As qualitative research has burgeoned across the social sciences, and as researchers have been collecting more and more varieties of data, appropriate ways of analyzing those materials have remained problematic for many. There are no intellectually worthwhile formulaic or procedural ways of analyzing the many different types of data. Analysis can seem daunting to many younger researchers: proverbially, they collect far too many data and then find themselves overwhelmed by the resulting analytic work. They are confronted by piles of unanalyzed interview transcripts, thousands of words of fieldnotes, heaps of visual data, and the rest. They should have had a clear idea of how they were going to analyze the data all along, and they should have been analyzing in the course of their fieldwork. They need help.

There are plenty of textbooks and courses that offer advice on analysis to the novice researcher and, indeed, to the more experienced. Collectively, they offer a variety of perspectives on the process of analysis and its outcomes. Students and researchers are entitled to find themselves as much confused as enlightened. Many introductory texts misrepresent the real work of analysis by confounding it with mechanical tasks of transcribing, coding, and searching. But always at issue is the proper relationship between observations (data) and ideas. At root, the important thing for the ethnographer or other qualitative researcher is that data should be things to think with and to think through; there is, or should be, a constant shuttling between ideas and data, data and ideas. Moreover, such analytic thinking should be a process that runs throughout the research, in parallel with data collection, so that the analytic dialogue is a thread through the trajectory of any given project.

So how to capture this process of analysis? It is certainly not a separate phase of the research after the data collection is complete. It cannot be a purely inductive process: one cannot fruitfully amass more and more observations with no guiding ideas to inform engagement with the data. (Although too many students and practitioners seem to operate on that basis.) Equally, a purely deductive procedure, whereby observations are used to test prior theory, does not capture the exploratory spirit of qualitative or ethnographic research. Clearly, those polar opposites, in terms of the logic of inquiry, do not do justice to the ways in which researchers actually can and could interact with their data, and in which observations and ideas are intertwined.

In Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research, Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans explore and develop a third way for qualitative analysis: abductive reasoning, an approach they had flagged in a previous publication (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). The general idea is not new, of course. It derives from the pragmatist philosophy of Charles Peirce. In essence it encourages the researcher, confronted by an observation or series of observations, to ask what underlying state of affairs might have given rise to those observed phenomena. Speculation is thus invited, and the analyst is always trying to invoke ideas (causes, patterns, conventions) to account for observations.

In other words, invoking abduction is one way of capturing—and perhaps legitimating—what creative researchers actually do anyway. It is a particularly apt way to characterize observational, field disciplines. The astronomer, for instance, can observe...
something new or anomalous and from that and similar observations posit a new class of phenomena (such as pulsars or quasars); the ethologist can observe patterns of animal behavior and seek an explanatory account (based on ecological conditions or evolutionary advantage). So too the social scientist speculates in the search for generic ideas that account for observed actions and then develops those ideas in the light of further observations.

This is the general perspective advocated by Tavory and Timmermans. They contrast it with inductive approaches (which they equate with “grounded theory”) and deductive strategies (identified as “extended case method”). There is, however, an irony here. Grounded theory, first elucidated as such by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, was also based on Peirce’s pragmatism and advocated abductive reasoning. It was intended to encourage social scientists (of whatever stripe) to develop ideas and to avoid either recapitulating existing ideas (“theory”) or simply reporting observations divorced from the creation of ideas. Reichertz (2010) suggested that discrepancies in the interpretation of grounded theory can be resolved by recognizing that Strauss’s approach to GT is informed by abductive reasoning. It is not, therefore, an affirmation of purely inductive logic. Reichertz also suggests a role for abduction when no theory exists, or none works, and where “Something unintelligible is discovered in the data and, on the basis of the mental design of a new rule, the rule is discovered or invented and, simultaneously, it becomes clear what the case is” (Reichertz 2010). A very similar perspective on the role of abduction is also offered by Meyer and Lunnay (2013).

So Tavory and Timmermans do not really do justice to Glaser and Strauss in writing off grounded theory as an inductive approach. In its origins and general spirit, grounded theory is abductive. On the other hand, the authors may be forgiven. There is now an odd cottage industry of books and training courses in “grounded theory” that do indeed treat it primarily as an exercise in inductive reasoning, in which the researcher starts as a conceptual tabula rasa. The obsessive focus on coding data reinforces this view of grounded theory. In other words, grounded theory has undergone a process of simplification and vulgarization: that is the fate of many ideas, of course, as they migrate from the original formulation through textbooks and curricula. The same is broadly true of the closely related idea of analytic induction, which also looks a good deal like abduction in practice.

