Rural and Peri-urban Communities in South Africa: Using Innovative Qualitative Research to Hear their Voices

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Abstract: Research in rural and peri-urban communities in South Africa can yield rich data but requires new thinking on how best to gather data. The right questions need to be asked in an optimal way. This research for a PhD in Environmental Management, sought to determine the influences on pro-conservation attitudes and behaviour in communities surrounding protected areas in South Africa. Few studies in this field are purely qualitative, yet this approach can be an excellent way to investigate attitudes and behaviour. The aim of this paper is to describe the novel multiple-method qualitative approach used, which borrowed from grounded theory and was implemented in three contrasting case studies. The research was situated in the paradigm of constructivism/interpretivism, borrowing from pragmatism. Focus group interviews, mapping, and adapted nominal grouping technique (NGT) were used to collect data. The data were first analysed question-by-question for each case study, using open inductive coding, followed by cross-case analysis which resulted in meta-themes for each research objective. Atlas.ti was used to support analysis. The bouquet of methods proved valuable in gathering and triangulating data. Furthermore, NGT provided a novel means of ranking benefits and costs experienced by communities due to bordering a protected area – to indicate level of importance. Participants largely managed the process independently, and it allowed quieter individuals to be heard. Finally, the researcher found little evidence of mapping (or any drawings) being used in rural/peri-urban research. This unique methodology resulted in practical and theoretical knowledge in environmental management and provides a template for other researchers. It can be applied to business and other management studies requiring research in rural/peri-urban areas. Contributions include a data-derived middle-range substantive theory, accompanied by recommendations for its implementation. To broaden applicability, the theory was then combined with existing literature to produce a comprehensive integrated framework.

Keywords: Adapted nominal grouping technique; Case studies; Focus group interviews; Grounded theory; Mapping; Multiple method qualitative approach; Rural and peri-urban communities

1. Introduction

Research in rural and peri-urban communities in South Africa requires fresh approaches regarding how best to gather data, so that different voices can be heard. In these complex settings, rich data can be gleaned, but existing methods require modification to suit the participants. This paper stems from research for a PhD in Environmental Management, which sought to determine the influences on pro-conservation attitudes/ behaviour in communities surrounding protected areas in South Africa. I followed an innovative multiple-method qualitative approach, using contrasting case studies and adapted grounded theory. This paper focuses on the multiple methods used in communities living closest to the protected area. While this study focussed on attitudes to conservation, it would be equally relevant for any research in rural and peri-urban areas, such as market research on products or attitudes to changing business models. Although individual interviews with conservation authority representatives were also conducted, these fall beyond this paper's scope.

The methodology described in this paper arose from two research gaps. Firstly – few studies in the field of environmental management are purely qualitative. Bennett's (2016) review on using perceptions to improve conservation/environmental management, asserts that preference is given to quantitative methods in social sciences, resulting in an incomplete picture. He argues for a plurality of methods to provide a more holistic picture on which to base management decisions. In my meta-analysis of 39 primary research articles relating to communities and conservation, that shaped the direction of this PhD research, only six were purely qualitative. Of these, none were in an African context. Secondly – research in rural areas has its own complexities and needs to be re-thought. With language barriers, different illiteracy levels and issues of trust, I settled on a novel qualitative approach, which allowed flexibility. As contended by Maxwell (2013:3), "Qualitative research design, to a much greater extent than quantitative research is a 'do-it-yourself' rather

than an 'off-the-shelf' process … [involving] interconnection and interaction among the different design components".

In response to these research gaps, this paper aims to describe the novel multiple-method qualitative approach used, which borrowed from grounded theory and was implemented in three contrasting case studies. This methodology is depicted in Figure 1.

