

# Integrating Qualitative Content and Narrative Analysis: A Five-Step Approach

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**Abstract:** The integration of different analytical approaches allows harnessing their respective benefits. Nonetheless, the integration of varied methods is challenging, primarily due to the scarcity of comprehensive guidelines for such complex analyses. **This paper introduces a five-step approach for combining two distinct research methods: qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis** as a useful tool for researchers working under critical realist paradigm, or those who just wish to use both – categorizing and connecting approaches – in their research analysis. Qualitative content analysis plays a crucial role in categorizing insights from data. However, an exclusive reliance on content analysis might result in the loss of important contextual aspects associated with these insights. Consequently, narrative analysis becomes valuable, as it enables linking diverse elements in the data, such as the subject of study, its context, associated events, and identified categories. The process of combining the qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis method introduced in the current study was formulated during a doctoral research project within a critical realist paradigm, which necessitated a thorough consideration of both the subject matter and its context. In response to the absence of guidelines for combining content and narrative analysis, the author developed and tested a unique process during her research project. Employing the suggested approach of connecting content and narrative analysis can assist researchers, particularly those applying the critical realist paradigm in the process of generating contextually situated yet generalisable results. From a practical standpoint, innovative research methods and more comprehensive insights from academic studies enhance our understanding of various patterns in the business and management landscape.

**Keywords:** Multimethod approach, Categorising and Connecting methods, Qualitative content analysis, Narrative analysis, Critical realism

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## 1. Introduction

The integration of different methods in qualitative research has been considered beneficial for several reasons. One, and perhaps the main reason, is that people's lives and experiences are multi-dimensional, and applying a single method for data gathering and analysis may restrict researchers from making sense of the worlds in which we live (Mason, 2006; Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan et al 2011). The multimethod approach is further associated with the ability to “think outside the box”, thereby broadening and enriching the logical foundation of explanations, fostering creativity in the interpretive process, and facilitating a more comprehensive analysis across multiple levels (Mason, 2006). However, despite the acknowledged benefits of integrating various methods—a discussion that has spanned several decades—the persistent challenge reported by researchers involves the absence of systematic guidance for the combination of research and analysis methods (Zhou and Wu, 2020).

The term “multimethod approach” is mainly used to refer to the application of two or more qualitative methods, two or more quantitative methods, or the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study (Schutz, Chambless, DeCuir, 2004). Pluralism in methods is usually connected with the integration of different ways to gather data or different ways of analysing the data. However, it can also mean involving other people in the data gathering and analysis, moving iteratively between data and theory, or going back and forth between different steps in the research process (Chamberlain et al 2011). The current article discusses the integration of two qualitative analysis methods – qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis and the iterative combination of theory throughout this process.

Chapter 2, “Origins of the Problem,” outlines the background that led to the development of the current approach. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the paradigmatic underpinning, critical realism, and introduces the two analysis methods: qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis. The fourth section details the approach for combining these analysis methods, while Chapter 5 discusses the potential challenges in applying this approach. The final chapter summarises the article.

## 2. Origins of the Problem

The current article is derived from doctoral research conducted within the framework of critical realism, which was selected because it allows for generating contextually situated explanations. The challenge encountered

by the author in her study was the complexity and lack of guidance to achieve the desired outcomes. The critical realism approach itself, despite being open to methodological pluralism (Wynn and Williams, 2012), does not offer clear guidelines for obtaining these results. While a case study, which is associated with the possibility to develop contextual explanations appears to be a logical method for research under the critical realism paradigm, it may not always be the most suitable option, depending on the research question or the data available. Even when the case study approach is applicable, it still leaves many options for selecting the analysis methods.

At a certain point, it became evident that applying only one analysis method would be insufficient. Adding narrative analysis methods to the selected method of qualitative content analysis, to enhance the ability to consider contextual elements in the categorizing process, seemed promising. However, similar to the main challenge associated with multimethod approaches, guidelines for integrating these methods were scarce. Some articles that discussed categorizing and connecting techniques (for example, Maxwell and Miller, 2008) referred to the grounded theory approach as one possible way to combine the two methods. However, since this approach belongs to the constructivist paradigm and was much more inductive in nature than the research at hand, it was not found applicable.

