

Writeup of Krippendorff (2004)

Krippendorff, K. (2004). Conceptual foundation. In *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed., pp. 18-43). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

In this chapter, Krippendorff (2004) provided an excellent discussion of content analysis, its definition, its epistemological viewpoint, and the framework within which it is placed. He started by discussing “three kinds of definitions of” content analysis (p. 19). Some believe “context [is] inherent in a text,” while others “take content to be a property of the source of a text” (p. 19). Krippendorff disagreed with both of these, arguing that content “emerge[s] in the process of a researcher analyzing a text relative to a particular context” (p. 19). He considered texts not to be objective or “reader-independent” (p. 22), but to have multiple meanings that “need not be shared” (p. 23). These “meanings ... speak to something other than the given texts” (p. 23), “relative to particular contexts, discourses, or purposes” which “vary from one analysis to another” (p. 24); “content analysts [should] draw specific inferences from a body of texts to their chosen context” (p. 24). Krippendorff’s overall definition of content analysis, as stated at the beginning of his chapter, was as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 19). Next, he related six examples of content analysis as applied to wartime propaganda, historical events, open-ended interviews, focus groups, and mass communication and media, as well as to infer psychological variables from documentary evidence; these were illustrative of the need “to make explicit the very contexts within which researchers choose to analyze their texts” (p. 29). Krippendorff next presented at length “a conceptual framework for content analysis” falling under his definition (p. 29; see also fig 2.1, p. 30), employing the concepts of texts, research question(s), context, an analytical construct, inferences, and validating evidence. Texts referred to that “meant to be read, interpreted, and understood”—rearticulated—“by people other than the analysts” (p. 30); they “occur in the analyst’s world but acknowledge their origins in the worlds of others” (p. 31). Content analysis should “start with research questions” for reasons of “efficiency and empirical grounding” (p. 32); these questions should be “answerable ... by examination of a body of texts” (p. 32) and able to be validated, “at least in principle” (p. 33). “Context explains what the analyst does with the texts ... [and] embraces all the knowledge that the analyst applies to given texts” in terms of theories, propositions, and evidence (p. 33).

Content analysis researchers “need to make their chosen contexts explicit” to ensure understanding and increase validity and reliability (p. 34). Analytical constructs “guide the analyst, in steps, from the texts to the answers to the research questions,” acting “like testable mini-theories of a context” (p. 35) and ensuring “texts are processed in reference to what is known about their use” in context (p. 37). Inferences in content analysis are abductive, “proceed[ing] across logical distinct domains ... from particulars of one kind to particulars of another kind” (p. 37). Krippendorff provided numerous examples of these and stressed their logical bridging based on both a warrant and backing evidence. Finally, he concluded by contrasting content analysis with other methods of research, stressing its unobtrusiveness, ability to avoid many forms of participant bias, capability to “handle” large amounts of “unstructured matter as data” (p. 41), and sensitivity to context.

Analysis

Taken as a whole, Krippendorff’s chapter was excellent in providing most of what a prospective content analyst would want to know about this method. The organization was generally strong and most of the writing was relatively easy to follow and understand. Nevertheless, I feel some of the sections could have been explained better or more succinctly; in particular the sections entitled “epistemological elaborations” (pp. 21-25) and “inferences” (pp. 36-38) are both, in my view, a little longer than necessary for those with at least basic familiarity of qualitative research as a whole. It is possible that Krippendorff is assuming that readers may not be greatly experienced in qualitative methods and will need substantial background on content analysis’s epistemology and methods of inference, as drawn from qualitative research in general. Those who—like me—are already aware of numerous qualitative methods and techniques may find these sections tedious; even then, however, they still stress those aspects which are particularly important for content analysis: it is impossible to be objective, context is particularly important, and analytical constructs should be applied to what one finds in the data. Krippendorff provided a very useful and generally easy-to-grasp understanding of content analysis as a methodology, epistemological viewpoint, and technique, and I would highly recommend his chapter to those looking to learn about and practice content analysis in their research.