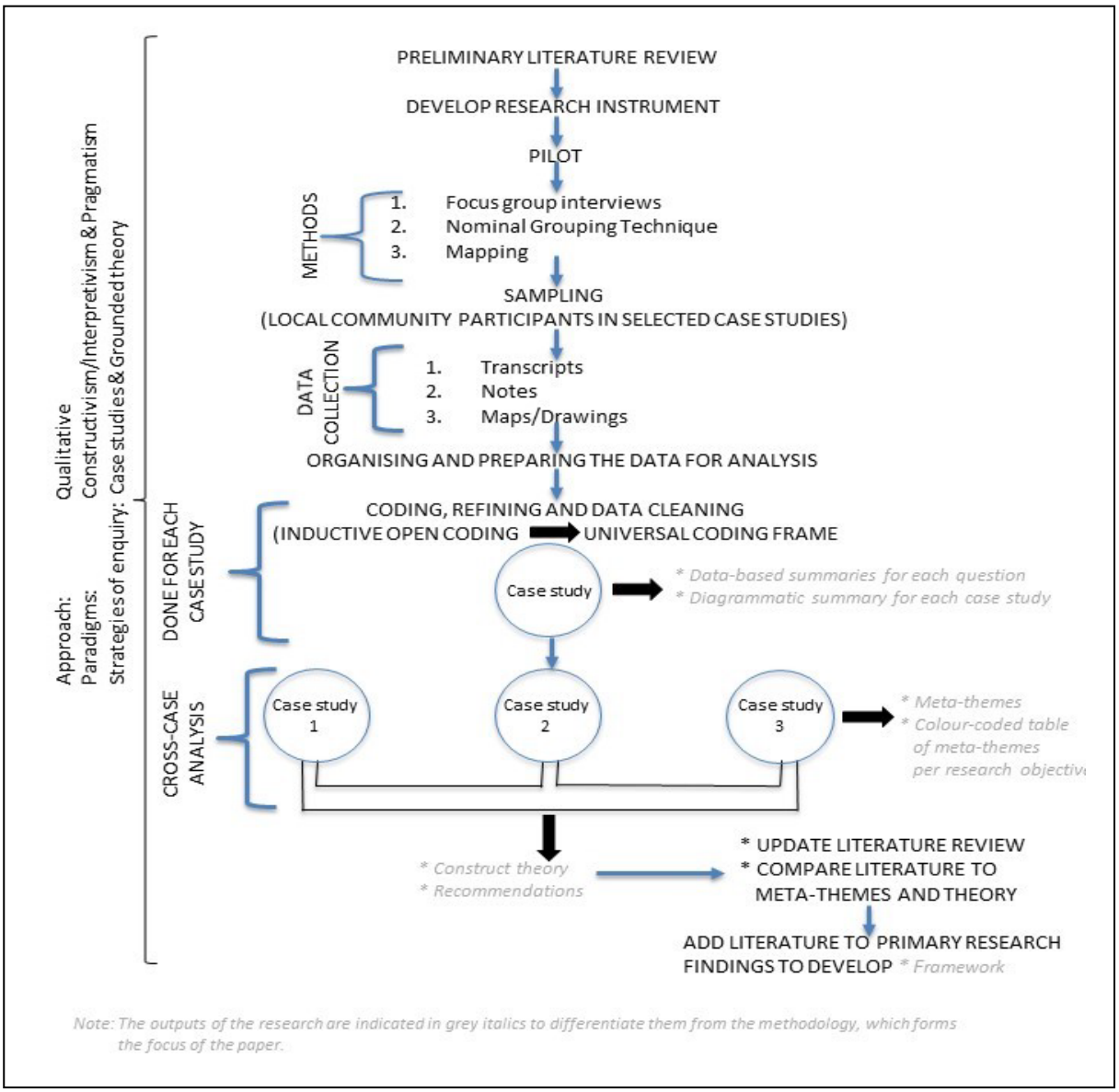

Figure 1: Research methodology followed

2. Approach, paradigms and strategies of enquiry

A qualitative approach is valuable to investigate a complex situation (Creswell, 2014), and to understand, in their own words, participants' feelings and perceptions (Lune & Berg, 2017). I could therefore approach the field without pre-defined categories per question, which would have limited participants expression.

The research was predominantly situated in two paradigms. Firstly – constructivism/interpretivism, recognising that participants have multiple subjective views, discovered and explored through interaction with each other and the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Secondly, I borrowed from pragmatism, in the sense of using a: combination of adapted grounded theory and case studies; creative blend of research methods; and self-designed research process to analyse, interpret and reduce data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016).

