Incorporating Documents Into Qualitative Nursing Research

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Purpose: To present an overview of how documents can be incorporated as key sources of data in qualitative nursing research.

Methods: Analysis of the nature of documents and the distinctive features of any research strategy to analyze documents.

Conclusions: Many different strategies can be used in the analysis of documentary sources that are relevant to nursing practice. A systematic approach to the analysis of these textual resources, using one or several of the analytic strategies described here, can support and advance nursing scholarship.

Keywords: research methodology, qualitative studies, document analysis, texts

R egulatory policies, nursing registrations, patients’ case files, drug information leaflets, and professional association newsletters are just a few of the documents that pervade nursing practice. Despite the importance of documents for nurses, and for the organization of contemporary societies more generally, social research methods are focused on the analysis of speech and action. Documents are often seen as inappropriate or secondary sources, unable to indicate sufficient insight into systems of social meaning and practice. Further, many researchers are cautious about using documents, given uncertainties about the most appropriate strategies to use and the limited guidance available in much of the qualitative methodological literature.

In this paper we argue for greater attention to documents in qualitative nursing research, as primary or supplementary sources of data. This discussion includes the nature of documents, distinctive dimensions of any research with documents, how documents might be analyzed, a framework for considering the spectrum of available approaches, and examples of the use of documents to advance nursing scholarship.

Background

Qualitative researchers value the “emic” perspective. They seek to understand the world from a participant’s point of view, by listening to or observing a person in a natural environment. By using documents, a researcher is placed at some distance from real people, so that human action and thought are interpreted through representations of reality. For those reasons, documents are an underutilized resource in qualitative research (Hodder, 2003; Prior, 2003; Silverman, 2001). Documents are most widely used when researchers have no other options. Historians, for example, are highly reliant on documents and other material artifacts, and have developed sophisticated techniques for their interpretation (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Jordanova, 2000). But analysts of the contemporary social world are generally reticent about using documents, and are most likely to use them as supplementary sources of data. Documents can be used as important resources for data triangulation, to increase the comprehensiveness and validity of any single study (Patton, 2002). However, documents can also be used as primary sources, providing the whole or majority of the data needed in contemporary social research, or as objects of study in their own right.

To gain some insight into the use of documents as sources for qualitative nursing research, the authors reviewed articles published in the Journal of Nursing Scholarship for a

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Accepted for publication May 3, 2005.
5-year period (First Quarter, 2000 to Third Quarter, 2004). The first stage of the review was a search of titles and abstracts to identify articles that appeared to include documents (e.g., published articles, internet documents, archival materials) as primary sources of data \((n=10)\). A more detailed review of the selected articles resulted in the identification of only one article (Squires, 2004) that clearly included documents as a source of data for qualitative analysis. Though small and selective, this search yielded evidence of the authors’ contention that, to date, qualitative nurse researchers have paid little attention to documents as sources of data.

Social research that includes documents is distinctive in at least three ways. First, unlike talk or action, documents are preserved traces, which persist beyond the local context of their production. Documentary texts “speak in the absence of speakers,” and “remain uniform across separate and diverse local settings” (Smith, 1984, p. 60). Second, people do not produce documents as independent personal acts. Rather, they produce documents in ways that draw on and relate to other documents (i.e., intertextuality, Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). Documents are a type of formal communication that shows the competence, and often the specialized knowledge, of their producers. Their form and content conforms with clear rules, such as the rules of nurse charting or policy analysis (Bauer, Gaskell, & Allum, 2000). Finally, documents are used to do more than record and reflect social arrangements; according to some authors they also are useful in organizing social life (Prior, 2003; Smith, 1984). From this perspective, the codification of human thought and action in documentary form is fundamental to the development of complex and enduring social arrangements (Strum & Latour, 1999).

Documents are not simply containers of meaning. They are actively and collectively produced, exchanged, and consumed. The production of documents indicates many decisions, by multiple people, about what to write, in what style, for what audience, and for what purpose. Documents are produced in and reflect specific social and historical circumstances. Documents are also exchanged in socially organized ways, and not all documents that are produced still exist or are equally available to all readers (Jupp, 1996). Finally, the consumption of documents is a social process, governing who will use which documents for what purposes. The social nature of the production, exchange, and consumption of documents means that they offer “social facts” rather than transparent or consistent representations of social reality (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, p. 47). The analysis of documents requires interpretation (Finnegan, 1996), which is the task of the qualitative researcher.

