Conducting a Qualitative Document Analysis

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Abstract

Document analysis has been an underused approach to qualitative research. This approach can be valuable for various reasons. When used to analyze pre-existing texts, this method allows researchers to conduct studies they might otherwise not be able to complete. Some researchers may not have the resources or time needed to do field research. Although videoconferencing technology and other types of software can be used to reduce some of the obstacles qualitative researchers sometimes encounter, these tools are associated with various problems. Participants might be unskillful in using technology or may not be able to afford it. Conducting a document analysis can also reduce some of the ethical concerns associated with other qualitative methods. Since document analysis is a valuable research method, one would expect to find a wide variety of literature on this topic. Unfortunately, the literature on documentary research is scant. This paper is designed to close the gap in the literature on conducting a qualitative document analysis by focusing on the advantages and limitations of using documents as a source of data and providing strategies for selecting documents. It also offers reasons for using reflexive thematic analysis and includes a hypothetical example of how a researcher might conduct a document analysis.

Keywords

document analysis, qualitative inquiry, reflexive thematic analysis

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Document analysis has been an underused approach to qualitative research. This approach can be valuable for various reasons. When used to analyze pre-existing texts, this method allows researchers to conduct studies they might otherwise not be able to complete. Some researchers may not have the resources or time needed to do field research. Although videoconferencing technology and other types of software can be used to reduce some of the obstacles qualitative researchers sometimes encounter, these tools are associated with various problems. Participants might be unskillful in using technology or may not be able to afford it. Conducting a document analysis can also reduce some of the ethical concerns associated with other qualitative methods. Since document analysis is a valuable research method, one would expect to find a wide variety of literature on this topic. Unfortunately, the literature on documentary research is scant. This paper is designed to close the gap in the literature on conducting a qualitative document analysis by focusing on the advantages and limitations of using documents as a source of data and providing strategies for selecting documents. It also offers reasons for using reflexive thematic analysis and includes a hypothetical example of how a researcher might conduct a document analysis.

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Introduction

Document analysis is a valuable research method that has been used for many years. This method consists of analyzing various types of documents including books, newspaper articles, academic journal articles, and institutional reports. Any document containing text is a potential source for qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). Document is a term used to refer to a wide variety of material including visual sources, such as photographs, video, and film (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Like documents consisting of texts, those that consist of visual material can be a source for qualitative analysis (Flick, 2018).

Since document analysis is a valuable research method, one would expect to find a wide variety of literature on this topic. Unfortunately, the literature on documentary research is scant (Tight, 2019). In this paper, I offer information designed to close the gap in the literature on conducting a qualitative document analysis and discuss the advantages and limitations of using pre-existing texts as a source of data. I also offer strategies for selecting documents and mention reasons for using reflexive thematic analysis when conducting documentary research.

Analyzing documents has frequently been an underused approach to qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative researchers often favor using other methods, such as interviews, over analyzing documents because of their desire to participate more actively in field research. Some researchers may avoid analyzing documents because they are unaware of how valuable this approach can be (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The scarcity of literature on this topic likely contributes to this lack of awareness and may prevent researchers from developing the skills needed for conducting this type of research.

When conducting a document analysis, researchers typically choose between using quantitative and qualitative methods. For quantitative studies, they sometimes conduct a content analysis and use numbers and statistics to make sense of data. Quantitative research focuses on measurements that facilitate comparison and statistical aggregation of data (Patton, 2015). Qualitative studies, however, do not emphasize the use of statistics and focus on how people interpret their experiences and construct the world. These types of studies are often designed to explore latent meaning in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies can also be conducted at the descriptive level. For these types of studies, rather than focus on interpreting latent meaning, researchers look for explicit meaning in the data. For such studies, they use data extracts as illustrative examples rather than provide an analysis of the extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Research with Pre-Existing Textual Sources

