RESEARCH REPORT

The Use of Documentary Research Methods in Social Research

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Introduction

Social research is an activity that is undertaken to find an answer or explanation regarding a particular social phenomenon. It involves *systematic* collection of data about such a social phenomenon for the purpose of finding and or understanding patterns and regularities in it. Social science departments in most universities require some of their final year students to undertake a small piece of social research, commonly referred to as a 'research project' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of a degree. A social research project is normally small in scale and is intended to gauge the student's ability to convert social research *knowledge* (acquired in class) into social research *skills*. Depending on how the student performs in the research project, the department will know whether the student is competent to undertake independent research in the future or to work with little supervision as a research assistant. To the majority of social scientists the idea of a research project is that it is something that is 'original' and for which 'new data' must be collected. To this end the social survey method, sometimes supplemented by in-depth interviews and participant observation, is selected as the method of choice, and very few social scientists ever think of re-analysing existing data sets (Hakim 1982).

Although social surveys, in-depth interviews and participant observation have been tried and tested, they are not the only ones available nor are they always useful. There is another research method that is often marginalised or when used, it is only as a supplement to the conventional social surveys. This is the *documentary research method* or the use of documentary sources in social research. This method is just as good and sometimes even more cost effective than social surveys, in-depth interviews or participant observation. The use of documentary methods refers to the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon we wish to study (Bailey 1994). Payne and Payne (2004) describe the documentary method as the techniques used to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical

sources, most commonly written documents whether in the private or public domain.

Unfortunately, documentary research methods have often been incorrectly considered a monopoly of professional historians, librarians and information science specialists, whilst social scientists rely on surveys and in-depth interview methods, the professional sociologist in particular. In the event that social scientists use documentary research methods, it is only to supplement information collected through social surveys and in-depth interviews, but seldom as the *main* or *principal* research method. No wonder that in order to undertake a research project, most students (following this poor example by their academic advisors) tend almost instinctively to think of questionnaires as *the* tools of data collection. Although social surveys are a respected research method, they are not always appropriate or cost effective. The purpose of this article is to show that documentary research in social science is a useful and under-utilised approach that can be adopted by researchers in the full confidence that it is also a scientific method that requires rigorous adherence to research protocol. The article does not intend to give an in-depth exposition on the use of documentary research methods, a task that has been ably dealt with elsewhere (Platt, J., 1981; Scott, J., 1990) but rather attempts to demonstrate its applicability to those who are not familiar with it or are just sceptical. Hopefully this introduction will provoke their thoughts, challenge their *usual* approach, persuade them to integrate documentary research methods in their social research courses and to explore this other option in their research activities.

What are Documentary Sources?

A document is an artefact which has as its central feature an inscribed text (Scott 1990). Simply put, a document is a *written text*. Documents are produced by individuals and groups in the course of their everyday practices and are geared exclusively for their own immediate practical needs (Scott op cit.). They have been written with a purpose and are based on particular assumptions and presented in a certain way or style and to this extent, the researcher must be fully aware of the origins, purpose and the original audience of the documents (Grix 2001). It must be noted that documents are not deliberately produced for the purpose of research, but naturally occurring objects with a concrete or semi-permanent existence which tell us indirectly about the social world of the people who created them (Payne and Payne 2004). A document, unlike a speech, can have an independent existence beyond the writer and beyond the context of its production (Jary and Jary 1991).

There are two types of documents that are used in documentary study, namely *primary documents* and *secondary documents*. Primary documents refer to eye-witness accounts produced by people who experienced the particular event or the behaviour we want to study. On the other hand secondary

documents are documents produced by people who were not present at the scene but who received eye-witness accounts to compile the documents, or have read eye-witness accounts (Bailey 1994: 194). Documentary sources provide what Scott (1990) characterises as *mediate access* as opposed to *proximate access*. Mediate or indirect access becomes necessary if past behaviour must be inferred from its material traces, and documents are the visible signs of what happened at some previous time. This is in contradistinction to proximate or direct access whereby the researcher and his sources are contemporaneous or co-present and the researcher is a direct witness of the occurrences or activities (Scott 1990).

Documents range from public through private to personal documents. The list of public document sources include government publications such as Acts of Parliament, policy statements, census reports, statistical bulletins, reports of commissions of inquiry, ministerial or departmental annual reports, consultancy reports, etc. Private documents often emanate from civil society organisations such as private sector businesses, trade unions and non-governmental organisations, as well of course from private individuals. They include minutes of meetings, board resolutions, advertisements, invoices, personnel records, training manuals, interdepartmental memos and other annual reports, etc. The list of personal documents include household account books, photo albums, address books, medical records, suicides notes, diaries, personal letters, etc.