Although the distinctive and socially organized nature of documents is clear, defining what a document is for the purposes of social research is not simple (Prior, 2003). Any number of items could be regarded as documents, including obvious examples such as patients’ charts, policy briefs, and newspaper articles, and also less obvious examples such as building blueprints or bus tickets. Each of these items can be read by the researcher to provide insight into systems of social meaning and practice. The status of items as documents depends on the uses.

This discussion is focused on documents that provide textual content that is not generated by researchers. That is, documents such as paintings, which contain no textual content, are excluded from this analysis, although even primarily textual documents often include nontextual representations such as graphs or pictures, which might require different analytic strategies (Hodder, 2003). In addition, primary interview and focus-group transcripts or field notes are outside the scope of this paper, because the production of these documents is under the control of the researcher. This discussion centers on textual resources that pervade modern social life and offer rich and challenging fodder for qualitative research.

### Working with Documents

For qualitative researchers, documents are distinctive in one respect: unlike interviews and observational episodes, documents exist before the researcher seeks to use them as data. In contrast with research using live talk and action, where the data are yet to be generated, research using documents involves a post-hoc account of previously generated social data (Hakim, 1987, p. 41). Researchers who use documents address their distinctive features in three main ways, through: (a) strategies of document selection, (b) consideration of the social exchange of documents, and (c) consideration of the socially produced nature of documents, i.e., source criticism.

For qualitative researchers, documents not only exist before beginning the research, they exist in great numbers and in many forms. Modern states, their agents, and private organizations produce voluminous data daily, to record activities, manage the actions of workers or service recipients, plan for the future, and explain or justify actions (Miller, 1997; Smith, 1984). Alongside these organizational records, not all of which are fully accessible to the public, exist the readily accessible documents circulated by modern communication industries to entertain and inform (Altheide, 1996). Furthermore people record the passage of their own lives, and increasingly use the Web to make these private thoughts publicly accessible (e.g., support group chat rooms, online diaries, blogs). Qualitative researchers must select carefully from this volume of documentary sources.

A difference between quantitative and qualitative research is the emphasis on purposeful rather than random sampling. Quantitative researchers sample randomly, to permit generalization, but qualitative researchers sample information-rich cases, to permit in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002). In the case of qualitative research with documents, however, this distinction is not always upheld. Selection strategies for qualitative research with documents are of three types: representative sampling, purposeful sampling, and purposeful but non-sampling selection.
Representative or random sampling is the most systematic selection strategy when a clear sampling frame to define a population of sources is available (e.g., all newspaper editorials in the five highest-circulation newspapers in a specific country). Qualitative nurse researchers working with documents might use such a selection strategy to better understand the nature of national media commentary about nursing human resource issues, such as recruitment and retention. However, for much qualitative research, no sampling frame can be defined because the population is unknown, so the attributes being selected cannot be predefined (e.g., the field of human actions or situations, unlike specific human populations, cannot be defined a priori). In these cases, the classic qualitative selection strategy of purposeful sampling offers a robust and systematic alternative, with an iterative, step-wise process of selection to the point of saturation (Bauer & Aarts, 2000). Nurse researchers working with documents might use this strategy to select patient case files for attributes other than the individuals themselves (e.g., for actions such as complaints, or for situations such as acute, chronic, or palliative health states).

A purposeful sampling strategy would yield information-rich patient case files to exemplify actions or situations that are extreme or intense, to demonstrate maximum variation or homogeneity, or to identify typical or critical cases (Patton, 2002). However, not all selection of documents follows a sampling rationale. The use of sampling indicates a concern with representation (or, given the statistical overtones of this term, exemplification). Researchers do not view items that can be sampled as entirely singular or unique; rather, sampled items are viewed as reflective of a larger body of things or phenomena in a representative (using randomization) or purposeful (e.g., typical, extreme) manner. For much qualitative research using documents, these sources are not regarded as representative. Laws and regulations, policies, and many other modern social documents can be read as unique testaments to events or phenomena. Selection strategies for researchers in these situations are structured for comprehensiveness rather than for representativeness (Jordanova, 2000). Researchers must purposefully select the most information-rich and appropriate sources in relation to the goals of the research (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Jordanova, 2000).