Qualitative researchers rely on various types of ways to collect data. In some cases, they create the data, but sometimes they use pre-existing data. Rapley (2018) compared data from a newspaper article with data from a research interview to differentiate between these two types. When researchers analyze newspaper articles for a study, they typically do not write the articles. However, when they conduct interviews, they participate in the creation of the data. In one case, the actions of the researchers lead to the creation of the data. In the other, the data exist without any actions by the researchers. In both cases, researchers are active in discovering, collecting, and making decisions about which materials will be analyzed and which will be ignored. But for data collected through interviews, they usually play a more active role (Rapley, 2018). Using pre-existing data is similar to using data from observations and interviews. Books, articles, and other documents can be thought of as texts that are equivalent to the information a researcher collects during an interview. These sources reflect the beliefs of people in a similar way to the data a researcher would collect from observations and interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Pre-existing data are often used with other types of data for triangulation, a strategy designed to increase the trustworthiness of a study. Triangulation helps to determine if the findings of a study are consistent and to develop a deeper understanding of the topic being investigated. In addition to analyzing pre-existing documents, researchers sometimes use data from interviews and observations. By using different methods to collect information, they can confirm their findings across data sets, thereby minimizing the possibilities for biases (Bowen, 2009). For instance, participant observation permits researchers to observe circumstances mentioned in interviews and situations informants may be reluctant to divulge. This method allows them to gain new insights and awareness of any descriptions their informants may have provided during an interview (Kawulich, 2005).

Although triangulation enhances the validity of qualitative research, some circumstances can make it difficult to do interviews and observations. The authors of texts may no longer be alive or be unwilling to participate in interviews. The COVID-19 pandemic made it hard to do observations at institutions that limited how many people could enter their facilities. Another reason for using pre-existing textual data involves affordability and easy access. Electronic databases at universities allow researchers to access a wide range of databases and textbooks (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and the Internet offers access to an immense amount of data, often for free.

Advantages and Limitations of Analyzing Documents

Although document analysis is frequently used to complement other methods, some researchers use it as their sole method of research. In certain cases, using pre-existing documents allows researchers to gain access to the best source of data for completing a project. When doing historical research, for example, interviewing people who lived hundreds of years ago or conducting direct observations on how they lived is impossible. A second example involves research on intimate personal relationships. Since people tend to be reluctant to discuss this topic and since these relationships are difficult to observe, documents, such as books and articles, can be an important source for investigating this subject (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A recently published book, for instance, entitled *The Science of Intimate Relationships,* includes a chapter on sex and passion. And when the term "sexual relationships" is searched using Google Scholar, a wide variety of articles appear that can be used for a document analysis.

Avoiding dangerous situations is another reason to use this method. Imagine doing a study exploring the behavior of terrorists. In highly violent settings, researchers are at higher risk of being harmed (Goldstein, 2014), so analyzing documents may be a safer approach. Through an analysis of tweets and other online content, Derrick et al. (2016) conducted a study to investigate how violent extremists operate, leading to a better understanding of such groups' organizational structures and recruitment strategies. This understanding may then facilitate developing plans to counteract violent online messaging (Blackstone, 2019). Although a study conducted using content obtained from social media might be less valuable than one completed through field research, such a study has the potential for yielding useful information.

Analyzing documents, such as books and journal articles, can be beneficial also because of the stability of the data. Researchers may influence the participants during interviews or observations. However, when they conduct a document analysis with pre-existing texts, the data are unaffected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Members of marginalized groups sometimes distrust researchers because of a fear that the research findings may be useless or harmful to their communities (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Consequently, they might provide inaccurate information about themselves and their communities when responding to questions (Creswell, 2016) or refrain from participating in research (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). An interviewer's ethnicity, sex, age, or social class can influence how participants answer questions (Waterfield, 2018).

Like interviews, observations cannot provide a complete understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Researchers normally do not see everything in a setting, understand what they observe, and determine what is crucial to observe (Bailey, 2018). And for novice researchers, gaining information through observations is challenging because of their inexperience in taking notes and observing at the same time (Creswell, 2016).

