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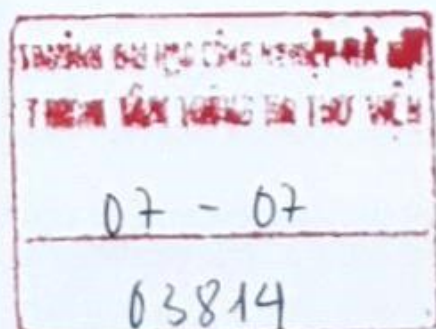
# Content Analysis



POCKET GUIDES TO  
SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH METHODS

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## Preface

We are very pleased to have *Content Analysis* join the Oxford Pocket Guides to Social Work Research Methods series. Content analysis is a widely used research method in social work and in allied disciplines and professions. As of March 2015, the *Social Work Abstracts* database showed 551 publications in which “content analysis” was used as a specific research method. Content analysis is often included in social work textbooks, such as those by Rubin and Babbie (2010), Maschi and Youdin (2011), Royce (2013), and Engel and Schutt (2013). However, the textbook discussions of content analysis fall short of clarifying some important variations within the method and in conveying its wide-ranging application to different types of data. The textbook portrait of content analysis unduly limits researchers in understanding the method, its strengths, its optimal uses, and its limitations.

This Oxford Pocket Guide offers a comprehensive overview of the variety within content analysis, along with detailed descriptions of three approaches found in the contemporary literature. This book provides an inclusive and carefully differentiated examination of contemporary content analysis purposes and methods. Such a book is not currently available in the social work literature. This book also includes many illustrations of actual content analyses, along with two full-length studies reviewed in detail. In this way, we hope the book is both conceptual

and practical, guiding the planning of projects as well as the methods to realize their completion. We hope it will be useful to researchers familiar with some forms of the method and will educate those new to content analysis.

In this book, we describe and examine three key approaches to content analysis: (1) basic content analysis, which focuses on manifest content and employs statistical analyses, in contrast to (2) interpretive content analysis, which focuses on both manifest and latent content, and (3) qualitative content analysis, which also focuses on both manifest and latent content. Interpretive and qualitative content analyses draw on narrative analysis methods rather than statistical analyses. Content analytic is neither simple nor monolithic. Understanding the multiple approaches to content analysis now available provides researchers with more choices, greater utility, and enhanced rigor for their projects. Our objective in this book is to help researchers expand their knowledge and fully understand the range of available tools in order to generate better research results.

The three methodology chapters of the book (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) are organized by a consistent outline. Several issues are explored in the same order to differentiate and examine the three approaches to content analysis. For each approach, we address the research purposes, intended audiences, epistemological issues, ethical issues, research designs, sampling techniques, coding techniques, analytic techniques, and the role of researcher self-reflection and reflexivity. Coupled with multiple examples of published studies, this organization can help readers better understand how the three approaches to content analysis are alike or different.

First, we draw a distinction between more *basic* content analyses drawing on literal and manifest content and *interpretive* and *qualitative* approaches that emphasize both context and latent content. In social work textbooks, content analysis is generally portrayed as drawing on manifest content in existing documents. This choice makes the coding process appear literal, where in practice it often requires a great deal of interpretation by the researcher. Literal, even automated, approaches to coding are indeed found in content analyses. However, most social work content analyses involve some judgments by the researcher in understating, interpreting, and coding complex data. Thus, a distinction between more basic, literal, and more interpretive approaches is

fundamental to understanding the variation within traditional content analysis.

Second, there are differences among these methods based on use of deductive approaches to coding and analysis versus use of inductive approaches or use of both approaches in combination. These choices influence how coding is understood and undertaken, and they shape the analytic choices used in content analyses. We will explore content analyses using deductive, inductive, and mixed approaches.

Third, we examine the relatively new set of methods known as “qualitative content analysis.” Several recent social work publications have stated that they use qualitative content analysis methods that do not involve quantification or statistics at all. Qualitative content analyses have somewhat different forms in the English-language and German literatures. However, all of these methods find usefulness in content analysis methods that emphasize context and require researcher interpretation and do not involve quantification. We hope to introduce and clarify the key elements of this innovative research method.

Fourth, the development of qualitative content analysis requires that researchers pay greater attention to distinguishing content analysis from other forms of qualitative research. One could argue that *all* qualitative research addresses content, but how and why different methods are applied warrants further conceptualization and clarification. Content analysis may share features with other qualitative (and quantitative) methods, but it is not identical to them. We will explore how qualitative content analysis differs from several other qualitative research methods.

Fifth, we examine the role of epistemology in shaping content analysis. This topic is virtually unexplored in the existing content analysis literature. A key but virtually unmentioned difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis centers on epistemology. Most basic and interpretive content analyses appear to draw on positivist or realist epistemological positions. Yet several qualitative content analyses appear to use a constructivist epistemology. We explore such epistemological differences and their effects on content analysis methods in this book.

Sixth, another limitation of the textbook approach to content analysis is a heavy emphasis on the use of existing or secondary data. Many content analyses *do* examine existing data. However, there is also a longstanding tradition of analyzing newly generated, primary data in

both quantitative and qualitative content analyses. Researchers need to understand the range of uses of content analysis to fully identify its potential for generating new knowledge. Using content analysis to examine practice through the statements of clients and professionals has a long history in the social work literature. In fact, one very early application of content analysis in social work used case records to assess the effectiveness of interventions (Dollard & Mowrer, 1947). We seek to help researchers understand the range of uses of content analysis and to illustrate how it has been used in social work and allied professions.

