

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240807798>

# Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

Article in *Qualitative Research Journal* · August 2009

DOI: 10.3316/QRJ0902027

---

CITATIONS

10,426

---

READS

808,906

1 author:



[Glenn Bowen](#)

Barry University

36 PUBLICATIONS 15,196 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

# Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method

Glenn A. Bowen

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

## 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-

icles); press releases; program proposals, application forms, and summaries; radio and television program scripts; organisational or institutional reports; survey data; and various public records. Scrapbooks and photo albums can also furnish documentary material for research purposes. These types of documents are found in libraries, newspaper archives, historical society offices, and organisational or institutional files.

Researchers typically review prior literature as part of their studies and incorporate that information in their reports. However, where a list of analysed documents is provided, it often does not include previous studies. Surely, previous studies are a source of data, requiring that the researcher rely on the description and interpretation of data rather than having the raw data as a basis for analysis.

The analytic procedure entails finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents. Document analysis yields data—excerpts, quotations, or entire passages—that are then organised into major themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis (Labuschagne, 2003).

## **RATIONALE FOR DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

Document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation—‘the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon’ (Denzin, 1970, p. 291). The qualitative researcher is expected to draw upon multiple (at least two) sources of evidence; that is, to seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods. Apart from documents, such sources include interviews, participant or non-participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 1994).

By triangulating data, the researcher attempts to provide ‘a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility’ (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). By examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study. According to Patton (1990), triangulation helps the researcher guard against the accusation that a study’s findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator’s bias.

Mixed-methods studies (which combine quantitative and qualitative research techniques) sometimes include document analysis. Here is an example: In their large-scale, three-year evaluation of regional educational service agencies (RESAs), Rossman and Wilson (1985) combined quantitative and qualitative methods—surveys (to collect quantitative data) and open-ended, semistructured interviews with reviews of documents (as the primary sources of qualitative data). The document reviews were designed to identify the agencies that played a role in supporting school improvement programs. The authors examined mainly the missions of the agencies as described in documents and reported that ‘some RESAs promoted the image of general assistance agencies, providing help in many areas, whereas others focused their assistance more specifically on the provision of knowledge through training and technical assistance’ (p. 636). Also, Sogunro (1997) used questionnaires combined with interviews, document analyses, and direct observations to examine the impact of training on leadership development. Offering exemplary clarity concerning the use of documents, Sogunro reported that a review of a 19-year-old leadership training program’s records provided information on the history, goals, objectives, enrolments, and substantive content. Specific leadership competencies or skills were identified also through a review of program documents.

As a research method, document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies—intensive studies producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organisation, or program (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Non-technical literature, such as reports and internal correspondence, is a potential source of empirical data for case studies; for example, data on the context within which the participant operates (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Furthermore, as Merriam (1988) pointed out, 'Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem' (p. 118).

Angers and Machtmes (2005) reported that they analysed documents as part of their ethnographic case study, which explored the beliefs, context factors, and practices of middle-school teachers that led exemplarily to a technology-enriched curriculum. The authors stressed the need to triangulate the study methods (which also included observations and interviews) so as to validate and corroborate data obtained during the study. However, Angers and Machtmes failed to identify the documents analysed—even the nature or type of documents—and the analytical procedure employed. They stated only that 'documents were collected from the school system website' (p. 772).

It is important to note here that qualitative research requires robust data collection techniques and the documentation of the research procedure. Detailed information about how the study was designed and conducted should be provided in the research report.

Whereas document analysis has served mostly as a complement to other research methods, it has also been used as a stand-alone method. Indeed, there are some specialised forms of qualitative research that rely solely on the analysis of documents. For example, Wild, McMahon, Darlington, Liu, & Culley (2009) did a 'diary study' that examined engineers' information needs and document usage. They used the data to generate new 'document use' scenarios and a 'proof of concept' test of a related software system.