Both the strategies of enquiry used, namely case studies and grounded theory, were equally important in executing the study and producing contributions. I used contrasting multiple case studies to provide a deeper understanding; to avoid the vulnerability of single cases; and to enable comparison between cases (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Yin, 2009). In this study, the three cases were specifically selected for their contrasting ownership structures/management models, and for being at different stages in the level of improvement in human wellbeing offered to the adjacent community.

3. Developing and piloting of research instrument

In line with constructivist and Straussian variants of grounded theory, a preliminary literature review was completed in January 2015 to provide broad themes (multiple lenses). From this, I developed the research instrument. I set the review aside until results had been written up (in mid-2019), and the theory constructed. This interval assisted in avoiding the pitfalls of literature hampering creativity or forcing preconceived categories when in the field and during data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). The pilot study comprised two main phases, which are outlined below:

3.1 Testing IQA/NGT at Phinda Game Reserve/Mduku community

I accompanied another researcher to Phinda Game reserve (late 2015) to assist with Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) within the rural Makhasa/Mduku community outside Phinda. Though IQA differs somewhat from Nominal Grouping Technique (NGT) (Chapple & Murphy, 1996), which was one of methods I used, it was a valuable trial-run, guiding my research design. The lessons learnt and adaptations made are outlined below:

- In this rural community, IQA was quite challenging, but participants became accustomed to the process. I asked direct questions rather than issue statements, allowing time for participants to understand the question and seek clarity.
- Having them discuss and clarify notes/ideas as a group before sticking them up, achieved little and considerably lengthened the process. For my work, participants were therefore not divided into groups, but generated ideas and pasted them up immediately.
- While the idea was to generate ideas as individuals, some participants chose to first discuss with a fellow participant, or have someone write for them. Hence, I allowed this adaptation.
- With IQA, the entire group should categorise the notes. This proved complex, with little progress as 20 people clustered around. We immediately adapted and had two volunteers to sort ideas into categories and then seek group consensus. I replicated this approach, followed by voting on each category's importance level.
- IQA was demanding and time-consuming. For my study, I limited the use of an IQA/NGT approach to questions where categories and importance levels were required.
- After the Makhasa session, clarification on some notes written in Isizulu had to be sought. I realised the importance of clarifying while participants were still present. For my study I employed highly literate local translators, who could translate immediately, so that, if necessary, notes could be clarified before participants left.

3.2 Testing the questions and multiple methods approach

The research instrument was first checked by the two subject specialists in environmental management and tourism respectively, and two professors proficient in qualitative analysis, and their feedback incorporated. To test the questions' clarity, a pre-pilot was undertaken in the form of individual interviews with four participants living on farms within Dinokeng Game Reserve. This was invaluable in terms of what additional questions were required, and how questions could be asked better.

The initial plan was for Dinokeng Game Reserve and Kekana Gardens community (bordering the reserve) to form the formal pilot, undertaken on 4–5 December 2015. Logistics proceeded well in terms of participants self-dividing into two groups and one group having the focus group interview while the other drew their map (Section 5.1). In NGT, participants generated many ideas, ordered these and enjoyed it! Clarification of notes was done straightaway with the translator's help. Participants managed the questions well, and variety aided triangulation. It was successful and produced such rich data, that I incorporated it as a case study. The only change was removing the question: "Draw your interpretation of your relationship with this protected area". This proved abstract and confusing, yielding nothing different from the other mapping question.

4. Sampling

4.1 Case study sampling

There is no fixed rule regarding the number of sites and participants required, and no ideal number of cases (Creswell, 2014; Darke, Shanks & Broadbent*,* 1998). For qualitative studies Creswell (2014) recommends four to five, while Palmberger and Gingrich (2014) suggest two to four cases, especially if the aim is cross-case analysis. Due to the in-depth analysis process for each case study, three contrasting cases were chosen for this work (Section 2). This contrast enabled me to determine how very different contexts influence attitudes and behaviour related to conservation, and to end with comprehensive contributions (theory, framework and recommendations). The three case studies were Kekana Gardens community (bordering Dinokeng Game Reserve) (Gauteng province); Khanyayo community (the closest village to Mkhambathi Nature Reserve) (Eastern Cape province); and Mnqobokasi community (bordering Phinda Private Game Reserve) (KwaZulu Natal province).

