

Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper



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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper is aimed to map content analysis in the qualitative paradigm and explore common methodological challenges. We discuss phenomenological descriptions of manifest content and hermeneutical interpretations of latent content. We demonstrate inductive, deductive, and abductive approaches to qualitative content analysis, and elaborate on the level of abstraction and degree of interpretation used in constructing categories, descriptive themes, and themes of meaning. With increased abstraction and interpretation comes an increased challenge to demonstrate the credibility and authenticity of the analysis. A key issue is to show the logic in how categories and themes are abstracted, interpreted, and connected to the aim and to each other. Qualitative content analysis is an autonomous method and can be used at varying levels of abstraction and interpretation.

1. Background

The first descriptions of content analysis were developed exclusively for a quantitative approach and thus related to a positivistic paradigm (Berelson, 1952). Later descriptions indicate that content analysis has undergone comprehensive changes, moving from ‘a counting game’ to a more interpretative approach within the qualitative paradigm (Schreier, 2012; Egberg-Thyme et al., 2013; Lindgren et al., 2014). This paradigm is a value-based process characterised by multiple realities, the mutual creation of data, and the development of individual and multifaceted perceptions of phenomena (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Qualitative content analysis is a method to analyse qualitative data. It focuses on subject and context and emphasizes variation, e.g. similarities within and differences between parts of the text. It offers opportunities to analyse manifest and descriptive content as well as latent and interpretative content (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004).

Its roots in different scientific paradigms contribute to challenges concerning ontology, epistemology, and methodology in research using qualitative content analysis. The origin of qualitative content analysis in a positivistic paradigm has an impact on discussions of its ontological and epistemological roots. The ontological assumptions of content analysis are open and vary according to the researchers' standpoint. Researchers with a positivistic point of view maintain distance and separation from the objects of the study and strive to catch some objective ‘truth’; those with a hermeneutic point of view strive to be close

and connected to the study participants and reveal meanings in the data using various degrees of interpretation. The epistemological assumptions in quantitative content analysis are that some ‘truth’ in a text can be revealed with as little interpretation as possible, for example by measuring, weighing, and counting frequencies and proportions of similar statements (Krippendorff, 2013). The epistemological basis of qualitative content analysis is that data and interpretation are co-creations of the interviewee and the interviewer, and interpretation during the analysis phase is a co-creation of the researchers and the text (Mishler, 1986). Thus, a text is assumed to imply more than one single meaning (Sandelowski, 2011).

There are also various issues related to the choice of methodological approaches. Examples of such methodological issues are the interchangeable use of the concepts of ‘category’ and ‘theme’, and the difficulty of keeping levels of abstraction and degrees of interpretation logical and congruent throughout the analysis and the presentation of results. This is a discussion paper aimed to map qualitative content analysis in the qualitative paradigm and to explore common methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis.

2. Mapping Qualitative Content Analysis

In terms of epistemology, qualitative content analysis can be applicable whether knowledge is believed to be innate, acquired, or socially constructed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Qualitative content

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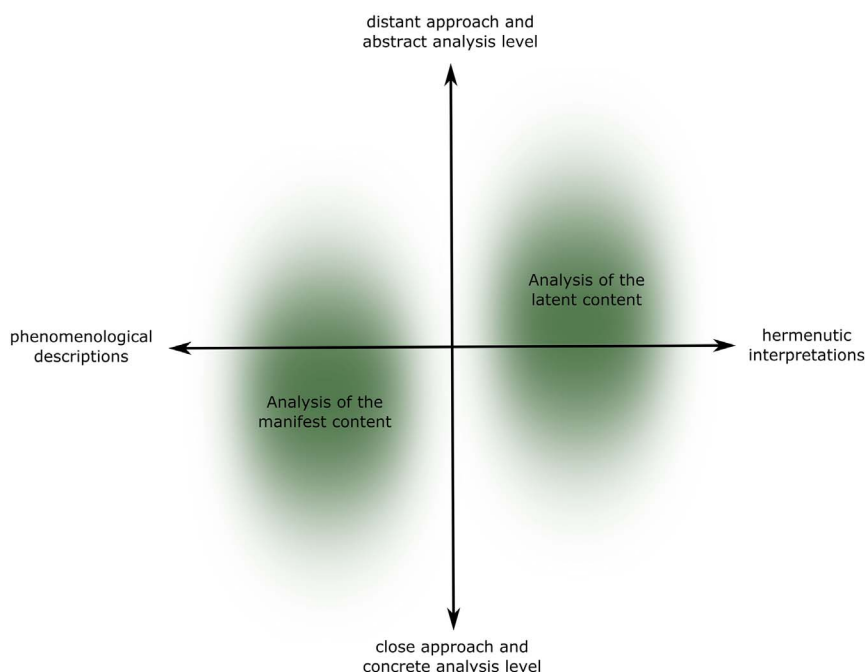


