for me to present the findings for all of the 4 readings, here are some of the extracts identified from the different readings, to illustrate the potential benefits of using this approach.

**Reading 1: Reading for the plot and the responses to the narratives**

**Reading for the plot – Example: Age and Narrative Context**

As part of the larger qualitative study, the focus of the interviews was on the experience(s) of miscarriage. The overall ‘story(ies)’ that women told contextualized the experience of miscarriage in terms of where the woman is in her life, in terms of her relationships, career, reproduction, her perceptions regarding age, factors such as medical care, and how the miscarriage subsequently became incorporated into their life narratives. Employing NUDIST 4 in this respect ensured that I could examine the ‘themes’ and ‘codes’ relevant to specific demographic factors. Reading for the plot identified that notions of ‘age’ were central to the narrative context. Although at the beginning of each interview women were asked their chronological age and their reason for the pregnancy (Dowrick and Grunberg, 1980), women were not prompted about the relevance of their age, unless they raised it as significant, to avoid any unnecessary distress. Where women did comment upon their age, it was often something that they returned to as they narrated their story, as these two accounts (including the progressing lines from the coded transcripts) demonstrate. I was then able to return to my
CAQDAS codes, and check through certain question-specific codes, free-codes, memos and notes that I had made, as well as search for the incidence of ‘age’ in the narratives of women over 35 years of age.

The first example concerns a woman who had a stillbirth at the age of 36, and a subsequent early miscarriage. In this account, age is discussed in relation to fears concerning Down’s syndrome, but subsequently in relation to trying for another pregnancy, and finally, the woman suggests that it is now ‘too late’ for her to try again:

Interviewer: Can I start by asking you your age and where you were born?
Respondent: I was born in [place] and I’m forty two…
R: I was absolutely fine [during the pregnancy] and then, because of my age
I: mm
R: I was…I had a scan, and then I had another scan…
R: …actually, I do know the date that I lost the first baby, but not
the year, and think that you just do that, sort of, then you work
ninety-five per cent of your life perfectly happily, and just forget
about that five per cent, otherwise you get completely wound up about it
I: yes
R: and mixed up about it, and I think, particularly because of my age,
it would have been very difficult if I was, you know, desperate to
have another baby…
R: …I just think it is very
difficult …if you’re an older Mum, because of the energy levels, and
things like that, and so that’s why I sort of had an idea of my stop
off point…and also, you become selfish, because you think: well,
then if you’re forty five and you have a baby, and then, when you’re
fifty five, when you might be retiring, it’s going to be ten…

Interview 31, age 42

This account, demonstrates the ways in which some women described their concerns about coming to motherhood late. Although women in Victorian times often continued childbearing well into their 40’s (Berryman, 1991: 104), now this is deemed inappropriate – because women (and their partners) are expected to plan their families, optimize their fertility, and return to paid employment.

In the second example, this woman suggests that time became pertinent because it had taken her several years to become pregnant after her first baby. She then reflects upon the age of her own mother when pregnant, and her subsequent feelings of depression after two miscarriages, before suggesting that she is more worried by time passing while she is attempting to get pregnant, rather than having a subsequent miscarriage:

Interviewer: …how old are you?
Respondent: I’m thirty nine…
I: so, you said that you were trying for a long time, how
long was long?
R: oh, probably…probably four or five years, not with the first baby,
but from then on…

I: …what made you try for another pregnancy then?

R: erm, it just felt right

I: okay

R: I mean, my age has got a lot to do with it as well, I mean [partner] is also reasonably old, erm, my mother was nearly forty when she had me

I: mm

R: and there was a big gap between me and my sister, I know what it’s like to have older parents…

I: …you said that you felt depressed, and you wanted to get on [and try for another pregnancy]?

R: because I didn’t feel in control of my body, as I say: the feelings that I had, I knew were nothing to do with the miscarriage, erm, I didn’t view the miscarriage as a negative thing, as I know that I couldn’t cope with a baby that wasn’t one hundred per cent okay, well, near as one hundred per cent as possible okay; erm … but obviously my age factor, there are more anxieties than if it had happened when I was twenty, twenty five…

I: …and you don’t think that the miscarriages have put you off at all [trying for a subsequent pregnancy]? 

R: no, if I’d been younger, I don’t think it would particularly have bothered me, if I’d had ten of them! Erm, it’s just the time factor really, I think…

Interview 72, age 39

In this account, as chronological age increases, so do uncertainties as to whether motherhood will ultimately be achieved.

