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Research article

How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the research process – from planning to presentation, with the emphasis on credibility throughout the whole process – when the methodology of qualitative content analysis is chosen in a qualitative study. The groundwork for the credibility initiates when the planning of the study begins. External and internal resources have to be identified, and the researcher must consider his or her experience of the phenomenon to be studied in order to minimize any bias of his/her own influence. The purpose of content analysis is to organize and elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it. The researcher must choose whether the analysis should be of a broad surface structure (*a manifest analysis*) or of a deep structure (*a latent analysis*). Four distinct main stages are described in this paper: the decontextualisation, the recontextualisation, the categorization, and the compilation. This description of qualitative content analysis offers one approach that shows how the general principles of the method can be used.

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Introduction

Qualitative research contributes to an understanding of the human condition in different contexts and of a perceived situation. However, there is no perfect designed study, and unexpected events will always appear. The main issue is how much financial resources, time and effort the researchers in a study team are able to invest in trying to understand the phenomena under study (Patton, 2002). Nevertheless, a researcher has to create the best study design possible, through accurate and considerate planning based on existing circumstances by identifying available resources. Firstly, there is the mapping of external resources – such as economics, time and potential informants – because some methods for data collection and data analysis are cost and time-consuming, and the choices of methods must be adapted to such restrictions. Second, internal resources of the study team, such as knowledge and ability, have to be known. The researcher's self-reflection is an essential part of qualitative research whatever chosen qualitative method (Burnard, 1995). The researcher must take into consideration his or her "pre-understanding", both in the planning process as well as during the analyzing process, in order to minimize any bias of his/her own influence (Elo et al., 2014; Long & Johnson, 2000). To have preconceived knowledge of the subject and to be familiar with the context can be an advantage as long as it does not affect the informants or the interpretation of the results. The researcher needs to understand both the context and circumstances in order to detect and take into account misrepresentations that may crop up in the data (Catanzaro, 1988). All qualitative research deals with some interpretation. However, the interpretations vary in depth and level of abstraction, depending on the method of analysis and on the researcher's ability to distance him/herself (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2001). When limits of the study are identified and discussed, the actual planning of the study then begins. An important factor to bear in mind during both the planning and the application is to maintain as high a degree of quality as possible throughout the whole process.

In qualitative research, several analysis methods can be used, for example, phenomenology, hermeneutics, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenographic and content analysis (Burnard, 1995). In contrast to qualitive research methods, qualitative content analysis is not linked to any particular science, and there are fewer rules to follow. Therefore, the risk of confusion in matters concerning philosophical concepts and discussions is reduced. During the entire process, the researcher must adhere to a qualitative perspective, and the main issue is to achieve the rigor and credibility that make the results as trustworthy as possible. However, in content analysis, different concepts of credibility can be chosen in the discussion of trustworthiness. It is possible for the researcher to use the same concepts as in quantitative studies, an option that is not accepted when performing analysis using other qualitative methods (Long & Johnson, 2000).

No matter what chosen method, the process of analysis reduces the volume of text collected, identifies and groups categories together and seeks some understanding of it. In some way, the researcher attempts to "stay true" to the text and to achieve

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trustworthiness (Downe-Wambolt, 1992; Morse & Richards, 2002; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2001). This article focuses on content analysis and on several definitions and descriptions of content analysis as a quantitative and/or qualitative method that have been presented over the years. In 1952, Berelson defined content analysis as *"a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication"* (p. 18). By using the concepts *technique* and *objective*, Berelson underlines the process of analysis as a reliable and learnable method that precludes the personal authority of the researcher. However, Berelson's definition does not capture the qualitative and latent perspective of the analysis. In order to make the method applicable both in a quantitative and a qualitative approach, and without specifying the depth of analysis, Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as *"a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use "* (p. 18). Downe-Wambolt (1992) underlines that content analysis is more than a counting process, as the goal is to link the results to their context or to the environment in which they were produced: *"Content analysis is a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena"* (p. 314).