Although conducting a document analysis can reduce some of the concerns qualitative researchers frequently encounter, this approach is by no means free of issues researchers typically face. Like interviews and observations, documents by themselves will likely not include important information other methods may uncover. For example, when allowing outsiders to examine its documents, an organization can provide access only to content aligning with the values of its chief executives. Conducting research with documents as the sole source therefore raises questions about biased selectivity (Bowen, 2009).

Other examples of potential biases that could result from analyzing documents involve investigating public records and personal documents. Although public records might seem objective, these documents could be biased. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed how police records documenting the incidence and frequency of crimes can be a function of how a particular department defines and reports the crimes. Analyzing such documents may not reveal

whether a high arrest record of a given group involves a racially discriminatory practice. Personal documents can be deceptive as well. People can underestimate their income for a personal income tax report but overestimate expenses for a grant proposal. Researchers also need to be concerned about the authenticity of historical documents and those provided by sources who wish to remain anonymous (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another weakness with relying on pre-existing texts involves working with limited data. Data sources on a certain subject might not exist. Consequently, researchers might need to tweak their research interests or questions based on the available data (Blackstone, 2019). Since many documents are not produced for research purposes, the use of pre-existing texts as the sole source of data may not provide the content needed to conduct a study. Pre-existing texts might also not provide a continuous record of events like field notes and offer only unrepresentative samples. For some investigations, the only writing available involves the technical reports the funders request (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

More Benefits of Conducting a Document Analysis

The limitations associated with conducting a document analysis do not mean that this method is a less worthy approach to research. In addition to the advantages previously mentioned, conducting a document analysis allows researchers to have access to data that would otherwise take enormous effort and time to collect (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Studies that may be practical to complete only through a document analysis include those that involve cross-cultural research (Bowen, 2009). Comparing aspects of different cultures thousands of miles apart is not a realistic goal for many researchers with limited resources and time to complete their research. Although the use of technology sometimes helps researchers to deal with these obstacles, in many cases, it cannot replace field research. Certain groups of people might be unskilled in using technology, and others may not have access to it.

In addition to using technology, some researchers participate in collaborative projects with people in a different country to have more chances to conduct studies. Participating in such projects often permits researchers to have more funding opportunities because this kind of research is viewed favorably. However, researchers can encounter problems fulfilling the accountability requirements of managing such a project in two countries, since each one can have different procedures for conducting research. Another challenge is agreeing on a topic that matches the interests of both groups (Sayer & Crawford, 2017).

Another reason to conduct a document analysis relates to the need to complete studies designed to focus exclusively on how texts portray different groups of people. Some school districts, for example, have an interest in implementing culturally authentic children's resources. These resources are believed to represent different groups of people accurately rather than stereotypically.

To find out the extent to which children's books are culturally authentic, a qualitative study can be conducted specifically for this purpose. Researchers might start such a study by exploring criteria for assessing cultural authenticity. Previous researchers have used the guidelines offered by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. These guidelines (see Table 1) are based on using 10 components for evaluating children's books for racism and sexism.

Table 1

Examples of Questions to Ask for Checking for Racism and Sexism

Component	*Questions*
Illustrations	Are all people from marginalized groups shown to be alike, or are they shown with distinctive features? Are females passive and males active?
Story line	Are the sources of poverty and oppression portrayed accurately?
Lifestyles	Are members of marginalized groups portrayed only in ghettos or barrios? Are they depicted unfavorably in comparison with those from the mainstream culture?
Relationships	Do females and people from marginalized groups make important decisions, or do they function mainly in supporting roles?
Heroes	Do heroes represent people who marginalized groups believe are heroes or only those who did not resist members of the mainstream culture?
Effects on children	Does the book counteract or reinforce the negative images associated with females and members of marginalized groups?
Author's perspective	Is the author's perspective ethnocentric? Is it patriarchal?
Loaded words	Does the book contain words with demeaning overtones? Examples of these words include savage, lazy, backward, docile, and primitive.
Copyright date	Was the book published recently? The copyright date might reflect societal standards of a particular period. These standards may or may not apply in today's world.
Historical accuracy	Were the attitudes toward women or marginalized groups common during a certain period? These guidelines may not apply for evaluating classical or contemporary literature.

