

# Playing fast and loose with qualitative data: Issues in data selection and representation

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15<sup>th</sup> Warwick International  
Postgraduate Conference  
in Applied Linguistics

# Review of this talk

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*Playing fast and loose with qualitative data: Issues in data selection and representation*

**“An outstanding piece ... the audience was gripped”**

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Postgraduate Conference  
in Applied Linguistics

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# Or rather...

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*Playing fast and loose with qualitative data: Issues in data selection and representation' by Keith Richards*

"Richards' sorry revisiting of old themes was **an outstanding piece** of effrontery – and incredibly boring. Only minutes into his presentation, most of **the audience was gripped** by an urgent need to escape as soon as possible."

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# They wouldn't do that, *would* they?

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## **Saturday Night Fever Apollo Victoria, 2004**

Extract: "All-out retro-romp"

Full version (*The Times*): "If it's an all-out retro-romp you want, this only fitfully delivers."

## **Guys and Dolls Piccadilly Theatre, 2005**

Extract: "Hilarious"

Full version (*Independent on Sunday*): "Frank Loesser's great musical from 1950 is hilarious... Grandage's production often falls somewhat flat".

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# Overview

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- Cherry-picking
- Decoupling
- Loose coupling
- The deviant case
- Quality criteria

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# The challenge

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Getting from data to written study can be a traumatic time for the researcher.

Holliday, A. (2007). *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). London: Sage. Page 92.

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# Cherry picking

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'Cherry Picking' is a style of data analysis used when a researcher has inadequate data. Basically, rather than working with large categories, the researcher has terminated data collection with a minimal data set, yet forges ahead nonetheless, completing the analysis.

Morse, J. M. (2010). Editorial. 'Cherry Picking': Writing from thin data. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(1): 3.

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# Misrepresentation

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**'Gary just doesn't understand.'**

1979 my problem is I just don't see what the follow up experiment...

2092 yeah it's quite difficult I I mean I just don't see erm (6.0) yeah I mean you know it's just kind of not not obvious is it what the erm.

2124 but its hard so hard to kind of understand why you would care about the length of this pulse

2546 sorry I don't understand what it's doing

1350 so the question would be

1797 so the question is

2261 that's the question isn't it

2412 but then the question would be

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# How to spot cherry picking (Morse 2010)

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- Few participants, interviewed only once, so they keep reappearing.
- Missing perspectives (too neat and tidy, prompts questions about what wasn't explored)
- Too much variation (too many groups, not saturated)
- No analysis at all, just selected examples to suit researcher's conclusions.

# Decoupling

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The value of this form [*must*], and its potential risks, were mentioned by two of my faculty informants:

Yes, telling readers they must do something is rather presumptuous and it is not a word I use very often. It has a striking effect, though. It definitely lets them know how you want them to look at something.

(Bio interview)

Hyland, K (2002). Directives: Argument and engagement in academic writing. *Applied Linguistics*, 23(2): 215-239. Page 229.

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# What decoupling can hide (1)

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N: I thought they couldn't write – what they think...

R: why did you think that?

N: they all stopped writing ... they (are) all afraid that they might get anything wrong ... so when I came here they couldn't show me work ...they were crying when I asked to see ... but they didn't let me look ... so I wrote the first page and the other page they wrote on their own.

R: ...you need to make sure that the others are still ... on task.

N: maybe they're afraid and maybe they're not sure ... I don't know ... maybe they're not confident enough to ask ... maybe they think it's a silly... task so they didn't ask 'cos they didn't want to do it.

R: you still need to emphasise ... **you don't expect all their writing to be perfect ... is that the expectation of the school ... if they put a pen to paper it must be perfect?**

N: mostly right yeah ... what are you writing here ... why are you writing this way? Why does your handwriting look like this? so they stop doing things.

R: **... so you're working against the culture ... almost**

N: yes ... I've told them they won't get everything right.

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## What decoupling can hide (2)

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'Of interest in the above is the sense that practices and identities of all those involved jointly construct and are constructed by the discursive resources available to the participants and this process is sociohistorically situated and contingent.'