Sources of documents

Most countries regularly produce crucial documents that can be easily accessed relatively cheaply. Documents can be found in ministry and departmental libraries, office shelves of officials, newspapers 'morgues' and even store rooms! The Central Statistics Offices in many countries produce statistical bulletins on various topics such as health, economics, employment, the cost of living, economic growth, housing and the population census reports and other topics. In my own research on labour issues I have relied on published public documents, some obtainable from the Government Stationery Office, The Register of Trade Unions and Employers' Organisations in the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, Employment Policy Unit, the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, the Botswana Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Manpower (BOCCIM) and the Botswana Federation of Trade Union (BFTU). I have also collected data from the Botswana National Archives, the Botswana National Library and the British Newspaper Library, London. For data on economic growth, structural transformation and class formation, I have relied on official publications such as the National Development Plans, Labour Statistical Bulletins, Employment Surveys, and Labour Department's Annual Reports. For data on income distribution I have referred to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey reports and government commissioned

consultancy reports. I have supplemented these with unpublished consultancy reports on wage policy and government ministers' speeches on wage policy and trade unions. For state control of labour I have analysed statute laws on labour legislation. To this I added a comprehensive review of literature on the politics, sociology and economics of post-independent Botswana. I have also used trade unions' commentaries on the wage policy and labour legislation and searched for relevant newspaper coverage of strike activities, including government reactions to strike actions.

Whilst the use of documentary sources may not be very popular in mainstream social research, documentary research is not new, having been extensively used by such classical social theorists as Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. Marx made extensive use of documentary sources and other official reports such as Her Majesty Inspectors of Factories Reports made between 1841 and 1867 (that is spanning over a period of 26 years!), reports by the Medical Officer of the Privy Council, Royal Commission and Inland Revenue Reports, reports on the employment of children in factories, the Banking Acts, the Corn Laws, Hansard, and Census Reports for England and Wales. He also referred to various Acts and Statutes such as the Factory Regulations Acts of between 1833 and 1878 (that is spanning a period of about 45 years!). Marx also used newspapers and periodicals such as *The Times*, *Economist*, *New York Daily Tribune* etc., (Harvey 1990). For his part, Durkheim, who is credited as one of the founding fathers of the discipline of sociology, relied on official statistics in his study of suicide. Durkheim made extensive use of statistical information on suicide waves in a number of European countries, looking amongst other things at suicide rates by religious affiliation, race, age group, gender, marital status, class and economic position and occupation (Simpson 1952). According to Simpson, Durkheim's book *Suicide* is regarded as the first modern example of a consistent and organised use of statistical methods in social research. At a time when statistical techniques were poorly developed, Durkheim managed to establish relationships between series of data by methodological perseverance and inference. He was able to establish that suicide, which looks like a very individual and personal act, is in fact induced, perpetuated or aggravated by certain social environments and actions.

Handling documentary sources

The general principles of handling documentary sources are no different from those applied to other areas of social research. In all cases data must be handled scientifically, though each source requires a different approach. Scott (1990: 1-2) has formulated quality control criteria for handling documentary sources. These are authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. *Authenticity* refers to whether the evidence is genuine and from impeccable sources; *credibility* refers to whether the evidence is typical of its kind, *representa-*

tiveness refers to whether the documents consulted are representative of the totality of the relevant documents, and *meaning* refers to whether the evidence is clear and comprehensible. I shall look at each criterion in turn.

Authenticity

Authenticity refers to whether the evidence is genuine and of reliable and dependable origin. Authenticity of the evidence for analysis is the fundamental criterion in any research. The researcher therefore has a duty and a responsibility to ensure that the document consulted is genuine and has integrity. This is in the same way that an interviewer must be sure of the identity of the interviewee or the participant observer must be sure of being in the right place and that the activities observed are not stage-managed for onlookers, but the 'normal' activity of the people involved. There are, however, many instances where documents may not be what they purport to be. For example wills, legal documents, diaries and letters can be forged or falsified, and even literary works may be attributed to authors who did not write them (Platt 1981). This places an enormous responsibility on researchers to satisfy themselves that the documents being analysed are not forgeries and are indeed what they purport to be. Documents should therefore not be taken for granted. According to Platt (1981), circumstances may arise that necessitate a close scrutiny of a document. Such circumstances include the following:

(i)   When the document does not make sense or has obvious errors;
(ii) When there are internal inconsistencies in terms of style, content and so on;
(iii) When there are different versions of the same document;
(iv) When the version available is derived from a dubious, suspicious or unreliable secondary source; and
(v)   When the document has been in the hands of a person or persons with vested interest in a particular reading of the text.