For historical and cross-cultural research, relying on prior studies may be the only realistic approach (Merriam, 1988). In his dissertation research, Gagel (1997) conducted an in-depth analysis of publications on literacy and technology, following a process known as hermeneutic inquiry. He investigated the works of over 200 authors and institutions from across 12 different fields or disciplines and also used a technique known as 'phenomenological reflection' to elicit essential and incidental themes.

The rationale for document analysis lies in its role in methodological and data triangulation, the immense value of documents in case study research, and its usefulness as a stand-alone method for specialised forms of qualitative research. Understandably, documents may be the only necessary data source for studies designed within an interpretive paradigm, as in hermeneutic inquiry; or it may simply be the only viable source, as in historical and cross-cultural research. In other types of research, the investigator should guard against over-reliance on documents.

## **SPECIFIC USES OF DOCUMENTS**

Documents can serve a variety of purposes as part of a research undertaking. Let us consider five specific functions of documentary material.

First, as indicated above, documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate—a case of text providing context, if one might turn a phrase. Bearing witness to past events, documents provide background information as well as historical insight. Such information and insight can help researchers understand the historical roots of specific

issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation. The researcher can use data drawn from documents, for example, to contextualise data collected during interviews.

Second, information contained in documents can suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research. For example, Goldstein and Reiboldt (2004) did document analysis to help generate new interview questions as they conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study of service use among families living in poor urban communities. Their research demonstrated how one method can complement another in an interactive way. As the authors explain, 'interview data helped focus specific participant observation activities, document analysis helped generate new interview questions, and participant observation at community events provided opportunities to collect documents' (Goldstein & Reiboldt, 2004, p. 246).

Third, documents provide supplementary research data. Information and insights derived from documents can be valuable additions to a knowledge base. Researchers should therefore browse library catalogues and archives for documents to be analysed as part of the research process. In her study of closure of technology teacher education programs, a university-based scholar used newspaper reports, university policy documents, and department self-evaluation data to supplement data gained through interviews (Hoepfl, 1994, as cited in Hoepfl, 1997). Similarly, Hansen (1995) analysed journal entries and memos written by participants, as a supplement to interview data, in his study of technology teachers in training. For their part, Connell, Lynch and Waring (2001) separately employed document analysis in their investigations of the social milieu within organisations. They used document analysis to supplement data from other sources, such as semi-structured interviews and observation, as they developed a number of case studies.

Fourth, documents provide a means of tracking change and development. Where various drafts of a particular document are accessible, the researcher can compare them to identify the changes. Even subtle changes in a draft can reflect substantive developments in a project, for example (Yin, 1994). The researcher may also examine periodic and final reports (where available) to get a clear picture of how an organisation or a program fared over time.

Fifth, documents can be analysed as a way to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources. Sociologists, in particular, typically use document analysis to verify their findings (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000). If the documentary evidence is contradictory rather than corroboratory, the researcher is expected to investigate further. When there is convergence of information from different sources, readers of the research report usually have greater confidence in the trustworthiness (credibility) of the findings.

Atkinson and Coffey (1997, 2004) advise researchers to consider carefully whether and how documents can serve particular research purposes. As the authors emphasise:

We should not use documentary sources as surrogates for other kinds of data. We cannot, for instance, learn through records alone how an organization actually operates day-by-day. Equally, we cannot treat records—however 'official'—as firm evidence of what they report. ... That strong reservation does not mean that we should ignore or downgrade documentary data. On the contrary, our recognition of their existence as social facts alerts us to the necessity to treat them very seriously indeed. We have to approach them for what they are and what they are used to accomplish. (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, p. 47)

In sum, documents provide background and context, additional questions to be asked, supplementary data, a means of tracking change and development, and verification of findings

from other data sources. Moreover, documents may be the most effective means of gathering data when events can no longer be observed or when informants have forgotten the details.

## ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

In relation to other qualitative research methods, document analysis has both advantages and limitations. Let us look first at the advantages.

