

## Documentary Research Method: New Dimensions

Jashim Uddin Ahmed<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the documentary research method (DSM) in social research and aims to provide a general understanding of the DSM as well as specific tools for its successful implementation. In recent years, although a number of social research scholars discuss the importance of documentary research but this method has had little attention as compared to other methods. The DSM tools can be utilized in all fields where the documentary method is prominent, including business, anthropology, communications, economics, education, medicine, political science, social work, and sociology. In social science research the use of documentary sources is often overlooked. This paper argues that although the documentary research method is not very popular in social science research but it is nevertheless acceptable as a scientific research method. This article reveals assessing the validity of documentary data as well as the value of documentary research.

**JEL. Classification: D80; D83; I20;**

**Keywords:** Documentary Research, Qualitative research, Research methodology, new dimensions

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

‘Research’ is a particular form of enquiry. It is not possible to do research without having a problem, which needs to be solved, or a question, which needs to be answered (Ahmed and Huda, 2006). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1999: 9) stressed “research is always hedged about with uncertainty and risk.” According to Ahmed (2009), research is a part of a wider process that constitutes and renders a subject, amenable to study in a distinctive way. However, it is concerned with seeking solutions to problems or answers to questions. Gillham (2000: 2) offered the following definition of research:

Research is about creating new knowledge, whether the disciplines be - history, medicine, physics or social work. The raw material of research is *evidence*, which then has to be made sense of. Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (1995) argued that research is a process of trying to gain a better

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, School of Business, North South University, Block # B, Bashundhara R/A, Dhaka-1229, Bangladesh , E-mail: [jashim@northsouth.edu](mailto:jashim@northsouth.edu), jashimahmed@hotmail.com

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understanding of the complexities. Bassey (1999: 38) offered the definition of scientific research as “systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry, which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom.” Mason (1996: 4) also agreed that research should be “systematically and rigorously conducted.” These qualities are apparently what Bassey (1999) and Mason (1996) stated as “systematic”. Research dealt with the discovery of answers to “who, what, when, where, how” questions rather than the “why” questions. As Phillips and Pugh (1994: 45) put it:

.... research aims to re-orientate our thinking, to make us question what we think we do know, and to focus on new aspects of our complex reality.

As a bare minimum we may tentatively define research as an inquiry carried out to secure information for solving problems. Whether the research is simple or complex, sophisticated or primitive, scientific or non-scientific, useful or useless depends on its objectives, its design, and the skill and integrity with which it is conducted (Ahmed and Huda 2006).

## 1.2. What is Documentary Research?

A broad definition of a document is a ‘written text’. Document “must be studied as socially situated products” (Scott, 1990: 34). It is defined as “any written material other than a record that was not prepared specifically in response to some requests from the investigator” (Guba and Lincoln, 1981: 228). Silverman (1993) has provided a classification of documents as i) files, ii) statistical records, iii) records of official proceedings and iv) images. Guba and Lincoln (1981) distinguish between documents and records. They define a record as “any written statement prepared by an individual or an agency for the purpose of attesting to an event or providing an accounting” (Guba and Lincoln, 1981: 228). Doing documentary research is much more than “recording facts”. It is a reflexive process in which we confront what researcher calls the “moral underpinnings of social inquiry” (Coles, 1997: 6). “Documents do not stand alone” (Atkinson and Coffey 1997: 55), but need to be situated within a theoretical frame of reference in order that its content is understood. It is an important source of information, and such sources of data might be used in various ways in social research. Many researchers (Bailey 1982; 1994; Polit and Hungler 1991, Treece and Treece 1982; Webb, Campbell, Schwarz and Sechrest 1984) stated that document researches include institutional memoranda and reports, census publications, government pronouncements and proceedings, diaries and innumerable other written, visual and pictorial sources in different forms and so on. In a similar view, Denscombe (1998: 163) advocates, “government publications and official statistics would seem to be an attractive proposition for the social researcher.”

This *research method* is often marginalized or when used, it only acts as a supplement to the other general social research methods. Documentary research method refers to the analysis of documents that contains information about the phenomenon we wish to study (Bailey 1994). The documentary research method is used in investigating and categorizing physical sources, most commonly written documents, whether in the private or public domain (Payne and Payne 2004). This research method is just as good as and sometimes even more cost effective than the social surveys, in-depth interview or participant observation.

Documentary research has been a staple of social research since its earliest inception. Documentary products are especially important for the ethnographer, providing a “rich vein for analysis” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 173). Along with surveys and ethnography, documentary research is one of the three major types of social research and arguably has been the most widely used of the three, throughout the history of sociology and other social sciences. It has been the principal method, sometimes even the only one - for leading sociologists. Numerous

organizations and work settings are concerned with the production and consumption of records and documentary data. Well-known analyses of such processes and products include: school reports (Woods 1979); medical records (Rees 1981); classifications of causes of death (Prior 1985); and health visitors' case records (Dingwall 1977). The key issues surrounding the types of documents and the ability to use them as reliable sources of evidence on the social world must be considered by all who use documents in their research. The paucity of sources available until now means that, this compendium will be invaluable to social researchers. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). Social science uses a wide variety of research methods to improve knowledge, theory, practice and policy in the field. The different types of research methods, quantitative and qualitative, are linked to epistemological and theoretical frameworks. Using this type of material in a research study means that the documents are recorded as secondary data sources in the fact that they contain material, "not specifically gathered for the research question at hand" (Stewart 1984:11).

## 2. HANDLING DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Handling documentary sources are not different from those applied to other areas of social research. In every case, data must be handled *scientifically*. Scott (1990) 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 implacable source; credibility refers to whether the evidence is typical of its kind; representativeness 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. According to Scott (1990: 6), these "criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning should not be regarded as distinct phases in assessing the quality of documentary sources." They should not be applied in a rigid and formalistic way as well, the criteria should rather be seen as all interdependent and the researcher can not adequately use one criterion to the exclusion of others.