Together, these examples are representative of the way in which certain themes (e.g. age and miscarriage) constitute the overall ‘plot’ or story that runs throughout some of the women’s narratives; and the ways in which utilizing the data coded with CAQDAS (indicating the line numbers) suggests the rate at which the plot develops within these accounts. Age is not spoken of in isolation, but is contextualized in relation to other issues, such as declining fertility, older parenting, and perceptions regarding the lack of control over reproduction. Similarly, in a review of the literature concerning the importance of the context and narrative in interviewing, Mischler (1986) has suggested that both age and pregnancy loss are themes that develop throughout the course of an in-depth interview, rather than issues that are discussed as an obvious block of narrative. More recently, Layne (2003) has detailed how she revised her own account of her pregnancy losses, with each miscarriage that she experienced, and in the light of interviews that she conducted with other women who experienced pregnancy loss.
This analysis demonstrates the complex ways in which age is constructed, in terms of: physiological age (biological degeneration), social age (the ‘right’ age for mothering), and chronological age (age in years) (Arber and Ginn, 1998: 136). Several women were shocked when health professionals emphasized the issue of their age when they had gone to have their pregnancies confirmed. Despite medical research, which emphasizes a relationship between advancing age and pregnancy loss (Hansen, 1986), and which conflates chronological and biological age, some of the women differentiated between their chronological and biological age:

R: when I spoke to the Doctor, she wasn’t negative, she was a really, really nice person, but she was telling me all of the downsides [of pregnancy]; and I was like: oh!…then that made me very aware of what could happen…[the Doctor was talking about] Down’s Syndrome, pregnancy in later life, this, that and the other…and when you’re sort of thirty seven, you don’t think of yourself [sigh], it doesn’t matter what age you are, you feel the same, don’t you?… Interview 53, age 37

However, this subsequent account demonstrates how, on occasions, the women themselves conflated notions of ‘ageing’:

R: …I’ve always said that I never wanted an only child, I wanted to have more than one, erm, I do think that if you leave it too late, obviously there’s more chance of there being problems…not just with Down’s [Syndrome], but with physical complications of being an older woman trying to have a baby…I mean, I know how much hard work it is with [daughter], and then having to go through it all again… Interview 21, age 37

These two examples also demonstrate the contested notion of social age. The doctor in the first example provides a normative category for a particular age – the age at which women should have children; whereas the woman herself provides us with a subjective perception of age – that it doesn’t matter what age you are. In contrast, the second extract highlights how all three constructions are used in concert; with chronological and biological ageing being problematic, and social ageing creating ‘hard work’. It could be argued that this notion of work becoming harder as one ages appears more as a myth, in the context of late childbearing; indeed, with regards to paid employment, women are expected to undertake this type and level of ‘hard work’ until they retire.

What I have illustrated here, is how combining NUDIST 4 and the voice-centred relational approach made the ‘plots’ in the women’s narratives (regarding ‘age’) appear more explicit – as I moved back and forth between the narratives and coding, checking the meaning that I was attributing to the narratives, with the codes, memos and notes that I had earlier made with NUDIST 4. However, it should be emphasized that there were also many ‘subplots’ (such as planning, postponement, ‘other’ pregnancies and losses, ‘new’ families, and current pregnancies) which it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore.

Reading for the response – Example: Interviewer responses to the narrative

Mauthner and Doucet (1989) suggest that situating the researcher within the interview allows us to address some of our assumptions about the research. Prior to conducting the first interviews, I had ignored the significance of women’s age, as it had not been raised as an important issue in the existing literature concerning women’s experience of pregnancy loss. In contrast, my interviews demonstrated that, for some women at least, their age was an important aspect of their experience. In my subsequent interviews, as well as discussing our ages, I confided to my interviewees that I had not experienced a pregnancy loss, which I believe allowed me to ask probing questions; and I drew upon my previous experience as a nurse, which allowed me to answer some of their technical questions. I often discussed issues regarding my own background along with the nature of the research, as a means of making the women feel comfortable (Lee, 1993), and as part of the ‘genuine emotional relationships’, which I formed with some of the respondents (O’Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). My coding of this data, in which my questions and the women’s responses were kept together, as interactive two-way dialogue facilitated my later conceptual analysis,
highlighting our subjectivity, and preventing either myself or the women from sliding out of view (Weston et al., 2001; Letherby, 2003; Frost, 2006).