Through experimentation, the author developed her own way of combining both analysis methods. As this proved to be useful and yielded interesting results, it was considered worthwhile to share the developed process with other researchers planning a critical realist study using a qualitative research approach. The process, presented in the current study, can also be useful to those who do not apply the critical realism paradigm but wish to benefit from both analysis streams—those that support categorizing and those that support connecting. Before describing the process of integrating the two analysis methods, a brief overview of critical realism paradigms, along with the benefits and limitations of qualitative content and narrative analysis when used separately, will be provided.

### 3. Literature Overview

*Critical realism* serves as a philosophical foundation, often positioned between positivist and constructivist approaches, with the aim of understanding the mechanisms leading to specific events and/or actions (Wynn and Williams, 2012). One of the unique and useful aspects of conducting research under the critical realism paradigm is that the emphasis is not only on discovering the mechanisms leading to certain actions but also on understanding the role of context in the trajectory of events and actions (Danemark 2002; Wynn and Williams, 2012). For example, Y and Z need to be present for X to occur, or event A may be followed by event B in the case of X. This approach is called *contingent causality* (Zachariadis et al 2013) and is particularly beneficial in business research. For instance, in analysing leaders' decisions in specific situations and how these decisions may evolve as circumstances change.

*Qualitative Content Analysis* (hereafter Q-CA, to distinguish it from Qualitative Comparative Analysis, commonly abbreviated as QCA) is a widely used method in qualitative research. It is defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The sources of textual data encompass a wide array, including but not limited to interviews, surveys with open-ended questions, focus group discussions, observations, print media, books, email logs, etc. (Kondracki, Wellman, Amundson, 2002). Q-CA can range from inductive to deductive approaches, which can also be combined in the same analysis process. To illustrate the possible applications of Q-CA, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described three different approaches (for more descriptions of approaches, see also Mayring, 2010, and Scheiner, 2014):

- *Conventional content analysis* – an inductive method where researchers allow the codes and categories to emerge from the data;
- *Directed content analysis* – between the inductive and deductive approaches, where researchers have some preliminary understanding of the possible codes and categories, but these are not fixed and can change during the analysis process;
- *Summative content analysis* – the most deductive content analysis method, where researchers have predetermined codes and are looking for how many times certain words, actions, and experiences are mentioned in the data.

The qualitative content analysis offers several strengths, such as its suitability for analysing retrospective data, its capacity for analysing temporal changes in phenomena, and its adaptability to a diverse array of textual data sources (Kondracki et al 2002). Additionally, Q-CA enables the condensation of a large datasets into

systematic concepts to describe or explain certain phenomena, offering flexibility in its application from inductive to deductive approaches (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste et al 2014). Compared to some other analysis methods, numerous guidelines and examples of successful application of Q-CA are available.

However, like any research method, Q-CA has its constraints, including its limited capacity for understanding causality (Kondracki et al 2002). This means that while Q-CA can be useful for explaining relationships between different aspects, it cannot when applied alone, assist in understanding how these relationships came to be (Kondracki et al 2002). Additionally, the use of Q-CA often leads to the decontextualization of data, meaning that the relationships and patterns identified between the codes may not accurately reflect those in a real-life context (Maxwell and Miller, 2008).

*Narrative analysis* (hereafter NA) can involve using narratives as a source of data or creating narratives based on the data. In the current example, the latter approach was employed, defined as a method where "the researcher organizes and interprets empirical data describing some more or less consistent events, happenings, and actions in a way that they construct one or more narratives to be interpreted and discussed" (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011). In simpler terms, the researcher creates narratives (or stories) by combining various "sections" from original stories to explain some phenomena. The rationale for decomposing and recomposing narratives, rather than using the original narratives directly, is that the original narratives may not describe the phenomena as clearly.

It is recommended that researchers applying NA use data that is narrative in nature, such as stories and descriptions, since these would be "richer and thicker," thereby enabling the creation of compelling, easily memorable, and contextually rich results (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011). Narrative analysis can be conducted in several ways, with the most common being *thematic*, *structural*, and *performative* narrative analysis (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011; Frost, 2011):

- *Thematic* narrative analysis focuses on identifying themes that emerge from the data and organizing them to develop meaningful stories.
- *Structural* narrative analysis examines how the story (narrative) is told, for example, the words used.
- *Performative* narrative analysis concentrates on the contextual aspects that influence the construction of narratives.