- *Efficient method:* Document analysis is less time-consuming and therefore more efficient than other research methods. It requires data *selection*, instead of data *collection*.
- *Availability:* Many documents are in the public domain, especially since the advent of the Internet, and are obtainable without the authors' permission. This makes document analysis an attractive option for qualitative researchers. As Merriam (1988) argued, locating public records is limited only by one's imagination and industriousness. An important maxim to keep in mind is that if a public event happened, some official record of it most likely exists.
- *Cost-effectiveness:* Document analysis is less costly than other research methods and is often the method of choice when the collection of new data is not feasible. The data (contained in documents) have already been gathered; what remains is for the content and quality of the documents to be evaluated.
- *Lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity:* Documents are 'unobtrusive' and 'non-reactive'—that is, they are unaffected by the research process. (Previous studies found in documents are not being considered here.) Therefore, document analysis counters the concerns related to reflexivity (or the lack of it) inherent in other qualitative research methods. With regard to observation, for instance, an event may proceed differently because it is being observed. Reflexivity—which requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings attached to social interactions and acknowledgment of the possibility of the investigator's influence on the research—is usually not an issue in using documents for research purposes.
- *Stability:* As a corollary to being non-reactive, documents are stable. The investigator's presence does not alter what is being studied (Merriam, 1988). Documents, then, are suitable for repeated reviews.
- *Exactness:* The inclusion of exact names, references, and details of events makes documents advantageous in the research process (Yin, 1994).
- *Coverage:* Documents provide broad coverage; they cover a long span of time, many events, and many settings (Yin, 1994).

Document analysis is not always advantageous. A number of limitations inherent in documents are described below.

- *Insufficient detail:* Documents are produced for some purpose other than research; they are created independent of a research agenda. (Again, previous studies located in documents

are not being considered here.) Consequently, they usually do not provide sufficient detail to answer a research question.

- *Low retrievability*: Documentation is sometimes not retrievable, or retrievability is difficult. As Yin (1994) has noted, access to documents may be deliberately blocked.
- *Biased selectivity*: An incomplete collection of documents suggests 'biased selectivity' (Yin, 1994, p. 80). In an organisational context, the available (selected) documents are likely to be aligned with corporate policies and procedures and with the agenda of the organisation's principals. However, they may also reflect the emphasis of the particular organisational unit that handles record-keeping (e.g., Human Resources).

These are really potential flaws rather than major disadvantages. Given its efficiency and cost-effectiveness in particular, document analysis offers advantages that clearly outweigh the limitations.

## ANALYSING DOCUMENTS

Document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis is the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research. Some qualitative research experts may object to content analysis, contending as Silverman (2000) did, that it obscures the interpretive processes that turn talk into text. Those research experts should bear in mind that documents include more than transcriptions of interviews and other forms of talk. Further, the kind of content analysis that I recommend excludes the quantification typical of conventional mass media content analysis (although quantitative content analysis can be useful in providing a crude overall picture of the material being reviewed, with indications of the frequency of terms). Rather, it entails a first-pass document review, in which meaningful and relevant passages of text or other data are identified. The researcher should demonstrate the capacity to identify pertinent information and to separate it from that which is not pertinent (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition within the data, with emerging themes becoming the categories for analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The process involves a careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data. The reviewer takes a closer look at the selected data and performs coding and category construction, based on the data's characteristics, to uncover themes pertinent to a phenomenon. Predefined codes may be used, especially if the document analysis is supplementary to other research methods employed in the study. The codes used in interview transcripts, for example, may be applied to the content of documents. Codes and the themes they generate serve to integrate data gathered by different methods. The researcher is expected to demonstrate objectivity (seeking to represent the research material fairly) and sensitivity (responding to even subtle cues to meaning) in the selection and analysis of data from documents.