A selection strategy provides a systematic process and theoretical rationale for choosing among the plethora of available documentary sources. But qualitative researchers must also consider issues that stem from the social process of document exchange and condition the selection process, namely: what documents exist, which are accessible, and why. The availability of documents is embedded in social processes, based on the decisions of many individuals and institutions to preserve or allow access. Obvious biases include the limited ability of disenfranchised people or institutions to create, disseminate, and preserve documents. Less obvious biases include selecting, retaining, and cataloguing policies of document storage agencies (e.g., public or private archives, electronic databases; Howell & Prevenier, 2001). Whether obvious or obscure, these biases are important, and the quality of social research using documents is judged, in part, by how well the analyst accounts for and considers the implications of what is and is not available (Finnegan, 1996).

In addition to designing a selection strategy and adequately considering the conditions of document availability or exchange, researchers must make sense of the socially produced nature of documents with basic analytic strategies, what historians call “source criticism” (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Jordanova, 2000). Source criticism has both external and internal dimensions. External critiques establish authenticity and accuracy are technical including consideration of where, when, and by whom a source was created. Internal critiques establish how a source can inform, by considering intentions and abilities (e.g., access to events, literacy, social status) of the document’s producers.

Because found textual resources are socially produced beyond the control of researchers, those who use documents in qualitative research must attend to selecting available documents, considering what documents are not available, and conducting some degree of source criticism of the selected documents. These basic actions should be part of any analytic endeavor with documents; however, actual selection strategies and the degree of attention to the social nature of documents will vary according to the particular analytic strategy adopted by the researcher.

A Framework for Analyzing Documents

Though the term document analysis is in common use, many analytic strategies are available for qualitative interpretation of documents. We propose a framework to conceptualize strategies for the analysis of found textual resources as a spectrum, ranging from techniques that are analogous to those for the analysis of live talk and action to techniques that are more distinctive. The authors review three analytic strategies for qualitative research with documents, compare these strategies with more typical qualitative approaches, and consider the document selection approaches, and the degree of attention to document production and exchange, that each strategy requires.

In general, analytic strategies in qualitative research are of two broad kinds: content analytic strategies focused on sources as independent containers of fixed evidence about the social world, and context analytic strategies focused on sources in ways that embed them in the social contexts of their production and use (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001). For analysis of documents, three distinctive approaches are possible: (a) the analysis of documents for their content (content analytic); (b) the analysis of documents as commentary (context analytic); and, (c) the analysis of documents as actors (context analytic).
Content Analysis

Researchers who use content analytic strategies attend to documents as independently adequate resources for understanding some aspect of social practice and meaning. The source is, in this view, a container of static and unchanging information. The term content analysis indicates a range of qualitative analytic strategies to “identify core consistencies and meanings” in a volume of qualitative data (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Researchers use content analysis to elucidate key patterns, themes, and categories, drawing on any of several different philosophic approaches, including grounded theory and transcendental phenomenology. These philosophic differences imply different techniques of analysis, from an emphasis on comparison and theory development in grounded theory, to an emphasis on meaning and essence in phenomenology (Patton, 2002). Content analysis is a key form of inductive analysis for qualitative researchers working with live talk and action, but these techniques and theories are equally applicable to the qualitative content analysis of documents (Altheide, 1996).

The selection of documents for content analysis is generally based on a sampling strategy, either representative or purposive. If the quantity of documentary sources is naturally limited, sampling might not always be necessary (e.g., the study of all charts of a particular patient). However, the number of available documentary sources might be more than can be feasibly or productively reviewed in an individual study, so a sampling strategy is common. Furthermore, researchers who conduct content analyses of documents attend to the socially exchanged and produced nature of these sources to a limited extent. For example, one might wish to review media stories on nursing human resources to understand how premature departures from nursing practice are portrayed. In light of knowledge about the nature and structure of the media, the researcher would need to consider which form of media (i.e., newspapers, television) and which source (i.e., which newspapers, TV channels) is most relevant to the specific study, and which types of media are least likely to have been preserved or be readily available (e.g., nondominant-language media, media with limited circulation). In this context, external source criticism is minimal: as long as researchers gain access to the media in a conventional manner, they could safely presume that the articles selected were accurate replicas of the original published pieces. Internal source criticism would involve consideration of the extent to which the document can be used to provide insight into the wider social world. In this case, the analyst might consider the effect of biases on content (e.g., media’s focus on personal interest stories and stories of two-way conflict).

