USING AVAILABLE DATA: CONTENT ANALYSIS

500 Research Methods

Mike Kroelinger

General Facts

- ☐ Much information that has already been collected (data) or is available (written, verbal, visual communications) that has not been fully analyzed and interpreted.

- ☐ Analysis can be qualitative or quantitative or both.

Key Questions

- Is often important, when beginning a research project, to ask the question should more data be collected?

- The answer relates to the natural of the research problem and to available sources.

- Before decision making, you must examine and evaluate the available data.

Questions About Existing Data

- ☐ What are sources of the data?
- ☐ What composes the original sample?
  - ■ Who
  - ■ Size
  - ■ Location
  - ■ Selection procedures
  - ■ Other issues

Questions About Existing Data

- What data was collected?
  - Can you get the original instrument used to collect the data?
- What was the method of collection?
- If data has been collected over time, what comparisons can be done?
- Which comparisons cannot be done?

Questions About Existing Data

- ☐ What analysis has been done?
- ☐ What are the advantages of using the data?
- ☐ What are the disadvantages or limitations of using the data?
- ☐ What research questions could be posed?

General Comments

- Many different methods of unobtrusive research can be used to analyze what I am referring to as existing data.

- We can't discuss all of them but can overview some of the general issues associated with them.

Key Points About Existing Data

- ☐ key points are common for:
  - ◼ Content analysis
  - ◼ Existing statistical data
  - ◼ Historical/comparative analysis
  - ◼ Behavior mapping (to certain degrees)

Key Points About Existing Data

- ☐ The research is unobtrusive.
- ☐ Methods can be qualitative or quantitative or both.
- ☐ Validity and reliability are special problems that have to be addressed.
- ☐ Data should be re assessed multiple times to really get at the real content and its meaning.

Key Points About Existing Data

- The sources of data are varied but by and large are readily available to us:
  - Books
  - Human behavior (as it occurs)
  - Paintings
  - Music, laws
  - Time records
  - Drawings, digital images
  - TV
  - Videos
- The list is infinite! (Check the Berg reading for other examples).

Key Points About Existing Data

- Selection of what to evaluate or analyze in terms of *units* -- what you code is critical.
- May involve:
  - Subjective interpretation of definitions or meanings
  - Words, which might mean one thing to you and an entirely different thing to me.

Steps to Content Analysis

- Develop *operational definitions* for the key variables in your inquiry.
- Define *units of analysis* -- words, sentences, people actions, others.
- Decide how you are going to *collect and code* the data.
- Define categories for coding.
- Are you coding and analyzing the manifest or latent content?

Manifest & Latent Content

- Manifest content is the *visible, surface content* of the unit of analysis. Examples:
  - color is yellow
  - word means ....
  - person was female
- Easy to code and data is reliable.
- Let's reader know that you measured what you said you would measure.

Manifest & Latent Content

- Latent content is the *underlying meaning*.
- You would code your overall assessment of what, for example, a paragraph of text, means to you.
- If more than one person is coding, could have interpretation, and therefore, reliability problems.
- Even one person coding presents reliability problems.

Manifest & Latent Content

- ☐ You can use both methods.
- ☐ Use one unit of observation and code both ways -- does the unit receive the same characterization?
- ☐ If so, you may have validity and reliability.

Operational Definitions

- The operational definitions of any variable is composed of the attributes in it and how each are measured.

- Such attributes should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

- Don't describe, for example, a newspaper as conservative and liberal -- must be one or the other!

Counts

- ☐ Counts must be quantitative if your analysis is not qualitative.

Example of Content Analysis

- ☐ Public opinion about key issues of 1960's in the U.S. by Ray Funkhouser (1973 study cited in Babbie, 1989).
- ☐ Problem was to find the key public opinion issues of the 60's.
- ☐ Period of time marked by Vietnam War, civil rights movement, equality for women, decline in faith in government.

Example of Content Analysis

- Funkhouser's methods:
  - Survey research
  - Content analysis
- Turned to Gallup polls of the decade.
- Looked at answers people gave when asked what is … "the most important problem facing America?"

Example of Content Analysis

- ☐ The critical issues from the Gallup poll:
  - Vietnam war
  - Race relations & urban riots
  - Crime
- ☐ For content analysis, Funkhouser turned to the weekly news magazines – mass media.

Example of Content Analysis

- ☐ His intention: determine which issues were given the most coverage during the decade.

- ☐ He compared these findings to the Gallup Polls.

Key Decisions for the Researcher

- ❑ What period would he cover?
- ❑ What magazines?
- ❑ What sampling design?
- ❑ What issues would he consider?
- ❑ How would he code the issues?

Funkhouser's Approach

- ☐ Period of time – 1960-1970.
- ☐ Magazines: Newsweek, Time, & U.S. News and World Report.
- ☐ Limited to the above because it would be impossible to carry out a completely representative study of full range of informational stimuli available.

Funkhouser's Approach

- ☐ Used a strategy of indicators.
- ☐ Based on concept that the news magazines content reflects the nationwide content of prominent news media – T.V. and newspapers.
- ☐ Sampling – he took all of them, every edition of each magazine during the time period – 1,716 magazines.

