Ethical principles

Ethical principles are discussed in detail in our Year 1 book on pages 176–177. We strongly suggest that you complete this checklist before collecting data.

1. Participants know participation is voluntary.	☐
2. Participants know what to expect, i.e. the task(s) they will be doing.	☐
3. Participants know they can withdraw at any time.	☐
4. Participants' responses will be anonymous.	☐
5. I minimised the risk of distress to participants.	☐
6. I have avoided collecting any sensitive data.	☐
7. I considered all other ethical issues.	☐
8. I have not done anything that would bring my school/teacher/psychology into disrepute.	☐
9. My teacher has approved my plan.	☐

How different sources report mental health

Design considerations

Newspapers are usually divided into two main categories – broadsheets and tabloids. This distinction reflects the ways they report the news. Broadsheets are 'serious' newspapers and can supposedly be relied upon to report mental health issues in a responsible and measured way. Tabloids are 'popular' papers commonly held to report mental health issues in sensationalist terms (e.g. when mental ill-health is somehow linked to a crime). The difference is essentially one of how papers use language.

The aim of this research exercise is to use content analysis to see if there is a difference in the language used by broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in reporting issues of mental health/disorder.

Prepare materials

You could create a list of words that you might expect to see in tabloid and broadsheet reports of mental health/disorder. It may help to look through various articles to draw up a list of words. You may need to spend a considerable amount of time in this initial data-gathering phase.

Group the words into two broad categories of 'neutral' and 'negative' (negative could for example be language that encourages stigmatisation of people with a disorder). So 'schizophrenia', 'depressed' and 'mental health issue' would be neutral terms (although probably not everyone would agree). 'Nuts', 'crazy' and 'bonkers' are the sorts of terms that most psychologists would consider negative descriptions.

Use the list to draw up a table so you can keep a tally of references as you read your sources. Deciding what counts as neutral or negative language is a subjective judgement, and therefore you should check the reliability of your analysis by asking someone else to follow the same procedure. You could compare your tallies for similarities.

Sampling decisions

The validity of any content analysis depends on the quality of the sample. The sample is your collection of newspaper sources, which you can most conveniently access online. Choose two newspapers – a broadsheet (*Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Times*, *Financial Times*), and a tabloid (*Sun*, *Mirror*, *Express*, *Mail*).

Choose a keyword (e.g. 'schizophrenia') and search the online newspapers. It's a good idea to limit your search to a specific (and recent) timeframe (e.g. the past two or three years). You should also limit your search to headlines and subheadings, as including the articles themselves would probably produce an unwieldy amount of language (although you could try it of course).

Special ethical concerns

This is a content analysis so there are no 'participants' as such and therefore no special *ethical* concerns. But you might like to take the opportunity to reflect on the ethical issues involved in how newspapers report mental health/disorder topics.

Analyse your data

You will have four main categories of language – neutral tabloid, negative tabloid, neutral broadsheet and negative broadsheet. You could calculate the number of instances in each category as percentages of the total. You could also put these figures in rank order of frequency and draw a suitable graph to represent the data.

In terms of inferential statistical testing, you are comparing the four categories in a 2×2 contingency table. A suitable test to analyse the significance of any differences is chi-squared (although you are not required to do such a test).

Write the report

A written report is not required but it will certainly help you to cement your ideas. You could include comments on what the information shows. The discussion section is where you could present some conclusions. For instance, if you found a difference between newspapers, what does this tell us about attitudes towards people with mental health issues in our society? Finally, you could explain some strengths and weaknesses of the study and suggest improvements.