

Framework Analysis

(Based on: Ritchie & Spencer, 1994)

Framework analysis is a qualitative method that is suited to applied business research. It originated in an independent qualitative research unit in the Social and Community Planning Research Institute situated in London and was developed by two qualitative researchers, Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer in 1994. It is 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. organisational 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.

Framework analysis is flexible during the analysis process in that it allows the user to either collect all the data and then analyse 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. familiarisation;
2. identifying a thematic framework;
3. indexing;
4. charting; and
5. mapping and interpretation.

1. Familiarisation refers to the process during which the researchers familiarise themselves with the transcripts of the data collected (i.e. interview or focus group transcripts, observation or field notes) and gain an overview of the collected data. In other words, the researchers become immersed in the data by listening to audiotapes, studying the field or reading the transcripts. Throughout this process the researchers 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 is utilised. The selection depends 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 a variety of sources, time periods and cases are selected.

2. Identifying a thematic framework, the second stage, occurs after familiarisation when the researcher recognises emerging themes or issues in the data set. These emerging themes or issues may have arisen from a priori themes or 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

researchers use the notes taken during the familiarisation 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.

Although the researchers may have a set of a priori issues, it is important that they maintain an open mind and not force the data to fit the a priori issues. However, since the research is 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.

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.

3. Indexing means that the researchers identify 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, it is recommended that a numerical system be used for the indexing references and annotated in the margin beside the text. Qualitative data analysis tools such as NVivo, are ideal for such tasks.

4. In 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 taken 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. 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.

5. 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 aware 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.

References

Ritchie, J. & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. Bryman and R. G. Burgess (eds.) *Analysing qualitative data* (pp.173-194). London: Routledge