Note. The information in this table is from the California State Department of Education (1998).

For a study exploring how school texts portray a given group, observations or interviews would not be needed, since the research questions would focus on how a school district's resources portray this group. Although a larger study on this topic can involve how

parents feel about this subject and include observations and interviews, this approach would be unnecessary for studies with narrow research questions aimed at analyzing textual content.

Some parents might feel that certain curricular content is harmless, although it dehumanizes people from a given group. And others may be offended by content that is historically accurate and culturally authentic. Such a situation may benefit from a textual analysis designed to examine the various qualities of different curriculum content and the ways they affect student learning (Morgan & Forest, 2016).

Using pre-existing documents as a form of data also raises fewer ethical concerns than using other qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Public records are available for anyone to examine and are often anonymous. Authors of books and articles appearing in newspapers and journals are generally aware that anyone will be able to read their content. This awareness usually reduces the ethical concerns associated with using public documents. But such content can reflect the biases of the authors who create it. A newspaper may be motivated to publish content to express a political perspective rather than to report the facts objectively (Linders, 2007).

Although using certain documents can reduce the ethical concerns associated with the use of other qualitative methods, researchers need to be aware that in some cases, they need to deal with these issues. For instance, they need to decide on how to proceed when working with documents showing the misappropriation of funds and those revealing that administrative duties are linked with the offering of favors. Personal records raise concerns as well unless they are offered voluntarily for research purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

When questions related to ethics arise, researchers need to ask themselves whether those who produced a document intended it to be public or private (Hookway, 2008). In some cases, this question can be difficult to answer. For instance, blogs are examples of sources containing pre-existing text, but researchers disagree as to whether participant consent is needed to analyze them. Hookway (2008) indicated that since blogging is a public act of writing, accessible blogs are public. But those that bloggers have made "friends only" need to be considered private.

When making ethical decisions regarding the use of online content, researchers need to remember that the greater the chance the content is considered public, the less need there is to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the individuals who created it. Researchers need to be cautious with materials not intended for public use. They need to consider issues involving anonymity, consent, and vulnerability. Content posted by children and other vulnerable groups needs to be treated with care. Members of these groups might not realize the risks associated with posting content on the Internet. Researchers need to ask themselves if the authors of the content to be analyzed will be harmed by their research (Braun & Clarke 2013).

Another advantage of conducting a document analysis with pre-existing texts involves how this approach can benefit novice researchers. Instructors can introduce qualitative methods to beginners using one method of data collection to make qualitative research easier to conduct. Although triangulation increases the trustworthiness of a study, implementing several methods such as interviews, participant observation, and video recordings to collect data is a complex process (Green & Chian, 2018).

Using documents can be more appropriate for novice researchers also because less work needs to be done before the data analysis process. Field research requires traveling to a site to conduct interviews and observations. It also typically involves getting permission from gatekeepers. After collecting the data, field research may require more work because researchers need to transcribe their interviews. This process is not necessary when analyzing pre-existing texts, although it is usually a step for document analysis when the data come from audiovisual sources (Braun et al., 2016).

Although the use of documents as a data source can be valuable, several factors lead researchers to use this approach less frequently than other qualitative methods. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned a few reasons for this trend:

1. Researchers would rather create their own data.
2. They prefer to see situations and people in person.
3. They feel they lack the skills needed to analyze documents.
4. Researchers underestimate the potential of documents for yielding data.

Table 2
Strengths and Limitations of Conducting a Document Analysis

Strengths	Limitations
• Fewer ethical concerns to deal with. • Unobtrusive form of research. • Cost-effective method. • More opportunities to do research that would otherwise be difficult to do.	• Limited information. • Fewer opportunities to check for bias. • Not enough data to complete a study that matches the researcher's interests.