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) explain how their analysis of the raw data from organisational documents (and interview transcripts) progressed towards the identification of overarching themes that captured the phenomenon of performance feedback in the self-assessment of nursing practice in Australia. The researchers analysed 16 policies or procedures, including performance appraisal documents from health-care organisations. Aiming to

demonstrate rigour in the analysis, the researchers engaged in 'a comprehensive process of data coding and identification of themes' (p. 4). The analysis revealed that policy statements emphasised performance appraisal as a collaborative process between the manager and the nurse, and the importance of discussing the appraisal interview on a one-to-one basis.

## EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE

Although documents can be a rich source of data, researchers should look at documents with a critical eye and be cautious in using documents in their studies. Documents should not be treated as necessarily precise, accurate, or complete recordings of events that have occurred. Researchers should not simply 'lift' words and passages from available documents to be thrown into their research report. Rather, they should establish the meaning of the document and its contribution to the issues being explored.

The researcher as analyst should determine the relevance of documents to the research problem and purpose. Also, the researcher should ascertain whether the content of the documents fits the conceptual framework of the study. It is necessary, as well, to determine the authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and representativeness of the selected documents.

It is important that the documents be assessed for completeness, in the sense of being comprehensive (covering the topic completely or broadly) or selective (covering only some aspects of the topic). The researcher should determine, too, whether the documents are even (balanced) or uneven (containing great detail on some aspects of the subject and little or nothing on other aspects).

The researcher should consider the original purpose of the document—the reason it was produced—and the target audience. Information about the author of the document and the original sources of information could also be helpful in the assessment of a document. The researcher should be concerned with whether a document was 'written as a result of firsthand experience or from secondary sources, whether it was solicited or unsolicited, edited or unedited, anonymous or signed, and so on' (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966, as cited in Hodder, 2000, p. 704). In addition, because documents are context-specific, they should be evaluated against other sources of information.

In cases where previous studies are used as a data source, it is important to examine more than the research findings. The analyst should also identify the design (cross-sectional or longitudinal), methods, and instruments as well as the theoretical framework of each study.

'How many documents should I look at?' I can hear the beginning researcher ask that question. Although it is a legitimate question, the concern should not be about 'how many'; rather, it should be about the quality of the documents and the evidence they contain, given the purpose and design of the study. It is generally better to have access to a wide array of documents providing a preponderance of evidence, especially when the study is relying heavily or solely on documents. When documents are being used for verification or support, however, even a few can provide an effective means of completing the research.

The absence, sparseness, or incompleteness of documents should suggest something about the object of the investigation or the people involved. What it might suggest, for example, is that certain matters have been given little attention or that certain voices have not been heard. The researcher should be prepared to search for additional, related documents, which could fill gaps in the data and shed light on the issues being investigated.

Document analysis, then, is not a matter of lining up a series of excerpts from printed material to convey whatever idea comes to the researcher's mind. Rather, it is a process of



evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed. In the process, the researcher should strive for objectivity and sensitivity, and maintain balance between both.

In the next section, I illustrate the application of document analysis to a grounded theory study. As explained by Strauss and Corbin (1990), 'A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon' (p. 23).

## USING DOCUMENTS IN GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH

The use of documents was integral to my grounded theory study of Social Funds (Bowen, 2003, 2005). A Social (Investment) Fund is both an intervention and the agency that manages the intervention. As an intervention, it takes the form of monetary allocations to deal with poverty-related problems. As an agency, the Social Fund provides grants for small-scale development projects that are identified, prepared, and implemented by the community (Bowen, 2005). In Jamaica, where I did fieldwork for the study, the Social Fund is a major antipoverty initiative of the national government. The Jamaica Social Investment Fund (JSIF) supports community-based projects (subprojects) designed to rehabilitate and expand social and economic infrastructure, improve social services, and strengthen local organisations. Community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and local governments play the role of local sponsors.