One of the strengths associated with NA is the aspect that stories are compelling by their nature, and storytelling enables individuals to better understand themselves and the world around them (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011). Additionally, NA has proven useful in identifying key relationships within the data and integrating them by discarding information that is not essential to explain these relationships (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). Contrary to Q-CA, NA not only supports the development of connections between emerging themes but also maintains the relationships between these themes and their real-world context (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). It has also been argued that NA allows researchers to perceive multiple and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning (Frost, 2011).

However, NA has its limitations, such as its ineffectiveness in making comparisons and gaining insights into the similarities and differences between aspects in different contexts (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). Consequently, researchers who have been encouraged to employ coding methods in addition to NA have reported a significant enhancement in their ability to understand the data beyond the contextual frameworks, thereby recognizing other relationships besides those identified through narrative approaches (Maxwell and Miller, 2008).

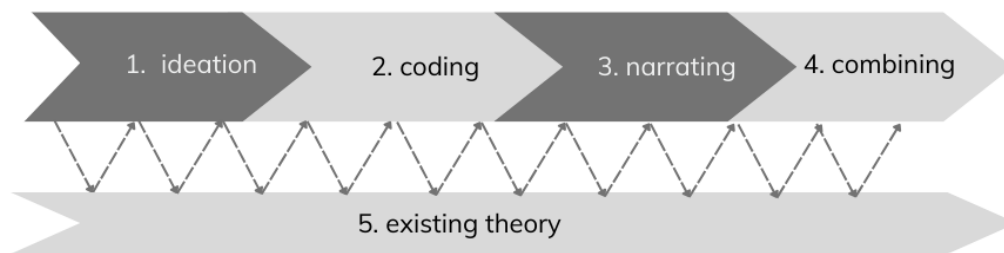
#### **4. Five-Step Approach for Combining Narrative and Qualitative Content Analysis**

The research, upon which the current example is based, sought to understand how organizations can support virtual team members in overcoming challenges related to virtual teamwork. To achieve this, the author aimed to identify the challenges experienced by virtual team members and organizational support mechanisms to assist individuals in navigating these challenges. While some of these questions could have been addressed using either content analysis or narrative analysis alone, to fully comprehend which support mechanisms should be applied and when, neither method was found sufficient on its own.

Thus, the combination of Q-CA and NA was found useful, as it enabled the development of relationships between categories (such as between different challenges) and their contexts (when challenges occurred), as well as relationships between different categories that go beyond the current narrative context (such as the relationship between the organizational support mechanisms and virtual team-related challenges).

Consequently, the author of this article found it to be a useful combination for creating contextually situated explanations within the selected critical realist paradigm.

The author's pursuit of integrating the two analysis methods led to the implementation of five distinct, yet interconnected steps: 1) developing tentative ideas from the data, 2) developing codes, 3) creating narratives, 4) linking codes and narratives, and 5) connecting the data with theory (see **Figure 1** below). The following sections elaborate on how each step was executed and how the outcomes were utilised to meet the research aim. Examples are provided based on the actual research to facilitate a clearer understanding and application of this approach in new research projects. It is important to note that the fifth step, e.g. connecting the findings with the existing theories, was applied throughout the entire analysis process.



**Figure 1: Illustrating the steps when integrating content analysis with narrative analysis**

Before continuing with the description of the integration process, it is important to note that perspectives on integrating qualitative methods vary. Approaches range from systematic methods outlining specific sequences of steps to more fluid strategies employing diverse "moves" throughout the research process (Maxwell and Miller, 2008; Chamberlain et al 2011). Although this article presents a more systematic approach to integrating two analysis methods, it serves more as a source of inspiration than a strict guideline. This aligns with the nature of qualitative research, where researchers have greater freedom in design and application (Mason, 2006).