The majority of these interviews took place within the women’s own homes, which contributes to a level of intimacy which may encourage women to speak as though to a friend, rather than a professional (Finch, 1993). This view is supported by many of the women’s own suggestions that the content of our conversations had rarely been discussed before. While I saw the interviewees beyond their experience of miscarriage, similarly the women talked to me about many other issues and aspects of both their and our lives, such as childbearing, work, and relationships. On reflection, my own role in the research and that of the women that were interviewed clearly impacts upon my subsequent analyses and my final research product (Letherby, 2003).

Reading 2: Reading for the voice of the ‘I’

Example: How the woman experiences herself and the miscarriage
I fore grounded the women’s experience of themselves with this reading (the psychical process of miscarriage), at the expense of the miscarriage per se (the physical process of pregnancy loss). In doing so, I suggest that this explicitly illuminates how women give meaning to and contextualize their experience of pregnancy loss. Mauthner and Doucet (1988:128) literally read for the voice of the ‘I’ by paying attention to the personal pronoun(s) that the interviewee uses. This allows the reader/listener to ‘pay attention’ to the ‘active ‘I’ who is telling the story’, rather than the story being relayed through the interviewer. For example, this woman is clearly talking about her biographical self (using ‘I’), even though she seems uncertain of what story she is trying to tell and asks herself rhetorical questions:

R: I just started thinking, is it because I’m older? like, ‘cos I’m thirty six, and is that it? Is that one of the reasons why? And that’s one of my concerns now, you know, am I going to have problems because I’m getting older and stuff… Interview 39, age 36

However, other women seem less certain about themselves, and shift from talking about themselves in the first person (I), to the second person (You) as a means of seeking reassurance from the interviewer. When women used this linguistic device during the interview, it was typically when they were asking me if I shared the same experience, such as an awareness of ageing:

R: I didn’t think it was gonna happen to me…and when you’re thirty seven, you don’t think of yourself, it doesn’t matter what age you are, you always think of yourself, you feel the same, don’t you?… Interview 53, age 37

For Shildrick (1997: 112-3) this is an example of how an individual stabilizes her subject position (I), that is who or what she is, by way of reference to something outside of herself (You/Other); what Shildrick terms ‘tracing the other in myself’. As part of my provisional coding, in the earlier stages of the research, I had created ‘free-codes’ (e.g. not explicitly based upon specific research questions), and made notes and memos regarding women’s use of language, and the ways in which they talked about themselves. Now combining my earlier coding with the use of this part of the reading guide allowed me to check my developing theorization against these explicit examples from the earlier coded data. For example, some women also employed a ‘wandering pronoun’ (I/We/You) when they were struggling to articulate their embodied experience (Mauthner and Doucet, 1988:128). In this example the woman shifts between the shared joy of herself and her partner, as part of a couple, ‘being pregnant’ (We), and the isolation of physically experiencing the embodied loss alone (I):

R: I think that, the only sort of long term feeling that I’ve got, is that, because I’m thirty nine, in fact, I’ll be forty in a couple of months time, erm, I think that, I thought that that was my last chance to have a baby, I thought: that’s it, you know…but we had twelve weeks, as we thought, we’d got used to the idea, we were really happy, we weren’t at all upset about me being pregnant, and erm, when I lost the baby, I thought: probably, that’s it, you know…because of my age, and I know that lots of people have children over forty, but, erm, I think for me I’d like to have my family completed by the time I’m forty, so, err, that’s the sort of regret, rather than the other sort of worries and emotions… Interview 9, age 39
For Wouters (2002), this transition, from I to We is indicative of a sense of belonging, and a (postmodern) need to share grief. Perhaps, in this example as least, the shift back from We to I demonstrates a sense of isolation. The second person (You) was also used to justify a course of action, and here the interviewee employs ‘you’ to suggest that you (as the ‘Other’) cannot appreciate this experience unless you have shared it in some way:

R: I’m frightened to death of falling pregnant….really worries me….if I’m late, I start worrying…it makes you very aware of being safe….we obviously discussed it, and things like that…because, at the end of the day, I know you [he] hasn’t had any, but, at the end of the day, I can’t have a baby to please everyone else….until you’re put in that predicament, and that situation, you don’t know how you’re gonna feel, and what you’re gonna feel, and then, when you’re put in that situation, it can change feelings…but you have to see through those feelings, and think: is that what you really want…you were very adamant that you didn’t want any children …if this hadn’t have happened, would you have changed your mind? Interview 55, age 38

I re-employed CAQDAS in several ways to explore this phenomenon. Firstly I was able to search for specific words, such as ‘I’, ‘We’ and ‘You’, and secondly, I was able to look across the coded data and see where exactly women struggled to articulate themselves. By returning to the NUDIST 4 coding in this way, I was able to see that this was not across an entire interview but instead was in relation to specific questions and issues. As such, using CAQDAS enabled me to explore these examples in relation to their both their wider and specific contexts.