Seventh, we will provide many exemplars of content analyses from the literature and other sources. We hope to *show* how researchers actually *do* content analysis along with *telling* a lot about *how* it is done. The concluding chapters offer detailed descriptions of two content analyses. In addition, each chapter includes summaries of several exemplar studies linked to the content being discussed. This should also make the book clear and useful for classroom teaching.

Eighth, the concluding chapters examine how content analysis can be used in advocacy efforts. Researchers often use content analyses as a data source in support of advocacy efforts. Analysis of documents and newly collected narratives both provide a valuable evidence base for claiming that greater attention is needed to a specific area of interest. Content analyses of both existing and newly collected data can be used in needs assessment, clarification of practice processes and consumer views, and even as a screening tool for some problems. In this way, content analysis fits well with social work practice needs.

Finally, we examine the strengths and limitations of two full-length exemplar studies to illustrate the variety and complexity of content analysis. Many studies are described in considerable detail throughout each chapter of this book. We hope this book will be useful as a refresher for those already familiar with content analysis and as a useful introductory text for those who are learning the methods or its variants.

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# Introduction

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The aim of this Pocket Guide is to distinguish and examine three approaches to content analysis. Many researchers think of “basic content analysis” as a quantitative research method, which is an accurate but limited understanding. Researchers do use word counts as a core analytic technique in basic content analysis. However, researchers also use content analysis without statistical analyses in approaches called “interpretive content analysis” and “qualitative content analysis.” In these two approaches, researchers focus on narratively describing the meaning of communications, in specific contexts, rather than on using quantitative word counts. These three varying approaches to content analysis have several similarities and some striking differences. They vary in the ways researchers conceptualize content and employ methods for collecting, coding, and analyzing data.

This book seeks to provide researchers with a comprehensive overview of the variety within content analysis, along with detailed descriptions of each of the three key approaches to it. In this way, the book provides an inclusive, and carefully differentiated, examination of content analysis conceptualizations, purposes, and methods. Such a book is not currently available in the social work literature. We hope it will



be useful to both guide researchers familiar with some forms of the method and educate those new to content analysis.

This chapter opens by offering an inclusive definition of content analysis. This will help clarify some key terms and concepts. Each of the three approaches to content analysis will also be introduced and defined briefly. The literature reveals long-standing differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis that are still evident in contemporary published research. This chapter also offers an examination of the origins and evolution of content analysis, as well as the development of content analysis in the social work profession. The aim of this introduction is to provide perspective on the origins, long history, and conceptual foundations of content analysis. Finally, the chapter will offer some brief examples of different approaches to content analysis in order to ground the discussion in practical examples of published research.

### WHAT IS CONTENT ANALYSIS?

Krippendorff (2013, p. 24) defines *content analysis* generally as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” These inferences may address the message itself, the sender(s) of the message, the recipients of the message, or the impact of the message (Weber, 1984). Note that both Krippendorff’s and Weber’s definitions of content analysis go far beyond attention to only the manifest content of a message. *Manifest content* refers to what is overtly, literally, present in a communication. Neither of these definitions of content analysis specify the use of either quantitative or qualitative analytic methods. Further, researchers most often use content analysis descriptively, but they may also use it to generate new concepts and theory and to test theory (e.g., Dollard & Mowrer, 1947; discussed later in the chapter). Researchers can use content analysis to identify and document the attitudes, views, and interests of individuals, small groups, or large and diverse cultural groups. Researchers may use content analysis in evaluation work to compare communication content against previously documented objectives (Berelson, 1952).

### Basic Content Analysis

Berelson (1952, p. 18), an advocate of a more literal approach, defined *basic content analysis* as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest content of communication.” Note that Berelson’s definition would disallow both interpretive and qualitative approaches to content analysis that do not exclusively focus on manifest content and do not always employ quantitative techniques. Neuendorf (2002) similarly defines basic content analysis as techniques using word counts or other quantitative analytic techniques. Neuendorf’s definition would also disallow both interpretive and qualitative approaches to content analysis that do not use quantitative analytic methods. Authors of basic content analysis approaches define it as using quantitative analytic techniques that only or predominantly address literal communication content. Meaningful content is assumed to be fully contained in the texts under study. The frequency of word or passage use is treated as a technique to determine the relative importance of specific content. Description and data organization are the key research purposes of such basic content analysis.

Basic content analyses are those approaches using word counts and other quantitative analytic methods to analyze data. Basic content analysts code mainly manifest data using deductively or inductively generated code lists. Quantitative criteria are used to determine the reliability and validity of the coding processes. Basic content analysts typically sample existing texts created originally by others for purposes other than the current research. They seek to be systematic, objective, and transparent.

### Interpretive Content Analysis

In contrast, Osgood (1959) defines a more interpretive approach to content analysis, calling it “a procedure by which one makes inferences about sources and receivers [of communication] from evidence in messages they exchange.” Holsti (1969) similarly defines content analysis more interpretively as “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of messages.” In this more interpretive or inferential view of content analysis, both manifest and latent content may be considered and analyzed