Context Analysis

In contrast with content analytic approaches, context analytic strategies are fundamentally ethnographic. Researchers working with such strategies approach documents as elements in the larger field of social activity, with meanings that are socially situated. Although researchers in this tradi-

tion share this broader orientation, analyses of documents are quite divergent, with two types clearly distinguishable. The first of these approaches, documents as commentary, includes research traditions such as case study, history, and policy analysis. Researchers using this approach use documents as commentary to provide insight into individual and collective actions, intentions, meanings, organizational dynamics, and institutional structures, in short, to interpret the social reality indicated in the documents. In the second approach, researchers adopt a more constructivist view of the social world. For these researchers, documents are actors in a social field: they generate social reality through interaction with human and nonhuman actors, and they cannot be used simply as reflections of social reality.

Documents as commentary. Researchers who use documents as commentary share a range of approaches that are marked by their descriptive orientation, their concern with organizational and institutional structure and process, and their naturalistic stance. For example, historians, case study researchers, and policy analysts often ask “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2003), such as: How are public policies made? or, Why is one policy chosen over another? Documents are particularly important sources for this type of approach, because they provide insight into social practices that are not observable, either temporally, because they happened in the past, or structurally, because observation is not possible or permissible. The formal nature of documents allows them to be used to identify social phenomena; they can be used to illuminate formal and intertextual social structures not amenable to observation or reflection (e.g., formal legal reasoning, organizational hierarchies, etc.). Finally, the analysis of documents allows for minimal researcher intrusion; they are thus especially important resources for researchers of a more positivist persuasion for whom observation alters rather than illuminates the social world.

Researchers who use documents as commentary can adopt a variety of analytic strategies, depending on their discipline and the research questions they pose, but several analytic approaches are shared: the use of description; the use of theoretical presuppositions to structure data analysis; careful attention to alternate or contrary examples or explanations; and the use of multiple types of documents or sources of data for triangulation (Jordanova, 2000; Prior, 2003; Yanow, 2000; Yin, 2003). In addition to these shared analytic strategies, some analytic approaches are more discipline specific. For example, historians emphasize the close and critical review of documents, ongoing comparisons with other documents, continued querying of the contexts in which the source was produced and exchanged, and the use of writing as an analytic strategy (Howell & Prevenier, 2001).

Researchers who use documents as commentary study them as unique rather than referential testaments; thus, the selection of documents is usually conducted in a purposeful but nonsampling manner. Documents must still be selected, but the selection strategy will be based on assessment of
each document’s importance, relevance and reliability for the project at hand rather than for its capability to stand
in for a wider range of similar documents. The analysis of
documents as commentary requires significant attention to
their socially exchanged and produced nature. In general,
documents that can be accessed most easily are those that
are deliberately produced for wide circulation. Less avail-
able are drafts of reports or meeting minutes, minority com-
mentary, personal letters, or e-mail. Because of the polished
and strategic nature of much published material, historians
search for unpublished material and pursue the “cult of the
archive” (Jordanova, 2000, p. 186).

Source criticism is a central concern for the use of docu-
ments as commentary. Analysts must examine the authen-
ticity and accuracy of all sources reviewed and consider how
such sources indicate the structures and processes under re-
view. What information, for example, did the author(s) of
the documents have access to? What did they wish to con-
vey? Close attention to the deliberately produced and ex-
changed nature of documents is important for their ade-
quately interpretation (Howell & Prevenier, 2001; Jordanova,
2000).

**Documents as actors.** This last analytic strategy is the
most distinctive. Researchers who use this strategy adopt a
particularly neat stance toward documents, seeing them
as social actors or actants (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), and as
actors of study in their own right. The content of documents
is their least compelling feature (Prior, 2003). What mat-
ters is not the information they contain or what social facts
they include; what matters is their production, exchange,
operation, or action (Miller, 1997; Prior, 2003). From this
perspective, a patient’s case file does not provide thematic
content for analysis, nor does it serve as a commentary about
what has happened to that patient. Instead, the case file is
understood to produce the person as a patient: produce a
legally determinate diagnosis, enroll the person in the med-
cal system, and establish a generic identity. The document
is the socially important fact, more real than the event or
phenomenon itself (Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Prior, 2003;
Smith, 1984). Social researchers who study documents as
actors call for research strategies with talk and observation
secondary to studying the document as the primary sub-
ject matter and key social agent (Miller, 1997; Prior, 2003;
Smith, 1990). The task of the researcher is to “follow a doc-
ument in use,” to consider how it is constructed so that the
local conditions of its production are erased (Miller, 1997),
and how it is enrolled into activity and functions to produce
events or phenomena (Prior, 2003, p. 68).

