

# Good evaluation: Reading the evidence well

*Life Promotion Officer Kristy Schubert reports ...*

*As a program and as an organisation, we're very interested in exploring good ways of evaluating what we do. So earlier this year, I went to a course in Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin.*

## Finding patterns of meaning

QDA is a form of analysis that distinguishes itself from the quantitative study of data. But 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' look and sound pretty alike, so they're easily confusable.

My eyes start crossing when I have to read them too often, so to try to ease the eye-crossing, here's a quick description of the difference between quantitative and qualitative analysis:

◆ **Quantitative data** shows us *quantities*:

e.g. how many people said something?

◆ **Qualitative data** shows us with *qualities*:

eg. why did they say it?

Quantitative data tends to be numbers. Qualitative data might be interviews, song lyrics, poems, minutes from meetings ... whatever it is that constitutes your evidence and information.

While numbers make sense in the systems of maths, interviews and stories makes sense in the systems of society, culture and emotions. So we need something other than maths to process this information.

Basically, rather than maths and formulas, the tools people use to analyse qualitative data are:

- 1) a system of summarising what's been said
- 2) a system for describing the social or cultural systems that seem to be controlling how it's been said.
- 3) a system for leaving a paper trail of how you reached that summary

This course took us step-by-step through the processes of making these kinds of summaries and descriptions and showed us how to leave a paper trail behind us.



**When QDA is done well, it becomes a way of seeing the patterns of people's reasons for doing what they do and choosing what they choose, and hopefully this kind of understanding helps us to build better services.**

## Why do QDA?

The reason you need to summarise your data is because funding bodies and peer-review journals don't have time or space to read or publish a lot of 'qualitative evidence': twenty interviews take up a lot more space than twenty numbers from a few sums. So even if you need those interviews to add richness to your argument and generally back up what you're saying, unless they can be presented in a way that's short and sweet, that funding or publishing mob just won't take it.

And the reason you need to leave a paper trail showing how you went from your twenty interviews to your one summarising table is so that funding bodies and peer-review journals can see the logic in your conclusions (and see that you weren't making things up).

But we don't just go through this analytical process for the funders and the publishers. When QDA is done well, it becomes a way of seeing the patterns of people's reasons for doing what they do and choosing what they choose, and hopefully this kind of understanding helps us to build better services. ✕