Keywords: content analysis, epistemology, framework, emergent, context, texts, meanings, inferences, replication, validity, research questions, analytical construct, abductive, unobtrusive, context-sensitive

Writeup of Garfinkel (1967)

Garfinkel, H. (1967). "Good" organizational reasons for "bad" clinic records. In *Studies in ethnomethodology* (pp. 186-207). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Summary

Garfinkel's (1967) chapter, while not strictly about content analysis, provided useful lessons and recommendations for research that uses documents as data sources. He began by introducing his study at the UCLA Medical Center's Outpatient Psychiatric Clinic, which was intended to determine "by what criteria ... applicants [were] selected for treatment" (p. 186). However, many of the desired data items—e.g. occupation, ethnicity, income, etc.—were rarely available through the medical records used as data sources. Initially Garfinkel and his colleagues ascribed this to "bad" records, but through further analysis identified "good" reasons for this (p. 187). He found that "the troubles with records [were] 'normal, natural' troubles ... in accord with prevailing rules of practice" (p. 191); the purpose of the records for the researcher "depart[ed] in theoretical or practical import" from the purpose in the organizational context of the medical center (p. 191). Garfinkel noted that true record-keeping and archiving of data on the part of the clinic did not take place often; it was easier to minimize financial and time costs by focusing only on current and short-term data needs, rather than on "unknown" future uses (p. 193). Forms for self-reporting data, which the researchers included in the records to aid their study's data collection, were also troublesome; the appearance of requiring fixed answers often stopped participants from raising issues they encountered with the forms' validity in measuring activities and their meanings. Garfinkel theorized that these "troubles" came down to a distinction between "actuarial" use of records to record and archive data about patients (p. 197) and "contractual" use of records as evidence of a social contract between patient and medical provider(s) (pp. 197-199). This resulted in "an overriding priority" (p. 200) being given to records' purpose as portraying the expected relationships, activities, "sanctionable performances," and the like between and "by clinicians and patients" (p. 199). The records "began to 'make sense'" when considered in light of this social contract (p. 200), requiring "an understanding of [the] order" of the organization and context they were created and modified in "for a correct reading," an understanding which was "shared, practical, and entitled" for those reading and writing the records (p. 201). The records, Garfinkel noted, were "gathered together not to *describe* [emphasis added] a relationship between clinical personnel and the patient, but to

permit a clinic member to *formulate* [emphasis added] a relationship between patient and clinic as a normal course of clinic affairs” when necessary (p. 202). Garfinkel concluded that “the clinic’s records are kept so as to serve the interests”—and context—“of medical and psychiatric services,” and that any and all research using them would necessarily have to keep this in mind (p. 207).

Analysis

Compared to Garfinkel’s chapter in the same book introducing ethnomethodology, his writing here was easy to follow and comprehend. While certainly not the easiest reading to grasp meanings and understandings from, his presentation of major issues that exist when using documents as data sources is one that can be used across qualitative epistemologies, philosophies, and methods. As might be expected, his conclusions make the most sense when considered in light of ethnomethodology; the records can be seen as a socially constructed “account” of the relationship and interactions between a patient and the medical system, and Garfinkel’s study as examining the procedures used to make these records accountable as expressions of the “normal course of clinic affairs” (p. 202). From a library and information science (LIS) perspective, it is interesting that Garfinkel argued in a footnote (pp. 205-206) that systems should be designed to support the “*ad hoc* ... classification ... collection and retrieval” that he identified being used; this arguably both presaged more recent research in LIS and echoed Bush’s associative memex and its (arguably *ad hoc*) construction of trails. This shows that Garfinkel’s chapter has particular applicability to modern-day LIS research, I would recommend it as an interesting and insightful reading into the use and analysis of documents in qualitative research.

Keywords: documents, content analysis, problems, record-keeping, purpose of documents, records, forms, self-reporting, actuarial, contractual, relationship, organizational context, social context, social contract, social construction