Note. The information in this table is from Blackstone (2019), Bowen (2009), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

As an avid researcher, I have benefited from using pre-existing documents for qualitative inquiry. Although I enjoy doing field research, I usually have to teach several courses each semester and to attend meetings, leaving me with less time to travel to a site to conduct interviews and observations. I have also experienced some of the ethical concerns related to doing observations and interviews. Although these concerns do not discourage me from participating in field research, I find that the feasibility of analyzing pre-existing documents often outweighs the advantages of implementing other methods.

Selection of Documents

The process of conducting a document analysis starts with finding the documents for the study. In selecting the documents, researchers need to consider several factors. Flick (2018) mentioned four factors to use when deciding which documents to include:

1. Authenticity
2. Credibility
3. Representativeness
4. Meaning

Figure 1

Factors to Use for Selecting Documents
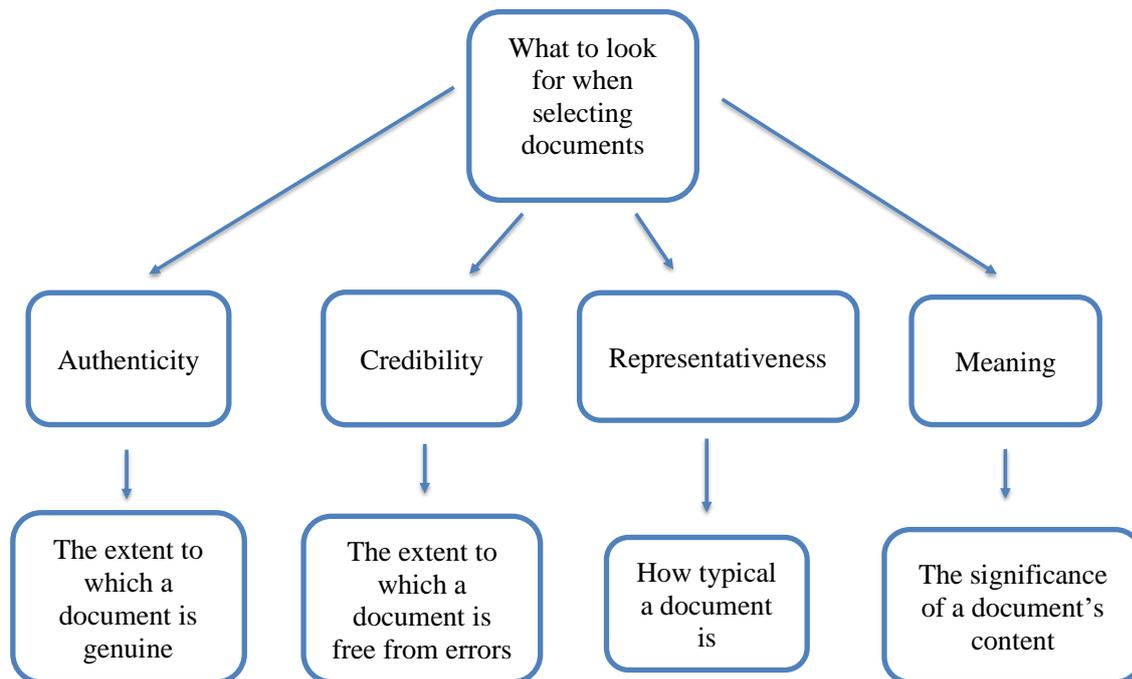
Note. The information in this figure is from Kridel (2015).

Authenticity involves the extent to which a document is genuine (Dunne et al., 2016). Mogalakwe (2009) indicated that the authenticity of the documents to be analyzed is a foundational element of any research. He also compared how a researcher's task of ensuring that the documents are genuine is similar to how researchers need to make sure the evidence is authentic when using other qualitative methods. For example, an interviewer must select the appropriate people to interview. And participant observers need to make sure that what they observe is not staged but natural activity. In a similar manner, researchers need to be sure that the documents they select are not forged (Mogalakwe, 2009).

