Framework Analysis:
A Qualitative Methodology for Applied Policy Research

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Abstract

Policies and procedures govern organizations whether they are private or public, for-profit or not-for-profit. Review of such policies and procedures are done periodically to ensure optimum efficiency within the organization. Framework analysis is a qualitative method that is aptly suited for applied policy research. Framework analysis is better adapted to research that has specific questions, a limited time frame, a pre-designed sample and a priori issues. In the analysis, data is sifted, charted and sorted in accordance with key issues and themes using five steps: familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; and mapping and interpretation. Framework analysis provides an excellent tool to assess policies and procedures from the very people that they affect.

Keywords: Framework analysis, applied policy research, qualitative

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Introduction

Organizations whether they are private or public, for-profit or not for profit are governed by a set of policies and procedures. To ensure the optimum efficiency and utilization these policies and procedures need to be reviewed periodically. The review process not only assesses the success or failure of the policy or procedure it also encapsulates the implementation of these policies. The research that undertakes this role is applied policy research, which means that the research is required to gather specific information and has the potential to create actionable outcomes (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Over the last three decades qualitative research methods have been recognized as a valuable tool in the social sciences and in particular management studies (Denzin & Linclon, 2000, Locke, 2001) and this has spilled over into applied social policy research (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Framework analysis is a qualitative method that is aptly suited for applied policy research. Framework analysis originated in an independent qualitative research unit in the Social and Community Planning Research Institute situated in London, England. It was developed by two qualitative researchers, Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer in 1994. It can be said to be quite similar to grounded theory; however, framework analysis differs in that it is better adapted to research that has specific questions, a limited time frame, a pre-designed sample (e.g. professional participants) and a priori issues (e.g. organizational and integration issues) that need to be dealt with. Although framework analysis may generate theories, the prime concern is to describe and interpret what is happening in a particular setting (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Research Methodologies

Before defining exactly what framework analysis methodology entails we will briefly explain what qualitative research is and how it is applied in policy research. Creswell (1998) provides some conceptual clarification by defining qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct and methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or a human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting (p. 15).

The type of methodology adopted by any research depends upon the central research objective and questions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Quantitative research methodology typically answers where, what, who and when questions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Silverman, 2000). However, it has been noted that quantitative research methodologies do not adequately answer why a phenomenon occurs or how it occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2000). To understand the processes or the how and why of a given phenomenon qualitative research provides the necessary in-depth and exploratory tools to achieve a clear picture of the process (Symon & Cassel, 1998). Collis, Hussey and Hussey (2003) argue that only qualitative research in the business environment provides a stronger basis for analysis and interpretation because it is grounded in the natural environment of the phenomenon.

Applied policy research is not limited to one particular stream of data collection and methodology. In fact, the use of multi methods not only provides a more in-depth data set but also allows the researcher to validate findings and thus increase the reliability of the findings (Yin, 2003). Also the use of multi methods may be necessary in order to answer the questions that initiated the research

process. Within applied policy research qualitative methods can answer the variety of questions. Ritchie and Spencer (1994) have broken these down into four categories: contextual, diagnostic, evaluative and strategic (see Table 1).

In qualitative research the qualitative data is collected by the researcher and analyzed using one of the qualitative data analysis methods. Qualitative data are in depth descriptions of circumstances, people, interactions, observed behaviours, events, attitudes, thoughts and beliefs and direct quotes from people who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). It may also include excerpts or entire passages from personal or organizational documents such as correspondence, records/diaries, and case histories (2002). At this point it is important to mention that qualitative data is usually in the form of text (i.e. interview transcriptions or organizational documents); however, it may also include non-textual data such as tables, pictures, audio and video recordings (Patton, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Table 1
Applied Policy Research Categories and Questions

Category	Goal	Sample questions
Contextual	Identifying the form and nature what exists	What are the dimensions of attitudes or percep that are held?
		What is the nature of people's experiences?
		What needs and does the population of the s have?
		What elements operate within a system?
Diagnostic	Examining the reasons for, or ca of, what exists	What factors underlie particular attitudes perceptions?
		Why are decisions or actions taken, or not taken?
		Why do particular needs arise?
		Why are services or programs and not been used?
Evaluative	Appraising the effectiveness of exists	How are objectives achieved?
		What affects the successful delivery of progran services?
		How do experiences affect subsequent behaviour
		What barriers exist to systems operating?
Strategic	Identifying new theories, poli plans or actions	What types of services are required to meet needs
		What actions are needed to make program services are more effective?
		How can systems be improved?
		What strategies are required to overcome the n defined the problems?