4.2 Within-case sampling

The choice of participants was driven by the research objectives, not by representativeness (Miles *et al.,* 2014). It was more important to explore the phenomena in varying ways with different people who had knowledge of the phenomena, than to have a large number of participants (Miles *et al.,* 2014; Rapley, 2014). Non-probability purposive sampling was utilised. The focus group interviews and mapping were undertaken with two focus groups, aiming at ten participants per focus group. NGT was carried out with all participants together in a larger group (i.e. 20), aligning with Creswell (2014) and Northcutt and McCoy (2004).

Community leaders were provided with criteria for selecting participants. Through the open invitation of the community leader to those fitting the criteria, various sectors of the community were present. Rapley (2014) contends that pragmatic considerations relating to access to sites or hard-to-reach people, do have their place. In research in rural areas in South Africa, it is protocol (and considered ethical) to work through community leaders. Bias that could emerge from the community leader being involved, was mitigated due to the open invitation. Furthermore, at two case study sites the complexities of rural research prevailed, and the initial invited group were not able to attend in full. Snowball invitations by several participants to others reduced the chances of bias. In all three cases, I had a balanced representation of ages, gender and positions in society. Several participants had limited grasp of English and others spoke only in their mother tongue. Data was gathered at a venue convenient to participants and within walking distance. The sample size in the three cases were 13, 19 and 24 respectively.

5. Data collection via multiple methods

Leaning towards the constructivist and Straussian variants of grounded theory, I acknowledged that the researcher influences the research process. While multiple methods within qualitative studies have received less attention than in the quantitative realm, there are still several options available. However, I found that discussions in the literature do not venture beyond describing the methods to providing guidance on how to analyse multiple methods and reduce the data. In this sense, I felt I was forging my own way, as per the most pragmatic approach.

With grounded theory not being prescriptive in terms of data collection methods (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014), the researcher chose multiple methods to: reduce vulnerability and bias that arise with a single method; decrease the researcher's influence (MacQueen & Namey, 2012); view the topic from different perspectives and gain richer understanding (Cohen *et al.*, 2011); and aid triangulation (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

The multiple methods chosen encouraged participant involvement and joint construction of shared knowledge. Ideas were gleaned from IQA; NGT; Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000) and World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) techniques. Figure 2 contains photos of the various methods.

5.1 Focus group interviews (FGIs)

The FGIs were ideal for in-depth discussion. After explaining to participants what the research was about, and ensuring confidentiality, they self-divided into two focus groups, with one group being given green stickers and the other purple. While one group had the FGI, the other withdrew to another venue for mapping (Section 5.2), and later swapped. The mapping group could not hear the interview group's responses.

During the FGI, the researcher played the role of facilitator. The local translator assisted where necessary, and his/her presence also minimised the effect that I could have on moulding the data, an aspect about which Barbour (2014:318) cautions the researcher. Easy questions were asked first, to create a relaxed environment of rapport and support. These questions elicited responses from a variety of participants, encouraging interactive discussion, which revealed complementary and contrasting opinions. The use of two focus groups in each case provided more opportunity for patterns to emerge.

In each case study, both FGIs were audio-recorded and I also made notes of answers, as well as particular emotions that would not emerge from transcripts.

Figure 2: Multiple research methods with rural and peri-urban participants

5.2 Mapping

In this research, mapping refers to joint construction of a map drawing by participants. Apart from Miles *et al.* (2014), none of the methodology texts consulted mention the use of pictures/maps drawn by participants as a data collection method. Coles, Duval and Shaw (2013), however, mention the emergence of innovative visual data such as drawings; and Darbyshire, MacDougall and Schiller (2005) and Miles *et al.* (2014) refer to studies where children drew maps and pictures respectively. Only one source mentioned mapping and drawings with adults, and this was in the Peruvian Amazon (Wali *et al.,* 2017). It appears therefore that the effective use of mapping with adults in the rural/peri-urban context of this research, constitutes a methodological contribution.