Hunt, N. D. (2011). The development of student teacher identities through undergraduate action research projects: An Emirati case study. Unpublished EdD Thesis, University of Exeter.

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# Deliberate decoupling

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To an analyst's eye, Adrian's final line, with its past tense usage and expression of thanks might also be seen as indicators of a move to closure – a sign that Adrian has gone as far as he wants to on this topic. Adrian, however, reports that this was not the case, nor did Layla feel that this was a good place to stop.

On this occasion, we can follow through from the discovery to the action that was based on it by referring to a follow-up e-mail sent by Andy to Joe...

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# Organic embedding

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Commonly in classrooms, teachers assign seating to children on the basis of matters to do with management (e.g., they do not put two noisy friends beside one another, they put a noisy child beside a quiet one, they keep children who are unlikely to complete assignments or who might be suspected of daydreaming closer to the teacher's customary position). Ms. Jones remarked that such considerations guided her decision making in this Grade 1 classroom, and as she received new information about children, as new children joined or left the class, and as she devised new strategies for encouraging them to complete tasks, she announced and enacted new seating arrangements. The children collaborated with the teacher in enforcing the classroom practice with regard to staying at one's own desk.

Luke: Can we work at somebody else's desks?

Ms. Jones: No, you work at your own desk. That's why you have one. (FN 2.1.96.11)

[Surjeet goes over to Amy's desk.]

John: Surjeet, get in your desk! (FN 2.8.96.29)

Toohey, K. (1998). 'Breaking them up, taking them away': ESL students in Grade 1. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 61-84. Page 70.

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# Loose coupling: category...

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A critical incident is:

... a story with a climax, dilemma or issue to be addressed, but no clear resolution and when the incident is finished being told, there is still a need to ascribe some meaning to the incident before it can be resolved in the mind of the teller.

(McAllister et al. 2006: 371)

# instantiation...

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I think it is because you want to adapt to stuff and you just go with the flow and if it worries you just put it in a little pile over there and keep trying. I think maybe the cleanliness over here got me to start with, 'cause you have my town [a tidy town competition winner] and then you have clean-up-Australia Day and you have garbage bins, [but here] the rubbish is everywhere and people just throw it, I still have an issue. I still hold on to mine until I find that one garbage bin so I can put it away. That I guess kind of gets me. I actually think that it's so overpopulated, even if they had the big hole in the ground like the tip and they just threw the rubbish in and didn't worry about it at least it is all in one place. And the smoking everywhere and ash all over the floor but you wear bare feet inside. I just noticed at the gamelan the last couple of days how there's ash all over everywhere, the floor everywhere and they stub it into the wood where they have been playing. It is kind of like a contradiction to do that but then you take your shoes off for the whole cleanliness thing. It doesn't really worry me—it is just an amusing contradiction.

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## ...and claim

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This is classic ethnocentrism where she compares Indonesian practices unfavourably with those with which she is familiar in Australia.

(Page 374)

Susan, for example, initially illustrated a highly ethnocentric view which, with more time and reflection, moderated towards a greater level of cultural awareness and acceptance.

(Page 377)

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# Loose coupling: data sources (1)

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'a traditional ethnographic approach ... and a microanalysis of discourse that followed methods used by conversation analysis'

(Palmer 2009: 197)

Palmer, D. K. (2009). Middle-class English speakers in a two-way immersion bilingual classroom: 'Everybody should be listening to Jonathan right now . . .'. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(2): 177–202.

## Loose coupling: data sources (2)

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When Ms. Melanie approached the group, the middle-class English speaker, Daniel, was holding the pen. A very strong student and known for his sometimes arrogant attitude during English class, Daniel had already had to ask the other two children, Maria and Oswaldo, both working-class Spanish-dominant students, for help to come up with the word for “feathers” (*plumas*) in order to record his idea. As the teacher approaches, she stood above the group, and was clearly just stopping in for a brief update on their progress and comprehension.