Adapted from "Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research" by Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer in A. Bryman and R. G. Burgess (eds.) *"Analyzing qualitative data"*, 1994, pp.173-194.

Qualitative Research & Applied Policy Research

Over the last three decades qualitative research methods have been recognized as a valuable tool in the social sciences and in particular management studies (Denzin & Linclon, 2000, Locke, 2001) and this has spilled over into applied social policy research (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The qualitative

Research Note

data that are utilized in framework analysis are usually gathered in the form of participant observation, focus groups or interviews (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Briefly, participant observation is a process of data collection where the researcher observes participants or is a participant of the event/phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2003). A focus group is a method whereby a group of 6-8 people are brought together to discuss a given the event/phenomenon in which they have a shared experience (e.g. the victims of a riot or asylum seekers) (Creswell, 2003, Silverman, 2000). Interviews are typically a face-to-face conversation between the participant and the researcher (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002).

There are three different types of interviews: structured, unstructured and semi-structured. Structured interviews are based on questions that are asked of each and every participant. There is no variation in the questions between participants. Unstructured or informal conversation interviews have no predetermined set of questions (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Patton, 2002). The interviewer starts the conversation with a broad/holistic question (e.g. Tell me about your life?). Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between a structured interview and unstructured interview. In the semi-structured interviews the questions are open ended thus not limiting the of the respondents/interviewees choice of answers (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, McCracken, 1988). The purpose is to provide a setting/atmosphere where the interviewer and interviewee can discuss the topic in detail. The interviewer therefore can make use of cues and prompts to help and direct the interviewee into the research topic area thus being able to gather more in depth or detailed data set (Creswell, 2003, McCracken, 1988, Patton, 2002). However what is needed is a procedure in which to interpret the data. In the area of policy research framework analysis provides a focus, repeatable procedure.

Framework Analysis

Framework analysis is flexible during the analysis process in that it allows the user to either collect all the data and then analyze it or do data analysis during the collection process. In the analysis stage the gathered data is sifted, charted and sorted in accordance with key issues and themes. This involves a five step process:

1.   familiarization;

2.   identifying a thematic framework;

3.   indexing;

4.   charting; and

5.   mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Familiarization refers to the process during which the researcher becomes familiarized with the transcripts of the data collected (i.e. interview or focus group transcripts, observation or field notes) and gains an overview of the collected data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). In other words, the researcher becomes immersed in the data by listening to audiotapes, studying the field or reading the transcripts. Throughout this process the researcher will become aware of key ideas and recurrent themes and make a note of them.

Due to the sheer volume of data that can be collected in qualitative research (i.e. transcripts of a single interview may run over 20 pages) the researcher may not be able to review all of the material. Thus, a selection of the data set would be utilized. The selection would depend on several aspects of the data collection process. For example, the mix of methods used (e.g. interviews, documents, observations),

the number of researchers involved (more than one interviewer mean a diversity of world views which may elicit different responses from participants), diversity of the individuals and environments in the research project, and the length of time that was required to collect the data (e.g. the study may involve seasonal workers and their view point may vary according to whether they are working or not). So it is vital that the researcher ensures that are variety of sources, time periods and cases are selected (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Identifying a thematic framework, the second stage, occurs after familiarization when the researcher recognizes emerging themes or issues in the data set. These emerging themes or issues may have arisen from a priori themes are issues however it is at this stage that the researcher must allow the data to dictate the themes and issues. To achieve this end the researcher uses the notes taken during the familiarization stage. The key issues, concepts and themes that have been expressed by the participants now form the basis of a thematic framework that can be used to filter and classify the data (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

Although the researcher may have a set of a priori issues, it is important to maintain an open mind and not force the data to fit the a priori issues. However since the research was designed around a priori issues it is most likely that these issues will guide the thematic framework. Ritchie and Spencer stress that the thematic framework is only tentative and there are further chances of refining it at subsequent stages of analysis (1994).

