Designing a Study Using Content Analysis

Content analysis involves analyzing the content of existing written, audio, or visual communication in an effort to draw conclusions about the characteristics, attitudes, and occasionally, behaviors of the individuals or groups that produced it. If indicators of the variables in a hypothesis can be found in various communication media (newspapers, magazines, TV programs, etc.), then content analysis might be a feasible method of research.

A content analysis study should:

1. Identify and define the key variables in the hypothesis and develop a coding sheet. The coding sheet should list indicators of every variable you tend to measure and provide places for marking how often each indicator occurs in your media source.

2. Indicate what specific media sources you will analyze as you look for and count occurrences of your indicators and how will you obtain your sources? Be sure the media you select is available and accessible to you. Discuss in detail how you plan to obtain, manage, and organize the media sources you will be using. Also, discuss any sampling or selection that must be done within your media source. Will you observe every aspect of the media source you have chosen, or only specific segments or components? Will you observe every available media source of the type you have chosen or will you select a representative sample for observation? If you plan to sample, what type of sampling strategy will you use? Be sure to make it clear how you will select and choose what to look at.

3. Discuss the actual process of observing your media source and marking your coding sheet. In other words, when, where, and how will you do it? Will you do it all yourself, or will there be multiple coders? Will you emphasize manifest or latent content? What will you do to insure that your coding is valid and reliable? Be sure to provide details as to what you intend to do and why.

4. Thoroughly discuss any ethical issues related to your study.

5. Include any supporting documents (data collection instruments such as questionnaires or interview guides, cover letters, informed consent forms, etc.) as attachments.