(Palmer 2009: 196)

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## Loose coupling: data sources (3)

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T:	¿Qué tienen en común estos?	What do these have In common?
Maria:	Que e - (fl aps arms) ¿Ellos tienen dos alas?	That uh They have two wings?
T:	dos alas, ok, ¿qué más?	Two wings, ok, what else?
Daniel:	Plumas.	Feathers.
T:	¿No más? ¿Solo esto? Oh plumas dijiste! Uh hehe Yo pensaba que dijiste 'no mas.' Plumas. Ok, ¿qué más?	No more? Just that? Oh feathers, you said! He he I thought you said "no more." Feathers. Ok, what else?
Daniel:	dos ojos.	Two eyes!
Maria:	[¡Oh! Oh!	
Oswaldo:	[¡Dos ojos!	Two eyes!
Oswaldo:	dos pies	Two feet
Daniel:	¿Y que son vertebrados?	And that they are vertebrates?
T:	Vertebrados, y se acuerdan, um, que tipo de um, de grupo se llaman los animales que tienen dos alas...	Vertebrates, and do you remember, um, what type of um, of group is called animals who have two wings...

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## Loose coupling: data sources (4)

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Having already had a few minutes to compile their ideas, all of the students were well able to contribute to responding to Ms. Melanie's question, and each offered something new. Daniel proudly offered the word that he assumed was the centerpiece of the lesson, that these animals were vertebrates, which Ms. Melanie accepted along with all the other responses. She acknowledged them all equally and graciously.

(Palmer 2009: 196-197)

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# Five Types Of Evidentiary Inadequacy

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- 1 Inadequate amounts of evidence
- 2 Inadequate variety in kinds of evidence
- 3 Faulty interpretive status of evidence
- 4 Inadequate disconfirming evidence
- 5 Inadequate discrepant case analysis

Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M.C.Wittrock (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. New York: Macmillan. Page 140.

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# Schegloff's deviant case

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A first rule of telephone conversation, which might be called a "distribution rule for first utterances," is: the answerer speaks first. Whether the utterance be "hello," "yeah," "Macy's," "shoe department," "Dr. Brown's office," "Plaza 1-5000," or what- ever, it is the one who picks up the ringing phone who speaks it. (Schegloff 1968: 1076)

The distribution rule discussed above holds for all but one of the roughly 500 phone conversations in the entire corpus of data.

(Police make call) Receiver is lifted, and there is a one second pause

Police: Hello.

Other: American Red Cross.

Police: Hello, this is Police Headquarters... er, Officer Stratton [etc.]

(Schegloff 1968: 1079)

Schegloff, E. A. (1968). Sequencing in Conversational Openings. *American Anthropologist*, 70(6): 1075-1095.

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# Discovery from deviant case

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Receiver: Hello

Greeting

Caller: Hello, this is Paul Smith.

Greeting/  
Identification

Telephone rings

Summons

Receiver: Hello

Response

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# Students: a typical exchange

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- 01 Annette: So he is actually on the register.  
02 (3.5)
- 03 Harry: >In fact< as you correctly pointed out, there  
04 was a point I think he was noticed if *he was in there*!=
- 05 Susan: =>Heheheh<hheh=  
06 Annette: =Ye:s=  
07 Susan: =·hhhh hehheheh  
08 Harry: (xxxxxxx) one to one.  
09 Susan: ·hhhh hhh  
10 Harry: Heh!hahah hh ·hhh  
11 (1.0)
- 12 Harry: ('xxxxxx missing?') 'Hang on I'll just check.'
- 13 Susan: Hhehehehahah=  
14 Paul: Left someone bound and gagged in the corner somewhere.  
15 Annette: Yeah. (0.5) That primary school teacher had the right idea.  
((Referring to a recent news item about a primary school teacher who bound and gagged one of her pupils.))
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# Students: a deviant case (1)

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- 01 Paul: Hiroko is still  
02 (1.0)  
03 Paul: a bit dreamy, (.) and I said (.) 'Are you a  
04 hundred percent' (.) and she said  
05 ((non-verbal expression))  
06 Keith: hhhhhe[heheheh  
07 Harry: [Heheheheh=  
08 Keith: =Heheheh  
...  
22 Paul: An:d actually (.) she's working by herself.  
23 °(You know)° and- because sh- I mean she- (.)  
24 she looks as if- (.) >she looks as if< she's  
25 on drugs. An- and I was worried because (.)  
26 sh- I said (.) she was looking up a word and I  
27 said 'What are you looking for?' `nd she said  
28 (.) `rambling`.