Having established the authenticity of a document, the researcher must also authenticate the authorship, that is, verify that the name inscribed on the document is that of the author. Instances exist where authors have been incorrectly named, or where documents were falsely presented as being the work of certain well-known personalities, such as the so-called 'Hitler Diaries' in the 1980s (Scott 1990).

But what does the researcher do when confronted with a government document signed by a minister or a company's annual report signed by the board chairman? In all probability the government document would have been written by civil servants whilst the annual report will have been written by the chief executive officer with the help of his staff. Under these circumstances it is better to take for granted the names of the authors inscribed on the documents. To illustrate the point, Botswana's first wages policy paper was produced by

Professor Ghai, a consultant. But I regard such a document as an official Botswana government document because it has been endorsed and accepted by the government as its policy document on wages. I also suspect that several documents I have used were produced by experts, for example, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey reports are produced by civil servants at the Central Statistics Office, and the BFTU policy proposals were probably written with the help of a consultant labour economist. The President and the minister's speeches on trade unions could have been written either by civil servants or with their help. But I have taken for granted that the speech is reflective of government policy as delivered by the relevant minister.

Credibility

Credibility refers to whether the evidence is free from error and distortion. According to Scott (1990) the question of credibility should concern the extent to which an observer is sincere in the choice of a point of view and in the attempt to record an accurate account from that chosen standpoint. On the question of credibility, that is, whether the documents consulted were free from distortion, I can only say that all the documents I have used were prepared *independently* and *beforehand*. None of the documents were produced for my benefit. I therefore believe that they were sincere and could not have been altered for my benefit or to mislead me. The question of credibility also applies to my respondents. I believe that the views that these people expressed were made honestly regardless of the fact that they could have erred in fact or in judgment of the situation. This point also applies to views expressed in the consultancy reports. I have no grounds to believe that the consultants could have deliberately misled their client, the government. Similarly, the views expressed by the trade unionists were made in their representative capacity. The extent to which their views reflect those of the rank-and-file is a matter that continues to bedevil representative democracy: the views of the representatives are not necessarily those of the people they represent. With regard to newspapers, I have ignored the reporters' comments and opinions on strike actions, and concentrated only on factual press statements or interviews of trade union leaders or government spokesmen. Any newspaper commentary used was acknowledged but not passed as fact. Although a possibility exists that an incorrect entry could have been made in the documents, for instance, some figures in the Labour Statistics Bulletins do not always add up, I have regarded such occurrences as genuine errors and not a fraudulent activity. I have no reason to believe civil servants can deliberately 'doctor' documents in order to mislead the public. With regard to consultancy reports, it is also relatively easy to establish their authenticity because these documents are not acquired from unreliable sources, but are collected from the consumers of the reports such as government.

Representativeness

The question of representativeness applies more to some documents than to others. Representativeness refers to whether the evidence is typical of its kind, or if it is not, whether the extent of its untypicality is known. Documents such as the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys were prepared by professional statisticians using generally accepted sampling frames and random selection procedures. This is clear from the methodology section of these reports. The fact that some of the findings are actually embarrassing to the government testifies to their representativeness and authenticity. But as to whether the documents I consulted were representative of the totality of the entire relevant document pertaining to a specific issue under investigation is difficult to say. Bureaucrats are notorious for secrecy, and I was dealing with bureaucracies of both the state and trade unions. During my field work, I was denied access to some files on the pretext that they contain sensitive information or could embarrass government. I believe however that speeches by the President and his cabinet colleagues accurately reflected the position of the Botswana government. There is no known case of a cabinet minister who has made a pro-trade union speech which could be atypical of the government position on the issue. I can safely say that a speech by one minister, notwithstanding its particular nuances or personal idiosyncrasies, to a large extent represents or reflects government policy.