Darbyshire *et al.* (2005) (who used mapping with children in a multiple method study), argues that it provided another avenue whereby their voices could be heard. I found that mapping provided insight into: how participants viewed the reserve and their community; how much they knew of the reserve in contrast to their community; and what they knew about the reserve (for example, vegetation, animals and boundaries). Furthermore, while the maps certainly provided new data, they also confirmed data from the other methods.

Prior to commencing the FGI with the other group, the researcher (and translator) asked the mapping group to draw a map of the reserve and their community. Participants were given a flipchart page, coloured pens and crayons. No further guidelines were given. They were free to use words, pictures or both. Neither researcher nor translator were present during this exercise.

5.3 Adapted Nominal Grouping Technique (NGT)

After the FGIs and mapping, NGT was undertaken with both focus groups combined. NGT is a consensus method helpful in synthesising individual opinions, without the limitations of group interaction where certain individuals may dominate (Van Teijlingen *et al.*, 2006). NGT was useful for questions where I wanted to generate multiple answers, and categorise and rank them via voting. I therefore used it to determine the benefits and losses that participants had experienced due to living near a protected area.

Based on lessons from the pilot phase where IQA was tested, the researcher adopted a simplified version (Section 3.1). Participants were given several sticky notes and asked to generate as many answers as desired. These were single words or a sentence, and in their own dialect if preferred. As individuals, they pasted the notes on a large page. The two volunteers then stepped in, and meaningful discussion ensued as participants grappled to place notes into categories. Participants named each category, tallied its notes and discussed whether they agreed with the order of priority (according to the tally). If not, a vote was taken.

The researcher stood back and allowed participants to work independently (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000). At no time did she move any notes. If assistance was required during ordering categories, the researcher let the translator facilitate, to reduce my influence.

I have not found evidence of NGT being used in rural settings, but experienced that a simplified version was highly effective. It promoted confidence, enabling participants to feel safe in expressing their realities, with quieter participants finding their voice. It also allowed movement of participants which "change[s] the shape, flow, energy and possibilities in the room" (Weisbord & Janoff, 2000:157). Furthermore, NGT provided a means of determining which benefits/losses are more important to participants. This type of ranking is currently lacking in the context of communities and protected areas, apart from a quantitative classification of benefits and threats by De los Angeles Somarriba-Chang and Gunnarsdotter (2012).

While adapted NGT had the advantage of allowing those who were less active or silent in the FGIs to be heard, a limitation is that I could not probe further into a note, as I did not want to single out certain individuals, and there were time constraints (the research involved approximately six hours of participants' time). However, note clarification was done as a form of member checking.

6. Data preparation, coding and cleaning

To support the analysis, I used Atlas.ti. Due to the complexity of a multi-case, multiple method study, the software was invaluable in coding and organising/retrieving and presenting different configurations of data. With hundreds of documents and over 1000 quotes, Atlas.ti facilitated comparison across questions and case studies.

This section consists of three steps:

6.1 Organising and preparing the data for analysis

Recordings of FGIs were fully transcribed by an outside company, and recordings and their transcriptions then imported into Atlas.ti, for checking. Using the programme's Association Editor, anchors were inserted within the audio-recording, enabling me to compare a text section with its corresponding audio. Specific quotes could thereby be played back during coding, increasing accuracy. This proved invaluable in analysing FGI data, as I could replay the excerpt, paying attention to detail such as tone of voice and emphases, and intensity of agreement/disagreement amongst participants (Barbour, 2014) – aspects not evident from transcripts.

All notes produced during NGT with their translation were double-checked after the event with a different translator, and resulted in the coding for some notes being changed. Each note was typed up as its own primary document, and imported into Atlas.ti. Finally, each map was scanned and also imported.

