
Sociology 350

Your Names: _____

Lab# 5

Subject: Qualitative Coding of Children's Books

The primary purpose of this lab assignment is to introduce "qualitative research methodology" to you through one particular venue---content analysis of children's literature. Later in the semester we will focus on qualitative research methodology of a different sort---participant observation. You should keep in mind that once you successfully complete this course you will be required to select between one of two advanced research methodology courses; namely, "Sociological Explorations" (SOC 416) or "Quantitative Social Research Seminar" (SOC 405). So you may want to begin reflecting over which of these two options you might prefer.

This lab requires that you utilize the Alice Hagar Curriculum Development Center on the second floor of the Murphy Library and select a sample of six children's books from the first aisle on the northwest wall which is labeled "Easy Readers/Picture Books". There are hundreds of children's books to choose between and so you want to check out more than the six you finally select. From these final six books, you are asked to include three books with a copyright date preceding 1980 and another three books with a copyright date between 1990 and 2008. In addition, you are asked to eliminate books that have only animal characters. Since we are employing such a small sample, we are restricting our book selections in order to assure that we are able to make comparisons between time periods. However, in so doing we will still have to reflect over the questions of how reliable and valid any comparisons that we observe really are.

1. Develop a qualitative research question.

- a. To begin this process, **peruse the six sample books** that you have selected and generate a list of appropriate categories of behaviors or themes which you want to concentrate on.

Children's books are full of cultural messages---remember that the messages may be deduced from the overall plot lines, the ways that people behave under specific challenging circumstances, the sorts of words that are used in the dialogue, and/or the pictorial images displayed.

- b. Choose a **category** of life experiences to examine.

*For example, you might discover that the books that you selected have information on mothers and fathers and how they communicate with each other or you might discover that all the books have information on how a child copes with some sort of imposed hardship **or whatever** you find as a link between these books. Of course, a couple of your selected books may not pertain to your selected category and if so may either replace this book with another or simply eliminate one or two of your selected six books.*

- c. Choose **how** you are going to examine your selected category of life experiences/ phenomena.

Now you need to choose how you are going to examine your children's stories. Since the information may be in words, pictures, or plot units or a combination of these, you need to decide which of these data types you are going to focus on. Naturally it would be best if you utilized all of these types of data in trying to get an overall story assessment. What you are looking for is up to you but it may be something very simple such as how children's books portray "sibling or peer relationships".

- d. Now write **your research question** above the dark line provided below.

Unlike a purely deductive study, the research question you address here is posed a bit differently. This is something which we often label as "descriptive" as opposed to "analytical" research. The latter of these terms means, for example, that we are more focused on how fathers are portrayed in relation to their children. One example might be that we will evaluate how children's books portray the work of mothers or fathers or both and this may be in the context of the home or the workplace or both.

2. Collect and code the data.

- a. Go through each book that you have selected, page by page, and mark each instance of the phenomenon that you choose to examine.
- b. Once you have collected the phenomena to examine, start to look at each example and code its various aspects as follows:
 - i. Start by asking of **each example**---“What’s going on (being displayed or talked about) in each instance?”
 - ii. Give that **a code** (a label indicating what it is)
 - iii. Then start to evaluate that instance. What are the **component parts** that make up each instance? Give each of those elements **a code**.

3. Analyze and interpret the data.

Once you’ve been coding for awhile, you may start comparing and contrasting the various codes as they appear. You will want to focus on whether or not one instance of a phenomenon is exactly the same or different from other instances of a phenomenon. As you do so, you will generally tend to find that some patterns emerge again and again. These are the data patterns that your research reveals. Try to identify as many different patterns as your data will allow.

Be sure to note particularly good examples of the patterns you've found. Then you can either check out the books and/or make copies of pages to use when writing your conclusions. For example---You might analyze how parents are portrayed in children's books and discover that mothers are portrayed in some different ways than fathers are portrayed and this may or may resemble the sex stereotypical patterns. When you proceed to write your conclusions in the next section you should reference your examples here.

4. Develop one or more conclusions about what patterns/themes you've found in these cases.

This type of qualitative research is *inductive* and is not intended to provide empirical proof that any one observed pattern would necessarily be replicated with a scientific sample from the universe of all currently existing children's books. Rather, based on the themes and patterns you see in the data that you collected, you can make statements about what appears, in fact, to be going on in these cases. It is from these descriptive statements that testable hypotheses might be generated and applied in **future empirical tests**. For example, do the patterns that you have observed appear to apply equally to the older and more contemporary children's books? If not, what appears to be different between these two time periods?

5. Develop a research hypothesis.

Based on the conclusions that you have reached about these examined cases, develop a statement about the children's books that could be tested in the future. In other words, develop **a future testable hypothesis** out of your observed data patterns.