Fig. 1. A two-dimensional model of various epistemological approaches including the researchers' standpoint.

analysis comprises descriptions of the manifest content, close to the text, as well as interpretations of the latent content, distant from the text but still close to the participants' lived experiences. The latent content is interpretations of the underlying meaning or the 'red thread' between the lines in the text (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The descriptions and interpretations can be seen as emanating from phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches to the objects of the study. Fig. 1 shows a two-dimensional model of various epistemological approaches, including the researchers' standpoint close to and/or distant from the text. Closeness to the text means more concrete descriptions and interpretations; distance from the text means more abstract descriptions and interpretations. The figure illustrates that manifest content, close to the text, can be seen as a phenomenological description, and more latent content, distant from the text, can be seen as a hermeneutic interpretation. During the analysis the researcher often begins by sorting the coded manifest content into categories and continues to search for the latent content and formulate this as themes on various levels. Thus, the researcher takes various scientific positions depending on the aim of the study.

3. Methodological Approaches

The methodological approach can be inductive, deductive, and abductive (Krippendorff, 2013), which means there are various challenges to be met.

3.1. Inductive Approach

An inductive approach, also called data-driven (Schreier, 2012) or text-driven (Krippendorff, 2013), is characterised by a search for patterns. During the analysis the researcher looks for similarities and differences in the data, which are described in categories and/or themes on various levels of abstraction and interpretation. The researcher moves from the data to a theoretical understanding – from the concrete and specific to the abstract and general. Eriksson and Lindström (1997, 1999) argue that there may be a risk in using an inductive approach of getting stuck in the surface structures of recurrent empirical summaries, and thus becoming a prisoner of induction. For example, the classification of human beings' health in terms of physical, psychological, and social dimensions can serve as a valuable summary, but does not offer

any new insights. Another issue to address is whether this really represents an inductive approach, or if it may be a result of the researcher's pre-understanding of human beings as physical, psychological, and social beings. The challenge in conducting inductive analysis is to avoid surface descriptions and general summaries.

One example of inductive content analysis is a study about loneliness among the very old (Graneheim and Lundman, 2010). Text from individual interviews was divided into meaning units that were condensed and coded. The codes were interpreted and compared for differences and similarities and sorted into 27 tentative subthemes. Through a process of reflection and discussion the authors agreed on 15 subthemes, and finally four themes were formulated that unified the content in the subthemes. The descriptive themes were 'living with losses', 'feeling abandoned', 'living in confidence', and 'feeling free' and they illuminated the variations of loneliness among the very old.

Another example of an inductive approach is found in an article by Lindgren et al. (2014). The aim was to illuminate experiences of loneliness among people with mental ill-health, which were reported under two categories: (1) 'multifaceted and altering' (based on the sub-categories 'varying with situation in life and endless' and 'a developing experience') and (2) 'emotionally and socially excluding' (based on the sub-categories 'lack of belonging' and 'feeling set aside'). The formulated theme of meaning running through these two categories was that loneliness could be metaphorically described as 'looking at the world through a frosted window'.

3.2. Deductive Approach

Using a deductive approach, also called concept-driven (Schreier, 2012), researchers test the implications of existing theories or explanatory models about the phenomenon under study against the collected data. They move from theory to data or from a more abstract and general level to a more concrete and specific one. Eriksson and Lindström (1997, 1999) argue that with a conventional deductive approach the researcher risks formulating categories based exclusively on an established theory or model.

Another challenge in using a deductive approach is deciding how to treat left-over data that does not fit the selected theory or explanatory model. What and how much is left over depends on the researcher's intentions when selecting theoretical model. Is the purpose to verify an

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