6.2 Coding, refining and data cleaning

6.2.1 Data coding

Coding is a key part of analysis (Miles *et al.,* 2014) to reduce and reorganise data into themes. Aligning with grounded theory, data analysis was inductive, with codes emerging from the data itself (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014); no literature was referred to during this process; and my analysis was supported by actual data, in the form of verbatim quotes. I used descriptive coding, where the code label describes the basic topic of the quote (Miles *et al.*, 2014). Themes were the headings to a group of codes or sometimes a stand-alone code. The screenshot from the code book in Figure 3 shows the following as an example: 'Lack of access to natural resources' is a theme under the NGT question on losses (L), which has several codes within it, while 'Lack of information/contact' is a theme as well as a code (without sub-codes). The same applies to the themes/codes emerging under the FGI question on what would make people more positive (MP) towards the protected area, for example, the meeting of 'Basic needs'. At other times, in the discussion or results, a theme might emerge by combining various codes, which were not structured hierarchically within the coding system. Hence, the term 'theme' is used flexibly.

The transcripts for the FGIs as well as the maps, lent themselves to coding (Barbour, 2014). For coding NGT, there was no previous research to benchmark against, as, if NGT is done fully (as opposed to the simplified version I followed), participants do the analysis themselves (but not by coding). However, each note could be coded, and I therefore decided to use coding to chunk data segments (quotes) for all three methods: in FGI transcripts it was a sentence/few sentences that represented a certain concept; within maps, coding involved chunking sections of the drawing; and in NGT notes, the whole sentence/word would be coded. Through this process, a hierarchical universal coding frame was created. Within this coding frame, each question asked of participants had its own codes. Atlas.ti's comment tool was used to write-up working definitions of codes.

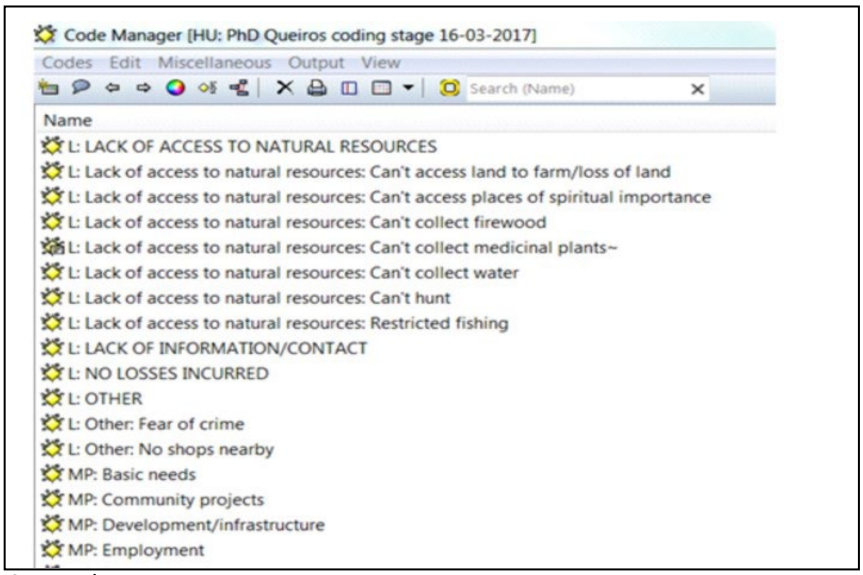

Figure 3: Examples of codes/themes

6.2.2 Coding rules and refinement

To aid consistency and transparency, a table was drawn up with the data cleaning process and coding rules. Schreier (2014), in her work on qualitative content analysis, calls these 'decision rules', while MacQueen and Namey (2012) refer to an 'audit trail'. As coding occurred, it was checked against this table, as well as against the code definitions.

I also compared data with data, codes with other codes, and data with the assigned codes (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014) to interrogate and refine coding further. In so doing, some codes merged within others or expanded if a particular category needed further sub-division. In most cases, refinement resulted in fewer codes with more quotations under each one, as opposed to more codes containing fewer quotations.

6.2.3 Data cleaning

After coding and refinement, the coding within each FGI transcript and NGT note was checked to see if data cleaning was required. Data cleaning involved two main steps:

Re-checking coding within transcripts and NGT notes

For cleaning FGI data, I listened again to all FGI recordings to recognise the voices of different respondents to ensure they were not coded again later regarding the same point. For each case study, the researcher re-read all the transcripts to ensure that text had been consistently coded. For NGT notes, quotes were re-read to determine if the correct code had been used. This was very useful and several changes were made to coding during this phase to ensure consistency across case studies.