An overview of the research process from planning to presentation can be seen in Fig. 1.

The planning

In all research, it is essential to begin by clarifying what the researcher wants to find out, from whom and how. The purpose may be of a descriptive or exploratory nature based on *inductive* or *deductive reasoning*. Inductive reasoning is the process of

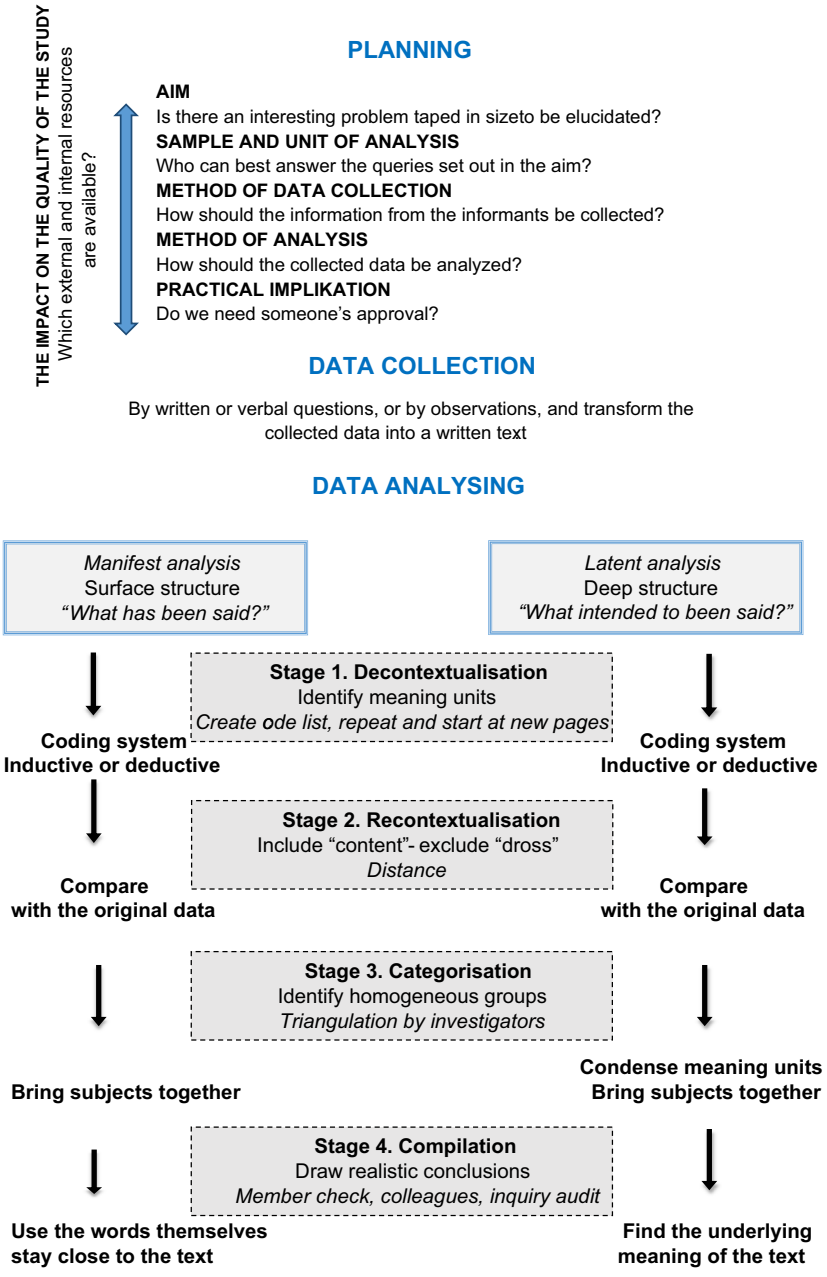

Fig. 1. An overview of the process of a qualitative content analysis from planning to presentation.

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