

Example Of Documentary Analysis

Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the function of documents as a data source in qualitative research and discusses document analysis procedure in the context of actual research experiences. Targeted to research novices, the article takes a nuts-and-bolts approach to document analysis. It describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the advantages and limitations of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. The application of document analysis to a grounded theory study is illustrated.

Keywords: Content analysis, documents, grounded theory, thematic analysis, triangulation.

Organisational and institutional documents have been a staple in qualitative research for many years. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of research reports and journal articles that mention document analysis as part of the methodology. What has been rather glaring is the absence of sufficient detail in most reports found in the reviewed literature, regarding the procedure followed and the outcomes of the analyses of documents. Moreover, there is some indication that document analysis has not always been used effectively in the research process, even by experienced researchers.

This article examines the place and function of documents in qualitative research. Written mainly for research novices, the article describes the nature and forms of documents, outlines the strengths and weaknesses of document analysis, and offers specific examples of the use of documents in the research process. Suggestions for doing document analysis are included. The fundamental purpose of this article is to increase knowledge and understanding of document analysis as a qualitative research method with a view to promoting its effective use.

DEFINING DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; see also Rapley, 2007). Documents contain text (words) and images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention. For the purposes of this discussion, other mute or trace evidence, such as cultural artifacts, is not included. Atkinson and Coffey (1997) refer to documents as 'social facts', which are produced, shared, and used in socially organised ways (p. 47).

Documents that may be used for systematic evaluation as part of a study take a variety of forms. They include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals; background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals; event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/art-

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EXAMPLE OF DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS IS A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO ANALYZING VARIOUS TYPES OF DOCUMENTS TO EXTRACT MEANINGFUL INFORMATION, UNDERSTAND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS, OR EVALUATE POLICIES AND PRACTICES. THIS METHOD IS WIDELY USED IN FIELDS SUCH AS SOCIOLOGY, HISTORY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND EDUCATION. IN THIS ARTICLE, WE WILL EXPLORE WHAT DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS ENTAILS, ITS SIGNIFICANCE, THE STEPS INVOLVED IN CONDUCTING IT, AND A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE TO ILLUSTRATE ITS APPLICATION.

UNDERSTANDING DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS INVOLVES A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF WRITTEN, VISUAL, OR AUDIO MATERIALS. THESE DOCUMENTS CAN RANGE FROM OFFICIAL RECORDS, NEWSPAPERS, AND PERSONAL LETTERS TO PHOTOGRAPHS, FILMS, AND DIGITAL CONTENT.

THE PRIMARY GOAL IS TO UNDERSTAND THE UNDERLYING THEMES, PERSPECTIVES, AND CONTEXTS THAT THESE DOCUMENTS REPRESENT.

IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS LIES IN ITS ABILITY TO:

- PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO SPECIFIC HISTORICAL OR CULTURAL CONTEXTS.
- UNCOVER BIASES AND PERSPECTIVES EMBEDDED WITHIN DOCUMENTS.
- SUPPORT OR CHALLENGE EXISTING THEORIES AND NARRATIVES.
- FACILITATE A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL PHENOMENA.

BY ANALYZING DOCUMENTS, RESEARCHERS CAN GAIN A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF THE SUBJECT AT HAND, WHICH CAN INFORM FURTHER RESEARCH, POLICY DEVELOPMENT, OR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES.

STEPS IN CONDUCTING DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

TO EFFECTIVELY CONDUCT A DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS, RESEARCHERS TYPICALLY FOLLOW A STRUCTURED APPROACH. HERE ARE THE ESSENTIAL STEPS INVOLVED:

1. **DEFINE THE RESEARCH QUESTION:** START BY IDENTIFYING THE SPECIFIC QUESTION OR TOPIC YOU WANT TO ADDRESS THROUGH DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS.
2. **SELECT THE DOCUMENTS:** CHOOSE RELEVANT DOCUMENTS THAT ALIGN WITH YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION. THIS MAY INVOLVE ARCHIVAL RESEARCH, ONLINE DATABASES, OR FIELDWORK.
3. **REVIEW THE DOCUMENTS:** READ AND FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE CONTENT OF THE DOCUMENTS. TAKE NOTES ON KEY THEMES, IMPORTANT DETAILS, AND ANY INITIAL OBSERVATIONS.
4. **ANALYZE THE CONTENT:** IDENTIFY PATTERNS, CONTRASTS, AND CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE DOCUMENTS. CONSIDER THE AUTHORSHIP, CONTEXT, AND POTENTIAL BIASES.
5. **INTERPRET THE FINDINGS:** SYNTHESIZE THE INFORMATION GATHERED AND RELATE IT BACK TO YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION, DRAWING CONCLUSIONS BASED ON YOUR ANALYSIS.
6. **PRESENT THE RESULTS:** SHARE YOUR FINDINGS THROUGH REPORTS, PRESENTATIONS, OR ACADEMIC PAPERS, ENSURING CLARITY AND COHERENCE IN YOUR ARGUMENTS.