So, if we overlook vulgar textbook incarnations, abductive reasoning starts to look a lot like good research practice. To that extent, the contrast with “extended case method”—as developed by the Manchester School of anthropologists and revived by Burawoy—can also look a bit forced. It is normally described as being theory-driven and hence deductive in logic. In practice, however, practitioners can hardly avoid the development of local, substantive ideas that relate directly to the social settings they study. One suspects that what is really at stake is the kind and level of theory that is invoked: in the extended case, the guiding ideas tend to be at a high level of generality (globalization, neoliberalism) rather than data-close. So I suggest that research-in-practice actually converges on the general principles of abduction—an emphasis on the close and inextricable relations between the local and the generic, the context-specific and the context-free.

Be that as it may, Tavory and Timmermans have written an excellent overview of the place of abductive reasoning in qualitative social research, and they make a cogent case for its significance. The book deserves wide recognition, especially when the quantity of qualitative research seems to be outstripping its quality. It is especially gratifying to have such a methodological text written by two authors who are themselves experienced empirical researchers. This thoughtful and well-written book is not just a how-to-do-it introductory manual. Rather, it is a sophisticated discussion of how pragmatist-inspired thinking can inform qualitative analysis. They include, for instance, a very nice discussion of defamilization. Productive analysis necessitates the capacity to think about phenomena as if they were unfamiliar, or strange. This can involve multiple re-readings of fieldnotes or transcripts and “slow” examination of the data. It is not a matter of mechanistic, quick-and-
dirty coding. Defamiliarization and the identification of incongruous or anomalous observations are crucial in the analytic process (under whatever methodological banner).

The most elementary idea in pragmatist abductive inference is this: The analyst asks her/himself, given an observation, “What might this be a case of?” The analyst then searches for other instances that are also candidate members of the same possible class or category. The resulting interaction between emergent ideas and data drives the elaboration of the concept(s) and informs the further search for cases or instances. The identification of variation is an important heuristic strategy. It allows analysts to interrogate the relationships between instances and the developing conceptual frameworks through which they identify and describe them. There is, therefore, an iterative process whereby ideas and data are brought into alignment and the ideas are developed or modified in the process.

The identification of categories of action, belief, or organization lead to the further consideration of explanation. Causality is always a difficult topic for the social sciences, and can seem especially so for the qualitative researcher. But Tavory and Timmermans make a plausible case that abductive analysis (and indeed other analytic strategies) can arrive at causal accounts, at least in the sense that they seek to uncover processual chains of action, observable in their consequences, that allow the analyst to identify immediate causes. Likewise, there can be explanation through pattern and regularity. Fidelity to the complexity of social life means that the ethnographer or similar qualitative researcher will not be seeking single-cause explanations, nor will s/he be assigning numerical weights to causal factors.

This is probably not a book for beginning students. The argument is quite dense—or at least abstract—at times, and it is not always carried forward with examples. More fundamentally, perhaps, there is the question of whether one really needs “abduction” or “grounded theory” or “extended case” methods in order to do justice to qualitative research and its analytic strategies. In essence, virtually all of the current perspectives seem to involve a creative process of arguing from cases. Howard Becker’s discussions of “cases” would thus be a valuable complement to this book, very different in tone and highly personal, but highly suggestive (Becker 2014; Ragin and Becker 1992). Students and novices (to say nothing of experienced practitioners who are set in their ways) need to be encouraged to think about “cases”: What category might the case (instance) represent? What are the defining characteristics of that category or class? How can one’s understanding of the case and the class be developed through comparative analysis? This is always a productive way of thinking about the relationship between data and ideas, abductive in spirit, that does not really require adherence to one or another rigid “method.” The field has too many “semi-scholars” who cling to one or another formula for their analysis, too often with a slavish adherence to “grounded theory.” They would do well to read Tavory and Timmermans, who argue for a different kind of approach without ever reducing it to a recipe or formula. The advocacy of a pragmatist, abductive style of thought for qualitative research is not original, but this is the first sustained account of what it involves and what it can imply. It is to be welcomed.

References