Also, it should be noted, that the current approach to integrating content and narrative analysis was implemented using data from semi-structured interviews. However, the current approach should apply to other types of data, such as structured and unstructured interviews. Additionally, it is assumed that secondary data, including reports, biographies, and various textual data such as emails, blogs, and chat logs, would also be suitable. The primary prerequisite is that the data must be qualitative, and preferably narrative in nature, as this enables the application of both Q-CA and NA.

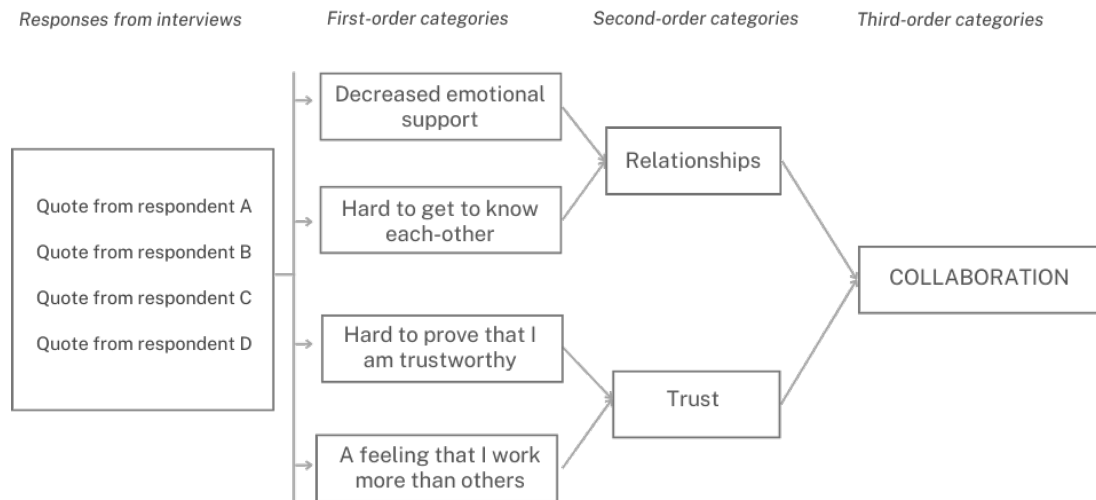
#### **4.1 Description of the Steps for Combining the two Analysis Methods**

*The first step* involved reading the interview transcripts, which led to tentative ideas about the categories and relationships in the data and selecting which parts to focus on in the text. In this phase, the researcher developed several preliminary theories that emerged from the data and could potentially explain certain phenomena. These preliminary theories were documented to ensure they were not forgotten while moving to the next analysis stages. In this case, after completing the first step, the researcher recognized the need for additional analysis methods (beyond Q-CA), as it was apparent that some potentially interesting results would be "lost" if relying solely on Q-CA. This realization led to the selection of NA as the second method of analysis.

*The second step* involved categorizing with the aid of Q-CA. Among the three approaches to Q-CA proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the current example employed directed content analysis, meaning that before beginning the analysis, the researcher already had an idea of the codes that might emerge. However, these predetermined codes evolved during the analysis process. Considering the three analysis methods outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), it is believed that both conventional content analysis and summative content analysis would be suitable for the integration of Q-CA and NA, as the primary goal of all three is to create codes – which can then be connected to the context using the NA approach.

In the current example, the categorising method, provided by Grounded Theory, originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss, 1967, as cited in Charmaz (2006, p. 165), was found applicable. Although the Grounded Theory approach itself is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, its analysis method, which consists of developing first-order categories, second-order categories, and third-order categories, has been found to be helpful to researchers working under other paradigms as well (Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, et al 2018). **Figure**

2 below illustrates how the development of first-, second-, and third-order categories facilitated the identification and categorisation of constraints related to virtual teamwork.