My study employed a multimethod approach, encompassing semistructured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and document analysis, adhering to the principles of the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Although data in most grounded theory studies come from interviews and observations, entire studies can be conducted with only documents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Pandit (1996) conducted one such study, using existing literature and documents to create two case-study databases from which a grounded theory of corporate turnaround was generated. The documents took the form of reports in newspapers, trade journals, business journals, government publications, broker reviews, annual company documents, and press releases. Turner's (1983) use of similar material in the qualitative analysis of organisational behaviour—with documentary sources being 'treated like sets of field notes'—influenced the Pandit study. In this regard, 'Analysis and category generation was commenced at the first paragraph of the report, and a theoretical framework generated which would handle the aspects perceived to be of interest to each paragraph' (Turner, 1983, p. 342).

In my study, it was vital that the voices and views of ordinary people be heard. It was most unlikely, I reasoned, that existing documents would be a reservoir or conduit for those voices and views. Therefore, I made interviews my primary data collection method.

Thirty-four respondents were interviewed individually at eight rural and urban sites where subprojects had been implemented. Ten key informants (knowledgeable insiders from the community and from external agencies) provided additional data and clarification of specific issues. Observation of community conditions and processes was included as a means to help determine what was being done, how, and by whom. It allowed me to develop a deeper and fuller understanding of how a Social Fund-supported subproject may affect community life in general and poverty in particular. Field observation was done during the same period in which the interviews were conducted.

Document analysis was a complementary data collection procedure in support of triangulation and theory building. Glaser and Strauss (1967) called attention to the usefulness of documents for theory building—a process that ‘begs for comparative analysis [with the library offering] a fantastic range of comparison groups, if only the researcher has the ingenuity to discover them’ (p. 179).

My methodical search for relevant documents over several months proved fruitful. I reviewed approximately 40 documents, placed them in context, and coded them for analysis (Bowen, 2003). These included Social Fund policy- and project-related documents, minutes of meetings, letters, newsletters, annual and special reports, and 26 newspaper articles (news stories, features, opinion columns, and editorials). Only a few documents were made available at the research sites. Most organisations had attendance records as well as minutes and reports of meetings; some had scrapbooks and files containing newspaper clippings, pictures, letters, flyers, program schedules, and similar documents. For the most part, interview respondents referred to these documents rather than provide me with copies. However, I obtained copies of the following documents: an annual report of a national foundation, with statistical data on a subproject sponsor; a brochure on a funded program together with a letter from a high school, containing anecdotal data on the program’s impact; and the text of a tribute to a rural community leader who initiated a subproject. These documents were rich sources of data.

Minutes of meetings of community-based organisations told me about subproject activities in local communities. The minutes were a remnant or artifact of organisational proceedings; they told a story of situations, processes, and outcomes in the organisation. I treated them as authentic because, in most cases, they were ‘signed’ by the president and secretary and added to the official records of the organisation.

Archival research included both electronic and hard-copy issues of Jamaica’s two daily newspapers: *The Gleaner* (the country’s newspaper of record for a century and a half) and *The Observer*. I downloaded data on Jamaica’s community-based organisations from a government agency (Social Development Commission) website and perused two government publications: the *Survey of Living Conditions* (Statistical Institute of Jamaica/Planning Institute of Jamaica, 1998) and *A Review of Children’s Homes and Places of Safety* (Ministry of Health, May 2003). I examined the news and editorial content of the newspapers dating back to 1995, a year before Jamaica’s Social Fund was incorporated and three years before the first funded subproject examined in my study was initiated.

The documents from which I mined data were incomplete, fragmentary, and selective, in that only the positive aspects of the subproject or of the sponsoring organisation were documented. In many cases, the documents were uneven, with extensive information on some subproject components or activities and virtually nothing on others. Nevertheless, documents were useful in providing a behind-the-scenes look at some subprojects and follow-up activities that were not observed.

Examples of the documents selected and the data analysed are given in Table 1. *The Human Development Report* (UNDP, 2003), for instance, contains the Human Development Index, a measure of standard of living and quality of life, which was used for cross-national comparisons between Jamaica and other Caribbean countries.