Various factors can indicate that a document may be inauthentic. A document might contain inconsistent content, such as changes in typography, handwriting, and style of language. Different versions of the same document could be available (Dunne et al., 2016). A document might make little sense, contain obvious errors, or come from an unreliable secondary source (Mogalakwe, 2009). And a document may have been modified to reflect a particular perspective (Dunne et al., 2016).

One way to decide on the extent to which a document is authentic is by determining whether it is a primary source. For instance, when doing a document analysis about what leading scholars wrote about a topic, a researcher would ask whether the scholars themselves wrote the documents. If they are not working with an original source, researchers need to consider any content that might have been omitted or misinterpreted (Flick, 2018). Confirming the authorship, date, and location of publication can be a way to attend to issues of authenticity (Kridel, 2015).

Credibility relates to the extent to which the source is free from error and distortion (Dunne et al., 2016). To decide whether documents are credible, researchers need to investigate whether their producers are reliable sources (Flick, 2018). Researchers can have access to original documents, but their authors may have included distorted perspectives resulting from inexperience or motives other than a desire to express honest explanations (Kridel, 2015).

Certain documents are more likely to be less credible than others. For instance, the formal documents commercial organizations produce addressing the outside world are usually intended to create a positive impression. Since the employees at these organizations are typically interested in protecting themselves, they often hide their mistakes, leading to a difference in what a document contains and what happens at their organizations (Payne & Payne, 2004).

Representativeness has to do with how typical a document is. If a document contains idiosyncratic content rather than material that reflects the content of a collection of other documents about the same topic, it lacks representativeness. Several factors can interfere with a researcher's effort in determining representativeness. Some significant documents get discarded because they become worn from being used often, and unimportant ones may remain because they stay in better condition. Historians need to consider that as time passes, documents that may have been considered less valuable might survive longer because they were stored away (Kridel, 2015). Assessing the representativeness of an organization's internal documents is difficult for researchers from the outside because its executives can allow access only to those they want a researcher to investigate (Payne & Payne, 2004).

Meaning involves the significance of a document's content and pertains to whether the evidence is clear and understandable. Documents can have literal and interpretive meaning. The literal meaning pertains to a document's face value. To assess the meaning of a text as a whole, a researcher needs to connect the literal meaning to the context in which the document was created (Mogalakwe, 2009).

Sampling Technique

During the selection process, researchers need to do more than just check for authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. They also need to decide on a sampling technique to construct the corpus that will allow them to achieve the goals of the research study. Flick (2018) mentioned that a researcher might use purposive sampling for a document analysis. Bowen (2009) described how he used theoretical sampling for a grounded theory study that included document analysis.

Bowen's study investigated the process of Social Funds in Jamaica. A Social Fund consists of an agency that controls funding to deal with the conditions poverty creates. In addition to documents, he used semistructured interviews and participant observation to collect data. And document analysis was used as a complementary method to enhance triangulation. Using a back-and-forth interplay with the data, codes and concepts were checked and rechecked to identify similarities, differences, and patterns. Bowen was satisfied with the data collection process only when he felt he had developed a consistent view of how the process of Social Funds worked and affected community conditions.

The number of documents a researcher should select cannot be determined prior to starting a study of this nature. This number depends on the research questions and other aspects of the research process. Figuring out whether a sample is large enough involves reaching a point of redundancy. This point of the study occurs when researchers cease to gain insights after collecting new data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

When I start new research using documents, I have no idea how many sources I will need before I have enough data to write a report. I may have to select a new topic altogether or cease developing a subtopic if I cannot find enough data. I know that I am making progress when I have identified a variety of reputable sources that allow me to develop themes on the topic I am pursuing. My feelings about stopping my search for more documents grow stronger when I feel that I have gathered enough data to identify various themes and that analyzing more

data will likely not help me develop a new theme. I then write a report that connects each theme logically.