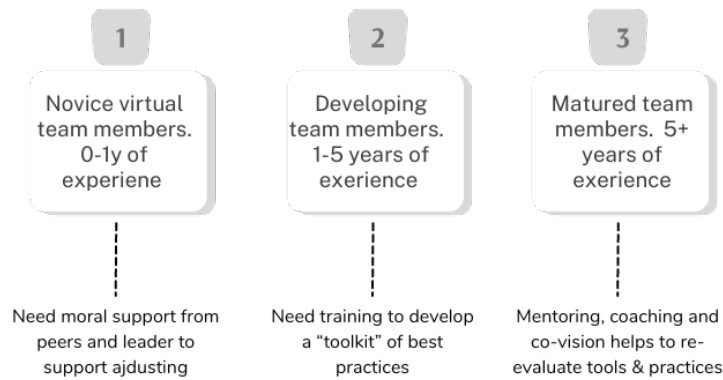


**Figure 2: An example of how Q-CA was applied to identify and categorise the challenges associated with virtual teamwork**

Applying Q-CA facilitated the identification of main categories and sub-categories of challenges associated with virtual teamwork from the interviewees' responses. In this example, trust and relationships, which are linked to collaboration, are emphasized to illustrate the process and its outcome. However, condensing the data into codes and categories significantly decontextualized the results, leading to the loss of much of the richness found in the original stories. Consequently, it became even clearer that additional analysis methods were necessary to reintroduce some of that context.

The third step involved implementing NA. To develop the narratives, a thematic analysis approach was applied (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011; Frost, 2011). During this process, the author reviewed all the transcripts and identified themes based on the continuity found in the text. The themes that emerged from the data facilitated the development of narrative descriptions of three different types of individuals (e.g. personas) who experienced challenges related to virtual teamwork in different ways (see Figure 3 below). Identifying these narratives facilitated the connection of challenges (identified in the second step) with the external context (e.g., when and how these challenges are experienced), thereby providing a more comprehensive and richer understanding of how individuals experience challenges in virtual teams and which support mechanisms to employ and when. Before describing the integration process, here is a brief description of the three personas developed through the narrative analysis.

The first persona that emerged from the data was the novice virtual team member, who had just started to work in such a way and to whom everything was new and frightening. To support adjusting, they reported the need for moral support from their direct manager and colleagues. The second persona has had approximately 1-5 years of experience with virtual teamwork, and they are usually looking for ways how to improve themselves and therefore eager to learn new collaborative tools and techniques. The second personas are motivated to take part in different trainings. The third type can be illustrated as a person who has had more than five years of experience with virtual teamwork, and who is in the process of evaluating different tools and techniques and letting go of those that are not bringing results. This type was found to benefit most from an opportunity to share experiences with their peers.



**Figure 3: Example of narratives developed regarding virtual team members and their varying needs for support**

The fourth step entailed linking the categories and narratives, aiming to establish connections based on the relational logic and causal explanations that emerged from the categories (codes) and the contextual aspects. Through this process, the author identified connections between the determined codes and the developed narratives (see Figure 4 below). With the help of combining the codes and narratives it was possible to create profiles of three different types of employees based on their experience with virtual teams by highlighting firstly how they experienced the same constraints (for example trust-related issues) differently and identification of different support mechanisms to support them in these various stages. It is worth highlighting that after the development of personas in step three, it was possible to extend the categorized challenges (with the help of data) so that the final outcome provides a richer understanding of how individuals perceive challenges related to virtual teamwork, depending on their prior virtual teamwork proficiency.

categories		adjusting	developing	maturing	narratives
COLLABORATION	Trust:	How can I make sure my team leader and members know I am working hard?	Which tools can I use to see progress of my team members and show mine?	How can I contribute to the process of developing trust within our team?	
	Relationships:	How to get to know my team members?	Which tools help me stay connected with team members?	How to effectively manage task, and relationship related communication?	
	Support mechanisms:	Moral support	Training	Mentorship, coaching, etc	

**Figure 4: An example of blending codes and narratives that resulted in a deeper understanding of how individual prior experience with virtual teamwork influences the manifestation of challenges and the subsequent need for support**

The fifth step was a continuous process taking place in an iteration between the empirical data and the existing theoretical base throughout the entire doctoral research process. The author was reading and increasing her theoretical knowledge base throughout the whole doctoral project, and the continuous iterative process of reading and connecting took place even when the author was not directly working on the doctoral project. The iterative process of going back and forth between data and theory is in line with the critical realist paradigm, where theories are seen as helpful tools in guiding the research process, while also accepting that theories are sometimes impartial or otherwise incomplete views of reality (Baker, 2016).