The documentary data were analysed together with data from interviews and observations, so that themes would emerge across all three sets of data.

**Table 1:** A Sampling of Documents and Data Analysed

Documents selected	Data analysed
Community Participation in Projects Funded by the Jamaica Social Investment Fund: 'Making Your Project More Participatory' (JSIF, n.d.)	Importance of equitable citizen participation in decision-making processes
<i>Millennium Development Goals: A Compact among Nations to End Human Poverty—Human Development Report 2003</i> (UNDP, 2003)	Human Development Index and related data
Jamaica Social Investment Fund's Annual Report 2002–2003 (JSIF, 2003)	List of approved subprojects
Jamaica's <i>Survey of Living Conditions</i> (STATINJA/PIOJ, 1998)	Relationship between poverty and sanitary facilities, specifically the use of latrines
Letter from a High School Guidance Counsellor to the Assistant Youth Coordinator at a local Mediation Center (11 April 2003)	Data on Peer Mediation Program in schools, a JSIF-financed subproject
<i>A Review of Children's Homes and Places of Safety</i> (Ministry of Health, May 2003)	Contextual data for the research on a girls home (a refuge for young, female wards of the state), which was supported by the Social Fund
Update on the National Poverty Eradication Programme 2001–2002 (JSIF, n.d.)	Data on Jamaica's Social Fund as an anti-poverty strategy
'A Week that was Strong' ( <i>The Gleaner</i> , 4 December 1999)	Role of the St. Elizabeth Homecoming Foundation, a local subproject sponsor, which organised Homecoming Week activities
<i>World Development Report 2003: Sustainable Development in a Dynamic Economy</i> (The World Bank, 2003)	Demographic and economic statistics

Source: Bowen (2003)

A thorough, systematic review of documentation provided background information that helped me understand the sociocultural, political, and economic context in which Social Fund-supported subprojects were conceived and implemented. The documentary data served to ground the research in the context of the Social Fund and related phenomena being investigated (i.e., three related concepts: *citizen participation*, *social capital*, and *empowerment*). Apart from providing contextual richness in the research, documents were particularly useful in pre- and post-interview situations. In that regard, I used data culled from documents to check interview data and vice versa. Documents supplied leads for asking additional, probing questions. Information contained in documents also suggested events or situations that needed to be observed. Therefore, as incomplete and uneven as they were, the reviewed documents augmented the interview and observational data and thus served a useful purpose.

In grounded theory research, as in other forms of qualitative inquiry, the investigator is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. As such, the researcher/analyst relies on skills as well as intuition and filters data through an interpretive lens. As researcher/analyst, I extracted and analysed data from documents as part of theoretical sampling—that is, 'sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving

theory' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 176). I reviewed line, phrase, sentence, and paragraph segments from the documents and other sources to code the data. The initial coding of the content of the documents was based on three groups of search terms: (1) the Social Fund-assisted community's name, (2) the subproject title, and (3) key words related to the subproject (nature, goals, activity, etc.).

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided the data analysis, which was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns and discovering theoretical properties in the data. In a back-and-forth interplay with the data, I constantly checked and rechecked the elemental codes and concepts. I scrutinised and compared data with data and with codes in order to organise ideas and pinpoint concepts that seemed to cluster together. Codes were clustered into substantive categories, and these category codes were compared across interview transcripts, observational data, respondent feedback, and data from documents. I compared coded segments by asking, 'How is this text similar to, or different from, the preceding text?' and 'What kinds of ideas are mentioned in both interview statements and documents?' Hence, I identified similarities, differences, and general patterns (Bowen, 2008, p. 144). If new categories were suggested by the new data, then the previous transcripts of interviews, together with data from field observations and documents, were re-analysed to determine the presence of those categories. By doing so, I filled in underdeveloped categories and narrowed excess ones.