Researchers who adopt an actor approach to the study
of documents focus explicitly on the document’s socially
exchanged and produced nature, and generally select docu-
ments in a purposeful but nonsampling manner. A researcher
selects documents that seem to have a greater “generative”
role in producing social relations’ documents that are used
(Prior, 2003, p. 47). Nurses will readily recognize such ac-
tive texts, e.g., care pathways and hospital regulations. Re-
searchers in this analytic tradition do not engage in source
criticism in the typical sense. Whether the texts they ob-
serve are accurate or authentic, and whether the authors
had the capacity or intention to develop the document are
of only incidental concern. So long as documents are useful,
the intentions underlying their production or circulation are
of limited concern. Researchers in this tradition advocate
empirical studies of the production or use of documents in
specific social contexts. Although considering documents as
key social actors is novel for most qualitative researchers, the
research strategy to follow in observing these social actors
is familiar, involving interviews and observation. Even this
most unusual approach can readily be chosen by qualitative
researchers.

**Discussion**

The analysis of documents can add much to nursing
scholarship, by complementing existing knowledge and con-
tributing new knowledge that would otherwise be difficult
to acquire. Examples of each of the three analytic strategies
show the usefulness of these different approaches.

In our review of this journal, we identified one study
with documents as the sole source in a content analysis.
Squires (2004) conducted a dimensional analysis of role en-
actment of acute care nurses. She selected 28 articles rel-
ated to acute care staff nurse roles in the published litera-
ture and reviewed them using a grounded theory approach.
By analyzing significant phrases or themes, the researcher
confirmed what many nurses know tacitly: that the role
of acute care nurses is complex and multifaceted. Squires
originally identified 37 separate dimensions of the role of
acute care nurses. Through a more integrative and com-
parative analysis, she refined them to a set of seven core
dimensions (autonomy, care delivery, culture management,
information management, leadership, psychological man-
agement, and relationship management). By analyzing docu-
ments, Squires was able to provide an overview of the acute
care nursing role, one that is not significantly influenced
by country of practice, or degree of work experience. Ar-
guably, no other types of sources would provide comparable
insight.

In our review we also identified one study as an example
of documents as commentary: the analysis of professional sta-
tus of nursing in Vietnam, from a commentary perspective
(Jones, O’Toole, Hoa, Thi Chau, & Duc Muc, 2000). The
authors used fieldwork, interviews, and participant obser-
vation to understand the barriers to nursing empowerment
in Vietnam and the resources and strategies to advance the
nursing profession. Arguably, research of this sort could be
significantly advanced by greater and more explicit use of
documents. A detailed review of nursing curricula could sub-
stantiate the argument that nursing education insufficiently
equips nurses to adopt leadership roles; review of govern-
ment policy might clarify the degree of official resistance to
significant change; and greater attention to nursing association policies and news reports might provide insight into the mobilization strategies used by nurses to date.

The actor approach might be profitably used in the study of nursing policy and its effect on nursing practice. Cheek and Gibson (1997) have argued, for example, that the professional autonomy of nurses is increasingly constrained by the proliferation of clinical and regulatory policies for nursing practice. They questioned nurses’ regard for these policy documents, and called for a more critical attitude, recognizing how policies constrain professional autonomy. An action approach to the study of documents would be necessary to address this critique. Such a research project might involve study of the introduction of a new policy relevant to nursing practice. It could include interviews and observation to examine how the new policy affects the autonomy of nurse clinicians.

Conclusions

Qualitative researchers have not traditionally analyzed documents, preferring the more familiar study of talk and action. But this focus leaves a wide assortment of documentary resources untapped, and precludes study of how documents indicate and even constitute the social world. The study of documents provides access to events that cannot be observed, to a species of formal communication about the social world, and to social actors that generate meanings and practices. By comparison with qualitative research of live talk and action, in which researchers must actively generate new social data, the preexisting status of documents renders them distinctive and results in the need for explicit attention to document selection, and to the deliberately produced and exchanged nature of these found textual resources. Strategies for the analysis of documents are common to those for analysis of talk and action, such as grounded theory, transcendental phenomenology, case study, policy analysis, and historiography. Even the most unusual document analytic strategy, with documents as social actors, is open to qualitative researchers without document analytic expertise because of its dependence on the generation of new social data. Qualitative nursing researchers are well qualified to add the study of documents to their armamentarium, and given the pervasive significance of documents for nursing practice, efforts to incorporate documents can be expected to significantly advance qualitative nursing research.

References