Drawing up quotation lists per code

For each question, a list of all quotes relating to all the codes for that question (regardless of the data being collected via FGI or NGT) was drawn from Atlas.ti. These documents were saved as 'Code query output documents'. In Atlas.ti the quotes are ordered according to the document, for example, the quote used in Primary Document 1 appears first in the list. However, I needed quotes to be ordered per code, and therefore cut and pasted quotes to achieve this. It was from these documents that quotes would be analysed per code, and those quotes best encapsulating the findings were copied from there and pasted into the thesis. These documents were supported by a data table (for each question) that contained the number of quotes per code. From these two documents, the findings were analysed.

I found this laborious cleaning process highly necessary for data integrity, consistency across case studies and the level of confidence with which I could proceed to the next analysis stage. This process aligned with Schreier (2014) who supports an iterative systematic process – checking coding, repeating steps and modifying the coding frame as one progresses.

7. Practical and theoretical contributions resulting from the methodology

While the paper has focused on the methodological process, contributions are briefly mentioned to illustrate the methodology's value.

Though some data reduction occurred during analysis when codes/themes were discussed, and illustrated with pertinent quotes, the findings still needed to be summarised further (as each case study, written up in its own chapter, was between 64 and 85 pages long). I decided to write data-based summaries at the end of each question, and then to use these to build a diagrammatic summary at the end of each chapter. This summary provided the overall context in terms of level of positivity towards the protected area; constraints; aspects that made participants positive/negative; and what would increase positivity in future.

The cross-case analysis chapter reduced the data further. Using the above-mentioned summaries, together with the data tables, the findings from the three cases were compared to extract the most pertinent influences on pro-conservation attitudes and behaviour. This was not written up question-by-question, but per research objective, and supported with bar graphs depicting the data. This layer of analysis involved the identification of meta-themes, which transcended the codes and refer to the most important issues (Yin, 1990). These were also illustrated in a colour-coded table (each meta-theme having its own colour) and hence, at a glance, one could see the prevalence of each meta-theme within the research objectives.

The meta-themes were then used as building blocks for constructing a theory grounded in the data gathered (Cohen *et al.,* 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) – a middle-range substantive theory presented as a diagram with its parts/categories as well as the interconnections/relationships between them (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The meta-themes were also used to develop recommendations, to assist in practical implementation of the theory.

Only after theory construction, did I consult newer literature (Figure 1). In order to differentiate this from the review done in 2015, newer research was added in a blue font. This is another application of the pragmatic paradigm. The researcher then returned to the cross-case analysis findings, and the theory – comparing them to both the original and more recent literature.

The final step of analysis was to combine the theory with literature in order to produce a comprehensive integrated framework encapsulating the influences on pro-conservation attitudes/behaviour. This broadened the applicability of the study by combining its results with those of previous studies.

8. Conclusion

The innovative multiple-method qualitative approach, using contrasting case studies and adapted grounded theory, described in this paper, produced findings that have contributed to environmental management. The different methods proved valuable in gathering and triangulating the data in the peri-urban and rural communities forming part of this research. Individuals responded differently to each method, providing opportunities for different voices to be heard, and contributing to the findings' richness. The particular bouquet of methods employed across three contrasting case study sites and the type of questions asked, has not been found elsewhere, and hence could constitute a methodological contribution. In addition, the paper also detailed the structured systematic process of analysis, and the PhD provides a roadmap for scholars interested in replicating the methodology. While qualitative research may often be a 'do it yourself' process, for new qualitative researchers, having a set structure or process to follow/borrow from as a baseline could be helpful. Furthermore, if scholars could document the research process followed, this could further contribute to providing 'recipes' for inexperienced qualitative researchers. Finally, this methodology could be transferred to other contexts and management disciplines where researchers need to hear the voices of rural and peri-urban participants. For example, a researcher wishing to determine ranking/order of importance of products in a marketing study, could test and use adapted NGT, as this research has proved its viability.

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