Funkhouser's Approach

- ☐ His source of data for the content analysis was the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

- ☐ Articles were tallied, by publication by year for a series of issues.

- ☐ He used only the topics listed under the headings.

Funkhouser's Approach

☐ Headings:
- Vietnam
- Race Relations
- Inflation
- Crime
- Urban riots
- Campus unrest
- Environment
- Drugs
- Sex
- Mass media
- Population
- Women's rights

Funkhouser's Approach

Funkhouser's sampling design was simplicity itself: He took 'em all, every edition of each magazine during the period specified. Given that decision, you can probably envision the observation procedures appropriate once the code categories were established: Scan some 1,716 magazines, coding each of the thousands of articles. Suddenly content analysis may not seem so much fun. Actually, Funkhouser created code categories and grossly simplified the observation at the same time. I'll let him tell you what he did.

The source of data for the content analysis of these publications was the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. Articles (but not book reviews) were tallied, by publication by year, for the following issues (using *only* the topics listed under the headings):

Vietnam: *Vietnam* ... American participation ... peace and mediation (except negotiation meetings) ... politics and government ... protests, demonstrations, etc., against ... public opinion

Race Relations: *Negro* ... militants ... students ... student demonstrations ... student militants ... in U.S. ... civil rights ... culture ... education ... history ... politics and suffrage ... segregation ... resistance to segregation ... social conditions ... *Race Relations* ... in U.S. ... prejudice

Inflation: *Inflation* (financial)

Crime: *Crime and Criminals* ... in U.S. ... prevention ... procedure ... criminal statistics ... *Law Enforcement*

Urban Riots (covering the general topic only—not specific cities, which were in some years listed separately): *United States* ... riots

Campus Unrest: *Student* ... demonstrations ... militants ... movement ... SDS ... SNCC ... opinion (all in U.S. only) ... *Kent State* (in 1970 only)

Environment: *Ecology* ... study and teaching ... *Environment* ... environmental movement ... environmental policy ... pollution ... control ... laws and legislation ... *Air Pollution* ... *Water Pollution*

Drugs: *Drugs* ... abuse ... laws and legislation ... *Hallucinogenic Drugs* ... LSD ... *Marijuana* ... *Narcotics* habit ... addicts ... control of ... and youth

Sex: *Sex* ... (psychology) ... in literature ... in moving pictures ... in art and the arts ... in the performing arts ... instruction ... and laws ... relations ... sexual behavior ... sexual ethics

Mass Media: *Mass Media* ... *Television Broadcasting* ... and children ... censorship ... moral aspects ... news ... in politics ... laws and regulations ... in U.S. ... social aspects

Population: *Population* ... overpopulation ... increase of ... distribution of

Poverty: *Poor* ... in U.S. ... *Poverty* ... *Slums*

Smoking: *Smoking Cigarettes* ... advertising

Science: *Research* ... federal aid ... in U.S.

Funkhouser's Approach

- ☐ Did not create his own coding scheme.
- ☐ Used the coding scheme developed by the *Readers' Guide* editors.
- ☐ Also used their coding of articles.
- ☐ All he needed to do was count the number of entries under each code category for the three magazines!

Funkhouser's Approach

- In simplifying the research, author ran risks:
  - No control over validity & reliability of what editors had done.
  - Difficulties with multiple entries – listings under more than one heading.

Funkhouser's Approach

- ☐ Combines content analysis and analysis of existing data demonstrating how a social researcher can find out about social life through an examination of information already collected and compiled by others.

Funkhouser's Findings

Table 11-1 News Magazine Coverage of Various Issues during the 1960s and Importance Ranking of the Issues

Issue	Number of Articles	Coverage Rank	Importance Rank
Vietnam War	861	1	1
Race relations (and urban riots)	687	2	2
Campus unrest	267	3	4
Inflation	234	4	5
Television and mass media	218	5	12*
Crime	203	6	3
Drugs	173	7	9
Environment and pollution	109	8	6
Smoking	99	9	12*
Poverty	74	10	7
Sex (declining morality)	62	11	8
Women's rights	47	12	12*
Science and society	37	13	12*
Population	36	14	12*

Note: Rank-order correlation between coverage and importance = .78 (p = .001).

*These items were never noted as "the most important problem" in the Gallup findings, so are ranked equally below the items that were.

Source: G. Ray Funkhouser, "The Issues of the Sixties: An Exploratory Study," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 37 (Spring 1973), p. 66. Used by permission.

Example of Content Analysis

- ☐ Go to http://www.census.org.
- ☐ Click on the American Factfinder
- ☐ Try to find existing data from the 2000 U.S. census that could be used for available data for a content analysis.
- ☐ Example: population, race, Hispanic or Latino, and age.

Summary

- ☐ Content analysis is appropriate for many research problems, it is not appropriate for every situation.

- ☐ Particularly beneficial when public records exist.

- ☐ Not useful for causal research.