These examples suggest that, for some women at least, the experience of miscarriage can question both their ontological and epistemological grounding. Layne (2003: 178) proposes that a woman may use the second person (You) to ‘become her own audience’; such that she ‘can revisit earlier scenes with the privileged knowledge of how things turn out in the end’. As such, some of these women are actually attempting to reconstruct themselves (post-miscarriage, and in relation to their other lived/embodied experiences) through their use of language.

Mauthner (Mauthner and Doucet, 1988: 128) suggests that using different ‘voices’ within a single account demonstrates that the interviewee is attempting to situate herself between her own experience, and the perception of such an experience that exists in discourse (either lay or professional), or what Cornwell (1984) identifies as public and private accounts. What will be suggested here, is that the women who discussed their experience of pregnancy loss, often switched between pronouns within the same sentence or paragraph, because they considered that neither public or private accounts were adequate for describing the embodied experience of pregnancy loss (Grosz, 1994). This methodological approach is a useful way of considering how some ‘older’ women struggle to come to terms with their notions of selfhood and identity following a pregnancy loss, as they shift between notions of I/You, Self/Other (Mother/Other?), Inside/Outside, in an attempt to understand their experience.

What I have illustrated here, is how combining NUDIST 4 and the voice-centred relational approach emphasized how some women use language to illustrate the ambivalence regarding her experiences of ‘self’ and miscarriage. I was able to do this by working between the mechanical and conceptual aspects of analysis, going back and forth between the coded data and my analytical interpretations. It should be noted that other themes include fixed and fluid narrative styles, contradictions, not having the words to describe the experience, and comparisons with other reproductive events (typically menstruation and childbirth).

Discussion

The ‘conceptual’ voice-centred relational method proposed by Mauthner and Doucet complemented the ‘mechanical’ coding that I had conducted using NUDIST 4, such that I was able to pay attention to both the breadth and depth of the data that I had collected. As with the use of CAQDAS though, this approach is not without its problems and I now want to explore some of the critical issues regarding the use of the voice-centred relational method.
Noting a recent ‘reflexive turn’ in social science research, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) have recently critiqued their own use of the voice-centred relational method, paying particular attention to issues of reflexivity, researcher roles, and the assumptions that underpin their earlier approach. In relation to my own research, adopting the voice-centred relational approach illuminated, rather than created, issues of uncertainty regarding older women’s narratives of early miscarriage, and my own role as a novice researcher. While Mauthner and Doucet (2003) contend that researchers often negate their role in the production and representation of ‘voices’, by combining the ‘reading’ approach with my earlier coding I paid attention to the interplay between analysis and representation. CAQDAS afforded me a framework for the rigorous exploration of my data (Pope and Campbell, 2001), but using an ontological approach that was ‘relational’ foregrounded the ‘intellectual privilege’ that I held over the analytical process (Letherby, 2003: 77).

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) have also asked that researchers explicate the context of the research process. Combining two methodological approaches allowed me to pay attention both to what women said in their accounts, and the ways in which they said it. While some women struggled to articulate their experience, others repeated their story verbatim at focus groups that were conducted during the larger qualitative study. Furthermore, paying attention to issues of auto/biography illustrated that some women reconstruct their embodied narrative in the light of other reproductive events (Letherby, 1994; Layne, 2003). This approach illustrates the fluid nature of women’s reproductive experiences (Grosz, 1994; Shildrick, 1997) and the inherent ‘leakiness’ of women’s experiences of miscarriage (Frost, 2006).

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) contend that the author can never be truly reflexive about all aspects of the research process. However, spending considerable time coding the data with NUDIST 4 prior to employing their conceptual approach, afforded me a great degree of reflexivity. Research is only a ‘snapshot’ of a moment in time (Thompson, 2002), and ‘the matter of time’ was central to my research. Combining these methodological approaches enabled me to identify several ways in which the juxtapositions of age and time created multiple uncertainties:

regarding the uncertainty of whether motherhood has been achieved;

in terms of future expectations of motherhood;

in relation to notions of foetal identity;

in terms of the notions of choice, planning and responsibility which characterise of the twenty-first century;

concerning older women’s narratives of embodied loss – further suggesting that this sense of liminality may be magnified by the uncertainty of the future.