Thematic Analysis of Documents

After a researcher has selected a sample of texts, the next step in documentary research is to conduct an analysis of those texts. Because of its versatility, thematic analysis is an ideal method for this process. Unlike other methods, thematic analysis is not a theoretically driven approach, and it does not prescribe epistemological or ontological frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The versatility of thematic analysis allows researchers to use this approach for many types of studies and to select the research design that matches their interests and areas of expertise (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic Analysis as a Qualitative Method

To use thematic analysis well for analyzing documents, researchers need to realize that this method consists of a variety of approaches. Without accurate knowledge about this method, researchers might publish papers without stating the approach they implemented and without recognizing the conceptual clashes between different approaches (Braun et al., 2019).

Braun et al. (2019) identified three schools of conducting a thematic analysis and mentioned that each one is associated with more than one way of implementing this type of analysis. The first school is associated with a "reflexive" approach, the second with a "coding reliability" approach, and the third with a "codebook" approach. Of these three schools, the only one based on completely qualitative methods is the reflexive approach.

The Reflexive Approach

The reflexive approach is based on a qualitative paradigm, partly because it emphasizes that researcher subjectivity is a resource rather than a problem. Within a qualitative model of research, researcher bias is not regarded as a concern because all research is viewed as influenced. One of the ways to use research subjectivity as a tool is by being reflexive. Researchers can be reflexive by considering how their views and feelings have influenced their findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Reflexivity relates to how the researcher's values, history, characteristics, and the decisions made during the research affect the results (Bailey, 2018). This aspect of qualitative research requires researchers to reflect about their thinking patterns for interpreting the data. In other words, researchers need to investigate their own interpretations. To be reflexive, they need to be alert to the social, political, cultural, and economic factors that influence their perspectives as well as those of the participants they study (Patton, 2015).

The coding process based on the reflexive approach evolves. This means that it is not determined at the start of a new study. For example, a code can be split into two codes or renamed if doing so better reflects the researcher's developing interpretation of the data. This way of coding allows researchers to uncover unexpected meanings rather than summarize the data. The data are interpreted through the researcher's own assumptions, commitments, and scholarly knowledge. Such a coding process leads to themes reflecting patterns of shared meaning (Braun et al., 2019).

A Hypothetical Example

The following hypothetical example illustrates what a document analysis might appear like if a researcher were to conduct a study on stereotypical children's books. A researcher's strong interest in racially biased content in children's books might lead her to start an investigation on how a certain group is represented. Such a researcher may be unsure of how to start. But after reading more about this topic, she might find out that Native Americans tend to be portrayed in worse ways than other groups and that this treatment can even occur in award-winning books. She may also find out that although previous authors have examined the portrayal of Native Americans, no one has done so using a sample of children's books published within the previous five years.

To close this gap in the research, she decides to conduct a study. Her first step is to explore what previous researchers found, so she searches the databases at her university for previously published papers about this topic. After reading a few studies and taking notes about the findings of previous researchers, she decides that she has sufficient knowledge about this subject to start her study.

She decides to collect a sample of all the children's books that won a prestigious award within the past five years. However, she finds out that this sample includes too few portrayals of Native Americans to conduct a study. She then identifies five recently published children's books containing sufficient content on Native Americans to conduct a study.

Her next goal is to determine the guidelines she will use to evaluate the children's books. Although she read previous studies, none of them included a systematic approach for evaluating children's books for cultural authenticity. She decides to read a few more published studies and discovers that some authors used the guidelines offered by the Council on Interracial Books for Children and that others created their own standards. Since all the guidelines she found cover similar principles for evaluating children's books on cultural authenticity, she decides to use standards reflecting the ideas of previous researchers and summarizes these guidelines in her own words.

Before starting to analyze the books, she checks them for authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. One of her strategies for checking them for authenticity is by exploring the publisher of each book. Since she is conducting this study to explore how children's books may influence young learners to develop misconceptions, her first strategy is to select a sample of books more likely to represent the materials children are exposed to at schools. She learns that all the books she selected were produced by known publishers of children's books.