## Students: a deviant case (2)

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- 29 Harry: hhhhhhheheh  
30 Paul: t huh  
31 Ed: Fair enough. [Well why not.]  
32 Paul: [And I thought] may:be (.) maybe (.)  
33 something her landlady has said to her.  
34 Ed: We did [e::r  
35 Annette: [Well see it wasn't anything (that had  
36 come up [in person ]  
37 Ed: [No last er]  
38 Paul: No no. [Absolutely not.  
39 Ed: [Last week we did e::m >(this you know)<  
40 some work on types of er walking. That was what  
41 it was. [(xxxx)  
42 Annette: [O:h right.  
43 Paul: And she suddenly thought today (.)  
44 'That's something I've forgotten to do.'
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## Students: a deviant case (3)

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- 61 Paul: Heheheheheheheh she just  
62 rambles. Ah you know she's- but she's- she's  
63 okay but she's don't expect anything of  
64 her. And er (.) I was going to have them  
65 working as a group of three, and she was going  
66 ((non-verbal imitation)) so I said 'Do you  
67 want to work by yourself.' And she went  
68 ((non-verbal imitation)). °Heheheheheh°  
69 (2.5)
- 70 Ed: We::ll I think this listening thing's getting  
71 her down you know all  
72 (0.5)
- 73 Ed: I mean it- we did an exercise  
74 yesterday where you had to pick out some  
76 pieces of information,

# Quality criteria and results

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Question	Yes	No	Unclear
Is this study qualitative research?	43	0	1
Are the research questions clearly stated?	38	2	4
Is the qualitative approach clearly justified?	13	22	9
Is the approach appropriate for the research question?	42	2	0
Is the study context clearly described?	24	3	17
Is the role of the researcher clearly described?	12	27	5
Is the sampling method clearly described?	21	11	12
Is the sampling strategy appropriate for the research question?	21	6	17
Is the method of data collection clearly described?	31	1	12
Is the data collection method appropriate to the research question?	37	0	7
Is the method of analysis clearly described?	12	20	12
Is the analysis appropriate for the research question?	17	10	17
Are the claims made supported by sufficient evidence?	23	9	12

Atkins, S., Lewin, S., Smith, H., Engel, M., Fretheim, A. and Volmink, J. (2008). Conducting a meta-ethnography of qualitative literature: Lessons learnt. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8:21.

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# The researcher's responsibility

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The spirit of ethnography is precisely its openness ... it is an uncomfortable science, something that demands tremendous intellectual flexibility and resilience, because every new project has at least the potential to destabilize the generalizations that emerged from the previous one. ...

The key thing about ethnography is what I have called elsewhere "the ethnographic invitation": the constant openness to critically check what we believe against the available evidence; to keep exploring things even when – or especially when – they appear to be well-known.

Jan Blommaert (List posting, [LING-ETHNOG] E-seminar Ingrid Piller, 14 May 2012)

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# A lesson from History

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As a discipline, studied and taught, history is forensic: its goal is critical assessment of the evidence. The goal in turn of source criticism is to understand why the evidence exists. Who produced it and for what purpose? In popular history, however, the evidence is conspicuous by its absence: it is either silenced to promote the voice of the narrator in rebranding a familiar tale, or sensationalized in the contrived divulging of a hidden scandal.

Conrad Leyser. Review of Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*. *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5699, 22 June 2012.

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# Keeping an open mind

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The author Helena Kennedy was once asked what made her laugh and responded by saying that she always found her mother very funny, giving the following story as an example:

Visiting her mother, who was ill and confined to bed, Helena mentioned that she was in Glasgow to address a conference on the subject of sexual harassment. Her aunt, who was sitting by the bed, said that she had once been on a bus and a man had actually put his hand up her skirt.

'Oh,' said her mother, perking up, 'was that the skirt you bought in the Jaeger sale?'

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# Getting to the heart of things

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The force of our interpretations cannot rest on the tightness with which they hold together, or the assurance with which they are argued. ... A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books. Page 18.

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