Meaning

Meaning refers to whether the evidence is clear and comprehensible. The ultimate purpose of examining documents is to arrive at an understanding of the meaning and significance of what the document contains (Scott 1990: 28). However, what documents contain can have either a literal or *face value* meaning, and an interpretative meaning. According to Scott (1990), the literal meaning of a document gives only its face value meaning, from which its real significance must be reconstructed. On the other hand, in an interpretative understanding, the researcher relates the literal meaning to the contexts in which the documents were produced in order to assess the meaning of the text as a whole. Another important point to be considered in the use of documentary sources is how to decide which inference to make from a document about matters other than the truth of its factual assertions (Platt 1980). For example, information on the growth of both gross domestic product and per capita income is given in factual quantitative terms. On its own, this type of information may lead people to expect a more equitable distribution of income and a higher standard of living. But when this information is read together with information on sectoral and structural changes in the economy, ownership and control of the means of production, employment patterns and income distribution, the picture is more complex. This is because statistics only give face value meaning. Statistics are only 'raw materials' which must be interrogated

and their real meaning reconstructed. One can only make sense of this welter of apparently disparate bits and pieces of information, by situating it within a *theoretical* context. It is the theory that re-orders the data, and inferences come as a matter of interpretation of the raw material informed by theory. For example, in my research on labour relations in Botswana (Mogalakwe 1994), I realised that although both wages policy and various pieces of labour legislation appeared innocuous, a rigorous reading of these, that is, informed by critical theoretical approach, revealed how the wording of these documents, that is their language, was a form of discourse that subtly ordered people's perceptions of the social structure and could be used to construct specific forms of social relationships and maintain the status quo. Language, whether written or spoken, subtly orders our perceptions of situations, and thus also constructs and creates social interaction. Social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories existing in the social world, but also actively construct a version of those objects, events, and categories (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

Conclusion

The main point in writing this article is merely to introduce documentary research method to those who may not be familiar or just sceptical about its relevance in sociology, and to show that even *original research* can be done using old data (Hakim 1982). The intention is not to present documentary method now as *the* research method of choice, but to show that like all research methods, this approach requires rigorous adherence to research standards and ethics. To this end a quality control formula of handling documentary sources exist and must be adhered to. This is important to bear in mind especially now in the era of information superhighway. There is just too much information, especially on the Internet, with some people now creating their own web-sites and publishing all sorts of documents online. Needless to say, these developments place an extra burden on the user of documentary sources when it comes to establishing their authenticity and credibility. But these dangers are no more pronounced in documentary research method than in other research methods. Every method of inquiry has its weak and strong points. This applies no less to documentary research method than to other research methods.

But having said that, it is important to note that no social research method is exclusive of other research methods and that on its own, is sufficient to remove all doubts from a researcher's mind. Occasionally social scientists combine research methods in order to enhance the reliability and the validity of their analyses. This is referred to as 'method triangulation', or the use of two or more research methods to investigate the same phenomenon (Grix 2001). According to Grix, *method triangulation* should not be confused with *data triangulation*, or the use of multiple data sources to investigate the same phenomenon.

Through method triangulation, a researcher can rise above the personal biases that stem from single methodologies and overcome the deficiencies that flow from one method (Mouton 2001). To this end the researcher may augment documentary data by in-depth interviews with a few key informants. The conventional way amongst social scientists is the other way round - to augment social surveys and in-depth interviews with documentary research! Key informants are people who are familiar with and or knowledgeable about the social phenomenon under investigation. Such interviews can help capture certain perceptions, attitudes, views and feelings, and the meaning and the interpretations that people have given to certain events and situations, and to detect any conflicting attitudes and interpretations of the same events and situations (Hakim 1987). Again if I can borrow a leaf from my own research on labour relations in Botswana (Mogalakwe 1994), it was amazing how I was able to gain a deeper understating both of the income policy and labour legislation through the perceptions and interpretations of both trade union leaders and employers as a result of in-depth interviews with a few key informants on both sides. The interviews helped me get the feel of what was happening in the industrial relations field of Botswana, something that I could not easily infer from the documents. The interviews helped me to subject the documents to additional and even more rigorous interrogation. It can not be overemphasised that the weaknesses and strengths of various research methods are subjects of ongoing debate. Suffice it to point out that no one can pretend to have risen above the fray. There is no one research method and there is no research method that is superior to others. The choice of a research method should only be on the basis of such a method's appropriateness, including costs. To this end, the documentary research method should be utilised by social scientists with the full confidence that it is also a respected scientific method.

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