The analysis of documents was instrumental in refining ideas, identifying conceptual boundaries, and pinpointing the fit and relevance of categories (Charmaz, 2003). Only when all the evidence from the documents, interviews, and observations created a consistent picture of the way in which Social Fund subprojects developed, operated, and affected poverty-perpetuating community conditions was I satisfied that the processes of data collection and analysis were complete.

The study eventually produced a substantive theory of stakeholder collaboration for community-driven development (Bowen, 2005); and a case study, including a socioeconomic profile, was developed for each of the eight local communities. As posited by the theory, communities that received Social Fund assistance attempted to deal with local-level poverty-related problems by following a four-stage process. The stages (based on interrelated thematic categories emerging from the data) are as follows: (1) *identifying problems and priorities*, (2) *motivating and mobilising*, (3) *working together*, and (4) *creating an enabling environment* (Bowen, 2005).

*Showing tangible results* was one of the subthemes of the *working together* category, which was generated partially by data from documents. In relation to this subtheme, the Annual Report of Jamaica's Disputes Resolution Foundation, as well as Hanover Mediation Center (local subproject sponsor) records, indicated that 70 per cent of 88 cases taken to mediation in 2000–2002 had been resolved. In addition, an exhaustive search of the Mediation Center files turned up a letter from a high school guidance counsellor, which said, in part: 'Using anecdotal evidence, we have seen where some students are seeking out the mediators and guidance counselors to help them solve conflicts rather than resorting to physical conflicts as the immediate answer'. The interviews did not unearth this set of data. Key informants confirmed the authenticity of the documentary data.

Studies that draw upon documentation are obviously constrained by what is available and its quality. While acknowledging their potential flaws, I confirmed through my study that documents have a major advantage over interviews and observation—that is, their lack of reactivity. The documents analysed in my study did not have the potentially distorting

effects of the qualitative researcher's presence in the field in terms of behaviours, attitudes, and feelings. To be sure, the diverse sources of data gave a more complete picture of the subproject, the local sponsor, and the community than would have been given by a single data source. The triangulation of data sources (which included documents), in effect, countered threats to trustworthiness, such as reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias. In my study, I included other trustworthiness techniques, such as a 'thick' description of phenomena and an audit trail, so that the process of theory development would be both visible and verifiable.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Increased understanding of document analysis is vital if this research method is to be used effectively. This article contributes to strengthening the knowledge base and advancing understanding of document analysis as a qualitative research method. It has described specific uses of documents and has delineated the advantages and limitations of this method. The article includes an exemplar by which to elucidate the method—a grounded theory study in which the systematic review of documents was completed in conjunction with interviews and observation.

Document analysis is a low-cost way to obtain empirical data as part of a process that is unobtrusive and nonreactive. Often, documentary evidence is combined with data from interviews and observation to minimise bias and establish credibility. Although the strengths of document analysis are considerable, the researcher should not use it as a stand-in for other kinds of evidence that may be more appropriate to the research problem and the study's conceptual framework.

The researcher/analyst needs to determine not only the existence and accessibility but also the authenticity and usefulness of particular documents, taking into account the original purpose of each document, the context in which it was produced, and the intended audience. As the subjective interpreter of data contained in documents, the researcher should make the process of analysis as rigorous and as transparent as possible. Qualitative inquiry demands no less.

## REFERENCES

- Angers, J. & Machtmes, K. (2005). An ethnographic-case study of beliefs, context factors, and practices of teachers integrating technology. *The Qualitative Report*, 10(4), 771–794. Retrieved 5 January 2009, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR10-4/angers.pdf>.
- Angrosino, M. V. & Mays de Pérez, K. A. (2000). Rethinking observation: From method to context. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 673–702.
- Atkinson, P. A. & Coffey, A. (1997). Analysing documentary realities. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*, London: Sage, 45–62.
- Atkinson, P. A. & Coffey, A. (2004). Analysing documentary realities. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (2nd ed.), London: Sage, 56–75.
- Bowen, G. A. (2003). Social funds as a strategy for poverty reduction in Jamaica: An exploratory study. *Dissertation Abstracts International*. University Microfilms AAT 3130417, Doctoral dissertation, Florida International University, A 65/04, 1557.
- Bowen, G. A. (2005). Local-level stakeholder collaboration: A substantive theory of community-driven development. *Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society*, 36(2), 73–88.