EXAMPLE OF DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS

TO ILLUSTRATE THE PROCESS OF DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS, LET'S CONSIDER A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE INVOLVING THE EXAMINATION OF EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE LATE 20TH CENTURY.

RESEARCH QUESTION

THE RESEARCH QUESTION FOR THIS ANALYSIS COULD BE: “HOW DID THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB) REFLECT SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION EQUITY IN THE EARLY 2000S?”

DOCUMENT SELECTION

FOR THIS ANALYSIS, THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS WOULD BE SELECTED:

- THE TEXT OF THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (2001)
- CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS AND DEBATES REGARDING NCLB
- REPORTS FROM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NCLB
- NEWSPAPER ARTICLES COVERING PUBLIC OPINION ON NCLB DURING ITS INTRODUCTION
- ACADEMIC ARTICLES ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF NCLB ON EDUCATION EQUITY

DOCUMENT REVIEW

IN REVIEWING THESE DOCUMENTS, THE RESEARCHER WOULD GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE LANGUAGE USED IN THE NCLB ACT, THE ARGUMENTS PRESENTED DURING CONGRESSIONAL DEBATES, AND THE VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES REFLECTED IN MEDIA COVERAGE. KEY THEMES MIGHT INCLUDE THE EMPHASIS ON STANDARDIZED TESTING, ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES, AND THE INTENTION TO PROVIDE EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

DURING THE CONTENT ANALYSIS, THE RESEARCHER WOULD LOOK FOR:

- PATTERNS IN HOW EQUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE DISCUSSED WITHIN THE DOCUMENTS.
- CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE INTENTIONS OF THE NCLB ACT AND ITS ACTUAL OUTCOMES, AS REPORTED IN ACADEMIC STUDIES.
- BIASES PRESENT IN MEDIA PORTRAYALS, WHICH MAY REFLECT BROADER SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION AND EQUITY.

FOR INSTANCE, WHILE THE NCLB ACT WAS FRAMED AS A MEANS TO ENSURE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, CRITICS IN VARIOUS ARTICLES MAY HIGHLIGHT HOW STANDARDIZED TESTING DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED UNDER-RESOURCED SCHOOLS, LEADING TO A WIDENING ACHIEVEMENT GAP RATHER THAN CLOSING IT.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

IN INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS, THE RESEARCHER MAY CONCLUDE THAT WHILE THE NCLB ACT WAS INTENDED TO PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, THE IMPLEMENTATION AND ENFORCEMENT OF THE POLICY REVEALED SIGNIFICANT DISPARITIES IN RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS. THIS ANALYSIS COULD SUGGEST THAT SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION EQUITY WERE MORE COMPLEX THAN THE LEGISLATIVE LANGUAGE IMPLIED, REFLECTING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES THAT PERSISTED DESPITE POLICY CHANGES.

Presentation of Results

Finally, the results of the documentary analysis could be presented in an academic paper or report, detailing the research question, methodology, findings, and conclusions. The researcher might also suggest further areas for study, such as exploring how subsequent education policies have addressed the limitations of NCLB.

Conclusion

Example of Documentary Analysis serves as a powerful tool for understanding historical and social contexts through the examination of various documents. By following a structured approach to document selection, review, analysis, interpretation, and presentation, researchers can uncover valuable insights that inform our understanding of complex issues, such as education policy and equity. This method not only enriches academic discourse but also provides a foundation for informed decision-making in policy and practice. As we continue to navigate an ever-changing societal landscape, the importance of documentary analysis remains paramount in uncovering truths and fostering dialogue.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Documentary Analysis?

Documentary analysis is a qualitative research method that involves the systematic examination of documents to extract meaningful information, patterns, and insights relevant to a specific research question or topic.

Can you provide an example of documentary analysis in academic research?

An example would be a researcher analyzing historical letters, government records, and newspaper articles to study the impact of a specific event, such as the Civil Rights Movement, on societal changes.

What types of documents are typically used in documentary analysis?

Documents used can include official records, reports, personal diaries, letters, photographs, articles, and other written or visual materials that provide context and insights into the subject matter being studied.

How does documentary analysis differ from other research methods?

Documentary analysis differs from other research methods in that it focuses specifically on existing documents rather than collecting new data through interviews or surveys, enabling researchers to analyze historical and contextual information.

What are the key steps involved in conducting documentary analysis?

Key steps include defining the research question, selecting relevant documents, organizing and categorizing the data, analyzing the content for themes and patterns, and interpreting the findings in the context of the research.

What are the potential limitations of documentary analysis?

Limitations can include biased document selection, incomplete data, lack of context, and the potential for misinterpretation due to the researcher's own perspectives and assumptions.

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