Devising and refining a thematic framework is not an automatic or mechanical process, but involves both logical and intuitive thinking. It involves making judgments about meaning, about the relevance and importance of issues, and about implicit connections between ideas. In applied social policy research, it also involves making sure that the original research questions are being fully addressed (p.180).

Indexing means that one identifies portions or sections of the data that correspond to a particular theme. This process is applied to all the textual data that has been gathered (i.e. transcripts of interviews). For the sake of convenience Ritchie and Spencer recommend that a numerical system be used for the indexing references and annotated in the margin beside the text (1994). Qualitative data analysis tools such as NVivo, are ideal for such a task.

Charting, the fourth stage, the specific pieces of data that were indexed in the previous stage are now arranged in charts of the themes. This means that the data is lifted from its original textual context and placed in charts that consist of the headings and subheadings that were drawn during the thematic framework, or from a priori research inquiries or in the manner that is perceived to be the best way to report the research (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The important point to remember here is that although the pieces of data are lifted from their context, the data is still clearly identified as to what case it came from. For clarity, cases should always be kept in the same order in each chart (1994).

The final stage, mapping and interpretation, involves the analysis of the key characteristics as laid out in the charts. This analysis should be able to provide a schematic diagram of the event/phenomenon thus guiding the researcher in their interpretation of the data set. It is at this point that the researcher is cognizant of the objectives of qualitative analysis, which are: "defining concepts, mapping range and nature of phenomena, creating typologies, finding associations, providing explanations, and developing strategies" (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994:186). Once again these concepts, technologies, and associations are reflective of the participant. Therefore, any strategy or recommendations made by the researcher echo the true attitudes, beliefs, and values of the participants.

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Conclusion

Framework analysis has been used in a multitude of settings. Although primarily used in health care setting (e.g. School of Nursing and Midwifery, 2002; Gerrish, Chau, Sobowale & Birks, 2004; Read, Ashman, Scott, & Savage, 2004) it has also been used in the assessment of information retrieval from the Internet (Balley, et al., 2004), and in an educational study on student performance (Archer, Maylor, Osgood, & Read 2005). These users have stressed that framework analysis is deemed appropriate for the following reasons:

- Primarily based on the observation and accounts of the participants.

- It is a dynamic that allows the change or addition or amendment throughout the process

- It is systematic in that it allows a methodical treatment of the data.

- Comprehensive in nature.

- The access to original textual data demonstrates its transparency, which allows others to formulate judgments. (School of Nursing and Midwifery, 2002; Archer, Maylor, Osgood & Read, 2005; MORI Social Research Institute, 2003)

To reiterate, the key features of the framework analysis approach are as follows:

- It is grounded or generative: it is heavily based in, and driven by, the original accounts and observations of the people it is about.

- It is dynamic: it is open to change, addition and amendment throughout the analytical process.

- It is systematic: allowing methodological treatment of all similar units of analysis.

- It is comprehensive: allowing a full rather than partial or selective, review of the material collected.

- It enables easy retrieval: allowing access to, and retrieval of, the original textual material.

- It allows within-case and between-case analysis: it enables comparisons between, and associations within, cases to be made.

- It is accessible to others: the analytical process and interpretations derived from it can be viewed and judged by people other than the primary analyst.

If the aim of the research is to generate recommendations or outcomes within a limited time period in regards to a given policy or policy issues, with specific a priori issues which maybe in the form of subsidiary research questions and there is a predetermined sample population then framework analysis maybe the appropriate methodology. The method has proven successful in numerous situations and

Research Note

need not be restricted to the public and for-profit sectors. Framework analysis would work equally well in the for-profit environment. Framework analysis provides an excellent tool to assess policies and procedures from the very people that they affect. Thus amendments to policies and procedures that reflect the needs and wants of employees translate to a greater level of compliance.

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