- Bowen, G. A. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 8(1), 137–152. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Charmaz, K. (2003). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies for qualitative inquiry* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 249–291.
- Connell, J., Lynch, C. & Waring, P. (2001). Constraints, compromises and choice: Comparing three qualitative research studies. *The Qualitative Report*, 6(4). Retrieved 12 January 2009, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR6-4/connell.html>.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. New York: Aldine.
- Eisner, E. W. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Toronto: Collier Macmillan Canada.
- Fereday, J. & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 80–92. Retrieved 12 January 2009, from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5\\_1/pdf/fereday.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_1/pdf/fereday.pdf).
- Gagel, C. (1997). Literacy and technology: Reflections and insights for technological literacy. *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education*, 34(3), 6–34.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goldstein, A. E. & Reiboldt, W. (2004). The multiple roles of low income, minority women in the family and community: A qualitative investigation. *The Qualitative Report*, 9(2), 241–265. Retrieved 5 January 2009, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR9-2/goldstein.pdf>.
- Hansen, R. E. (1995). Teacher socialization in technological education. *Journal of Technology Education*, 6(2), 34–45.
- Hodder, I. (2000). The interpretation of documents and material culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 703–715.
- Hoepfl, M. C. (1997). Choosing qualitative research: A primer for technology education researchers. *Journal of Technology Education*, 9(1), Article 4. Retrieved 12 January 2009, from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v9n1/hoepfl.html>.
- Labuschagne, A. (2003). Qualitative research: Airy fairy or fundamental? *The Qualitative Report*, 8(1), Article 7. Retrieved 5 January 2009, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR8-1/labuschagne.html>.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mills, J., Bonner, A. & Francis, K. (2006). The development of constructivist grounded theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(1), 25–35. Retrieved 12 January 2009, from <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/4402/3795>.
- Pandit, N. R. (1996). The creation of theory: A recent application of the grounded theory method. *The Qualitative Report*, 2(4), Article 3. Retrieved 12 January 2009, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR2-4/pandit.html>.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rapley, T. (2007). *Doing conversation, discourse and document analysis*. London: Sage.
- Rossmann, G. B. & Wilson, B. L. (1985). Numbers and words: Combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a single large-scale evaluation study. *Evaluation Review*, 9(5), 627–643. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Silverman, D. (2000). Analyzing talk and text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 821–834.
- Sogunro, O. A. (1997). Impact of training on leadership development: Lessons from a leadership training program. *Evaluation Review*, 21(6), 713–737. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Turner, B. A. (1983). The use of grounded theory for the qualitative analysis of organisational behaviour. *Journal of Management Studies*, 20(3), 333–348. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). (2003). *Millennium development goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty—Human development report 2003*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wild, P. J., McMahon, C., Darlington, M., Liu, S. & Culley, S. (2009). A diary study of information needs and document usage in the engineering domain. *Design Studies*. Retrieved 26 June 2009, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2009.06.002>.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn A. Bowen is Director of the Center for Service Learning at Western Carolina University (Cullowhee, North Carolina, USA). He earned his doctorate in Social Welfare at Florida International University (Miami, Florida, USA) in November 2003. His articles on qualitative research methodology have appeared in several scholarly journals.

Glenn A. Bowen  
Center for Service Learning  
Western Carolina University  
Cullowhee, North Carolina 28723  
USA  
Phone: + 1 828 227 7184  
Email: [gbowen@email.wcu.edu](mailto:gbowen@email.wcu.edu)