Next, she checks the books to ensure she has original versions that have not been modified. Her technology skills allow her to complete this step without having to get duplicate hard copies of each book. She achieves this goal by viewing many digital preview copies available on the Internet. Although these copies only show samples of each book, the ones she finds appear exactly as the hard copies she has. During this check, she also confirms that the books are primary sources by making sure the authors' names appear on the front covers.

When she refers to the guidelines for checking for credibility to ensure that this process is completed thoroughly, she discovers that when she evaluated the books for authenticity, she also checked some of the components involving credibility. These guidelines remind her that the extent to which a document is free from errors applies to both authenticity and credibility.

Something new she adds during her credibility check involves investigating each author's background. Since previous studies indicated that authors may include stereotypical content because of their ignorance regarding Native American people, she wants to conduct her study to investigate if this trend persists. To achieve this goal, she wants to ensure that each author has a desire to provide content that will benefit children but may lack accurate

information about Native American people. As she checks each author's background, she discovers all of them have previously written children's books and appear to have a genuine interest in creating appropriate content for children.

When checking the books for representativeness, she looks for examples of illustrations and passages that appear in one book but not in others. She fulfills this part of her document analysis not only when selecting the books to be analyzed but also later when she organizes her themes. At first, she does not find anything atypical when examining each book. But later, during the coding process, she notices that her sample contains only one example of how an author mixed aspects of different Native American tribes together. She remembers that previous studies indicated that this form of misrepresentation suggests that different Native American tribes do not differ from each other. Finding only one example surprises her and prompts her to analyze a few more books to see whether this form of misrepresentation still occurs. After selecting more books, she finds several more examples of this type of portrayal and adds these books to her original list of books to be analyzed.

When she explores each book for meaning, she does so rather quickly during the selection process to determine whether its content is appropriate for the book to be included in her study. However, when she starts the coding process and begins to construct her themes, she looks for latent meaning that supports the idea that Native American people are still portrayed inaccurately in children's books. She completes her investigation by connecting the meanings of each theme she constructed to form a story.

Conclusion

Conducting a qualitative document analysis with pre-existing texts is a valuable approach to research. This approach is particularly useful when researchers do not have opportunities to complete studies using other qualitative methods. One outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic showed why the analysis of documents can be advantageous. The pandemic made it challenging to conduct field research at institutions that reduced the number of people permitted to enter their facilities. In other cases, the time and money researchers need to travel to a site can prevent them from conducting a qualitative study on their preferred topics.

Researchers sometimes use videoconferencing technologies and other forms of synchronous communication when face-to-face interaction is difficult or impossible to achieve. Although these methods are beneficial, they are not useful for certain projects, such as those with people too poor to own technology or those with participants unskillful in using it. Other disadvantages exist with relying on technology. Differences in time zones can make communication inconvenient. Researchers cannot rely on nonverbal cues if using audio-only formats. And disconnections or a time lag that disrupts the flow of an interview may happen (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014).

Although conducting a document analysis can reduce some obstacles qualitative researchers frequently encounter, this research method needs to be implemented well if researchers expect to produce trustworthy studies. One of the crucial components of conducting a document analysis is selecting the appropriate documents to analyze. Without checking for authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning, researchers run the risk of conducting studies that will be discredited.

Also important is selecting a form of analysis that will not prevent the insights researchers frequently develop when conducting qualitative studies. Reflexive thematic analysis is an ideal method to achieve this goal. Although other forms of thematic analysis may be valuable for conducting positivist studies, these methods have been criticized for failing to produce the insights reflexive thematic analysis can yield (Braun et al., 2019).

The lack of literature on documentary research is unfortunate considering how valuable this method can be. This paper will likely influence more scholars to use this approach and to publish more guidelines on implementing this method. After increasing their awareness of how beneficial this approach can be, researchers could very well be more inclined to use this method for qualitative studies.

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