So, while ‘stories are not innocent’ because they are subjectively constructed (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 422), the subject position is so unstable that there is no one authentically known or knowable self (Sandelowski, 2002: 107). Using CAQDAS to explore the breadth of the data allowed me to illustrate the range of women’s experiences, as well as the depth identified by employing the reading guide.

Mauthner and Doucet (2003: 422) also detail their naivety regarding the epistemological and ontological assumptions inherent in their approach. However, I employed this approach because it situated people as ‘relational beings’, and I actively sought to explore any ‘interpretive assumptions’ using a ‘feminist standpoint’ (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003: 423). However, I may have lacked this insight if I had not previously coded the data with CAQDAS.

While Mauthner and Doucet, (2003) have subsequently been concerned with the extent to which their approach inherently privileged language, I actively focused on the women’s embodied narratives (Ellingson, 2006). Some feminist researchers have proposed that if we become immersed in issues of authenticity and representation, we run the risk of not saying anything useful about women’s lived experience (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994; Letherby, 2003, Lister, 2003). By being explicit about our means of data analysis, as researchers, we can say more about the issues and problems that our research seeks to address, as well as
engaging with debates regarding the taken-for-granted nature of both mechanical and conceptual data analysis techniques (Coffey et al, 1996; Bringer et al, 2004; Bryman and Beardswoth, 2006).

Conclusion

Combining the application of a computer assisted data analysis package (NUDIST 4) and the voice-centred relational method is a methodologically innovative approach to analysing older women’s embodied narratives of early pregnancy loss.

While the application of CAQDAS dealt with the enormous amount of qualitative data that was collected, the results of the coding were somewhat disembodied, such that the subjectivity of the researcher and research subjects were somewhat overlooked. Similarly, while the relational ontology approach contextualised the pertinent themes of analysis, there was a risk that the range of women’s experiences would be negated. The aims of the research were to explore what was distinct about older women’s accounts of pregnancy loss, and combining both mechanical and conceptual approaches, ensured that issues of reflexivity, subjectivity, and epistemological assumptions were prioritised.

Despite criticisms of both CAQDAS and the voice-centred relational approach, the process of coding and re-reading the data, each time foregrounding a different aspect of the narrative, ensured that both my own subjectivity and that of the interview respondents remained central to the analyses. Similarly, this analytical technique addressed concerns about the interplay between the research process and knowledge production more generally. Combining mechanical and conceptual analysis does not produce a more authentic or objective research product, but it does provide a comprehensive account of how a group of women give meaning to their experience of early miscarriage, as analysed by this researcher; while contributing to a body of knowledge regarding women’s embodied reproductive experiences, as well as debates regarding research methodologies. Where Lister (2003) has suggested that using the voice-centred relational approach to analyse women’s accounts of sexual abuse has identified a fractured epistemological position, by combining this approach with NUDIST 4 to analyse older women’s accounts of early pregnancy loss, I have similarly identified a position that is epistemologically and ontologically ‘leaky’ (Frost, 2006). That is, the boundaries of the experience are not fixed, but rather are porous and open to interpretation and re-interpretation, by the women themselves, the researcher, and shifting discourses about the meanings of motherhood and loss.

Furthermore, while mechanical and conceptual analytical techniques both have their weaknesses, I have suggested that their combination plays to their strengths. As such, they facilitate critical thinking about what we as researchers do, and its relationship with our results (Letherby, 2003). While this combined approach clearly can be applied to other areas of qualitative research, it is essential that, whichever means we employ, as researchers we are explicit about how we actually do data analysis.

1 CAQDAS has been defined as both computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (Lewins and Silver, 2005) and computer-aided qualitative data analysis (Kelle, 1997), but any discrepancy appears to be semantic rather than theoretical.

2 Such as discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992), grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and conversation analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

3 As part of the larger qualitative study, as well as conducting in-depth interviews, ‘data’ also constituted transcripts from focus groups with both interviewees and health professionals (conducted to inform the final report), my fieldnotes, as well as the women’s letters, poems, photos and comments. See Layne (2003) for an anthropological account of the use of these artefacts.

4 It should be noted, though, that newer programs, such as Nvivo7, are now marketed as having greater analytical and theory-building scope.
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