## **5. Possible Problems While Integrating the two Analysis Methods**

One of the potential risks of integrating Q-CA and NA is the possibility of becoming too focused on following the method(s) rather than analysing the data. This is particularly likely when researchers are novices or when one of the applied methods is new to them. One solution to overcome this challenge is to approach the integration of methods creatively and fluidly as suggested by Maxwell and Miller (2008) and Chamberlain et al (2011). The creative approach to combining different methods is supported by the underlying philosophy in qualitative and critical realist studies, where the interpretations of researchers are considered valuable rather than undermining the trustworthiness of the results (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015).

A second challenge, closely related to the first, is that narrative analysis—e.g., creating narratives based on qualitative data—is less known compared to Q-CA. When researchers apply NA for the first time, they often face questions about how to reconstruct the original story told by the interviewee into a story that resonates with the audience. Also, if there is a wide set of qualitative stories, selecting whose story to use in the reconstruction phase can be challenging (McCormack, 2012). The advice for overcoming this issue is to focus on the outcome the researchers aim to achieve by remembering that the purpose of narrative creation is not to produce a definitive truth but to offer one version of it (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011). However, if this approach feels uncomfortable, one way to decrease discomfort is to involve the respondents in the narrative creation process (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2011; McCormack, 2012).

Thirdly, employing any multimethod approach requires more time (Chamberlain, 2011) – which was also true in the current example. However, this extra time brought several benefits. Primarily, it provided an opportunity for reflection on the data, existing theories, methods, and insights emerging from the data. Consequently, it can be said that this approach allowed ideas to mature, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of the results. Therefore, dedicating more time to analysis by integrating content and narrative analysis approaches can be considered valuable not only for the methodological diversity and the benefits derived from their integration but also because the additional time itself facilitates deeper reflection and sense-making.

Finally, adopting new approaches to data analysis can pose challenges to validity and trustworthiness, potentially affecting publishing opportunities. Fortunately, qualitative scholars generally support “transcending boundaries, rather than reinforcing them” (Mason, 2006). Common criteria have been developed to assess trustworthiness and validity in qualitative studies (see, for example, Ryan and Ruddy, 2019; Healy and Perry, 2020), emphasizing purposefulness and transparency. This means that the chosen research methods must align with the research purpose, and the research process should be described clearly and transparently. Furthermore, Porter (2007) has suggested that instead of establishing universal criteria for evaluating the validity of qualitative research, the assessment should be left to the readers—that is, research can be considered valid until proven otherwise.

## **6. Conclusion**

The current article described a process of integrating qualitative content analysis (Q-CA) and narrative analysis (NA). This process was developed during a doctoral research project under a critical realist approach. The need to develop an additional process for integrating these two approaches arose from the specific aims of the research project, its paradigmatic foundations, and the absence of suitable guidelines for conducting such a multi-method analysis. The integration of the two methods resulted in a five-step process detailed in this article: 1) developing tentative ideas from the data, 2) developing codes, 3) creating narratives, 4) linking codes and narratives, and 5) connecting the data with theory.

From a theoretical perspective, researchers are encouraged to employ multi-method approaches, as integrating two or more methods has been linked to the ability to generate more innovative and comprehensive theories (Mason, 2006; Chamberlain, Cain, Sheridan, Dupuis, 2011). More specifically, combining a categorizing method (such as Q-CA) with connecting methods (such as NA) enables the development of causal explanations that are contextually meaningful (Maxwell and Miller, 2008). In this example, adding NA to the initially selected Q-CA method allowed for further systematization of the identified categories and the opportunity to extend insights regarding the categories considering the contextual aspects. Meanwhile, the use of Q-CA provided greater generalizability to the results than employing only NA might have allowed.

From the practical side, as our lives become increasingly complex, adding different methods to the same study or combining various studies can significantly enhance our ability to make sense of the world around us. Integrating Q-CA and NA in the same study, for instance, can aid in understanding the broader patterns within certain phenomena, as well as the deeper meanings and narratives behind those themes. This combination can reveal layers that might remain hidden when using a single method alone. In essence, the practical implication of integrating Q-CA and NA is a more nuanced, detailed, and comprehensive explanation of phenomena. This approach not only has the potential to deepen our understanding of complex issues but also aids in making more informed decisions, for example in the fields of business and management.

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