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Book review

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Doing excellent social research with documents – Aimee Grant



In her book *Doing excellent social research with documents*, Aimee Grant promises practical examples and guidance for qualitative researchers. As a research methods teacher and supervisor for student projects I am aware that there is a need for a book that sets out the different types of work that can be done with documents and data in social research in a modern and up to date context, and does not shy away from theory, ethics, and the actual practicalities of doing research and analysis. Grant's background is in health research and whilst that is evident in the choice of case studies that she uses to showcase and illustrate the different types of documentary research and analytic techniques, it does not mean that the book is only relevant to those interested in health. The case studies span a wide range of social topics. These range from a thematic analysis of tabloid press descriptions of the victims and perpetrators of the 2011 London Riots, to a Critical Discourse Analysis of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, alongside transcripts of parliamentary debates relating to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill 2015, to elicitation interviews on health and wellbeing in pregnancy.

The book begins with a general introduction setting out how a reader might go about using the text. Chapter two presents some key principles of undertaking documentary analysis, and includes an overview of the many different forms of documentary data that exist. Like previous documentary analysis experts such as John Scott in his *A matter of record* (1991) and Lindsay Prior in his *Using documents in social research* (2003) Grant takes us on a journey through the kinds of documents we might find in everyday life. Her work is up to date, and relevant to the kinds of questions social research students and researchers might ask around such issues including activism, feminism, and social justice. She includes some consideration of Actor Network Theory (ANT), the importance of considering quality, authenticity and bias in documents, before the all-important issue of designing research questions. This seemingly basic point underlies the heart of good research in my view, it is a point I labour with my students at every level, and I was gratified to see the emphasis Grant gave it here. As researchers, we need to clarify our research questions – what is it exactly that we want to find out? Only once we know this can we set about designing a research project, identifying a sample, collecting data and beginning analysis. Grant continues to ask us to consider the time and financial implications of accessing the documents we want – an important consideration particularly for time limited students. She also brings in ethical concerns, data management, analytic techniques and dissemination in a rounded and useful overview.

The bulk of the book is devoted to case studies that illustrate different types of documentary research and analytic techniques. Grant has divided these case studies into two sections: documents that are found in isolation from the author of the document (e.g. policy documents, tweets, archives and the like); and documents that are used in addition to other qualitative methods. Each case study takes us through considerations of research questions, research design, data management, analytic techniques, and dissemination in addition to summarising the context behind the type of document, the research context, and the findings. The case studies include the use of traditional media with thematic analysis, historical and official documents with critical discourse analysis, and multi-modal content and tweets with semiotic analysis. Grant discusses triangulating findings from primary research using advertising materials and content analysis, then moves on to ethnographic documents within a framework analysis before tackling participant-created documents used as an elicitation tool as part of a narrative analysis.


As a student of research methods, I remember having a module dedicated to quantitative analysis, and just one session to qualitative documentary research. We were given a document and told to, literally, 'analyse it'; we were told that the only way to learn about qualitative documentary analysis was to do it. Although we could potentially read about theory and see literature that demonstrated a particular analytical approach, there was, at that time, no book suggested to me that brought together the variety of ways one could approach qualitative documentary research. Perhaps they could have used Scott or Prior, they were not books that were on the reading list for my research methods PGDip. Grant's addition to the literature around qualitative research is to bring a modern and relevant book that can easily be included on research methods courses of all levels, and to move us to a point where we can look critically at the approaches we might use, and see how they might work in operation.

In my role as a teacher of research methods, when I first ask my students about the research that they want to undertake for their dissertation or project I mostly hear students discuss interviews and focus groups. At that time, they are often yet to understand that the transcripts or other material they may generate in those interviews are documents. When I introduce the idea of documentary analysis and the vast range of documents such work might incorporate, students need guidance on how they might go about giving due consideration to what they might include or exclude from such a project. They do not often make the connection between the questions they want to ask and have answered, and the analytical approaches they might use to go about this. It is my job to help them make those connections. This book allows those students to work through different analytic and theoretical frames such as thematic theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, framework and narrative analysis. Grant allows us to see the kinds of research questions such approaches would answer, using detailed case studies as exemplars. The questions posed by Grant in the concluding chapter revisit the salient points made throughout, and could form the basis of seminar questions or teaching points for students on research methods courses or preparing for individual projects or dissertations in social research. Grant is an experienced and creative qualitative researcher who presents the whole in a personal, readable manner. Her book is an excellent and accessible text that will be of invaluable use to students,

researchers and research methods teachers working in and around social research and using documents of any sort. Since reading it for this review I have recommended it to students and colleagues alike.

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