### 2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the truthfulness of origins; evidence is genuine, attributions, commitments, sincerity, devotion, and intentions. Authenticity of an evidence for analysis is the fundamental criterion in any research. The researcher therefore has a duty and a responsibility to ensure that the document he is consulting is genuine and has integrity. It is the same way as interviewer must be sure of the identity of the interviewee, or the participant observer must be sure that he is in the right place and that the activities he is observing are not stage managed for his benefit, but the 'normal' activity he intended to go and observe. There are, however, many instances where documents may not be what they purport or appear to be. For example wills, legal documents, diaries and letters can be forged or falsified, and even literary works might be attributed to authors who did not write them (Platt 1981). It places an enormous responsibility on the researcher to satisfy them that the documents being analyzed are not forgeries and indeed what they purport to be. Documents, therefore, should 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:

- (a) When the document does not make sense or has obvious errors;
  - (b) When there are internal inconsistencies in terms of style, content and so on;
  - (c) When there are different versions of the same document;
  - (d) When the version available is derived from a dubious, suspicious or unreliable secondary source;
- and
- (e) When the document has been in the hands of a person or persons with vested interest in a

particular reading of the text.

After establishing the authenticity of a document, the researcher must also authenticate the authorship of the document, 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 known personalities, such as - the Hitler Diaries (Scott, 1990).

## 2.2 Credibility

*Credibility* refers to the objective and subjective components of the believability of a source or message, whether the evidence is free from error and distortion. According to Wikipedia (2009), credibility has two key components: *trustworthiness* and *expertise*, which both have objective and subjective components. Trustworthiness is based more on subjective factors, but can include objective measurements such as established reliability. In the same way, expertise can be subjectively perceived, but also includes relatively objective characteristics of the source or message (e.g., credentials, certification or information quality). Secondary components of credibility include the source dynamism (charisma) and physical attractiveness.

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. The researcher must ascertain that the documents they are consulting are free from distortion, prepared *independently* and *beforehand* and most importantly, the documents are not produced for the benefit of the researcher, or deliberately altered to mislead the researcher. The need to establish credibility of documents is no less important in documentary research than in other research methods, such as survey methods, where the respondent's credibility in an interview depends on the extent to which the views expressed are made honestly, regardless of the fact that respondents could have erred in fact or in judgment of the situation. Some researchers might rely on newspapers as the sources of their information. Whilst newspapers can be used as documentary sources, it is advisable to ignore the reporters' comments and opinions on events and occurrences, and to concentrate only on factual press statements or interviews. Any newspaper commentary used must be acknowledged, but not passed as fact.

There is always a possibility that an incorrect entry could be made in a document. For instance, some figures in the Labour Statistics Bulletins do not always add up. However, this should be regarded as a genuine error and not a fraudulent activity to mislead the public. In other words, a genuine error does not undermine the credibility of the sources, especially as it can be detected and corrected. With regard to consultancy reports, it is also relatively easy to establish their authenticity because these documents are not acquired from unreliable sources. They are collected from the consumers of the reports such as government.

## 2.3 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 not, to the extent of its untypicality known. Documents, such as the Household Income and Expenditure Surveys, are 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 might actually be embarrassing to the government testifies to their representativeness and authenticity. But as to whether the documents consulted are representative of the totality of the

entire relevant documents pertaining to a specific issue under investigation is difficult to say. This is particularly the case with official government documents.

## 2..4 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). However, what documents contain can have either a *literal* or *face value* meaning and an *interpretative* meaning. 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, 1981). To this end the researcher may augment documentary data by in-depth interviews with a few key informants, that is, people who are familiar with and or knowledgeable about the social phenomenon under investigation. The tradition or conventional way amongst social scientists is the other way round to augment social surveys and in-depth interviews with documentary research! But the interviews can help one get the feel of what is happening through the perceptions of these key informants, something that a researcher may not deduce or easily infer from documents. Interviews with key informants can assist a researcher to subject the documents to additional and even more rigorous interrogation. Interviews can help capture certain perceptions, attitudes, views and feelings, and the meanings 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).

Needless to say, these developments place extra burden on the user of documentary sources when it comes to establishing the authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning of documentary sources.

## 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF DOCUMENTARY METHODS

Documentary methods differ from primary research data where the researcher is responsible for the entire research process from the design of the project, to collecting, analyzing and discussing the research data (Stewart, 1984). Judd, Smith and Kidder (1991: 289) distinguish three common characteristics of documentary methods such as:

- they rely entirely on the analyses of data collected for purposes other than those of particular studies in social relations;
- documentary studies often call for ingenuity in translating existing records into quantifiable indices of some general concepts;
- documentary studies are particularly susceptible to alternative interpretations for the natural events and their effects.

## 4. METHODS OF DOCUMENTARY DATA ANALYSIS

In social research, the data analysis method has been discussed by many social science commentators (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Dey, 1993; Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 1993; Weber, 1990). “‘Analysis’ involves breaking data down into bits, and then ‘beating’ the bits together. The word ‘analysis’ derives from the prefix ‘ana’ meaning ‘above’, and the Greek ‘lyis’ meaning ‘to break up or dissolve’” (Bohm, 1983: 156). According to Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996: 185), “analysis is about the search for explanation and understanding, in the course of which concepts and theories are likely to be advanced, considered and developed.” Data analysis brings all data together and then it progresses to reveal the contents

of quality data, demonstrating an ongoing process of resolving the collected research data into its constituent components. Data analysis leads to putting the collected data into shape, and to suggesting how it might be analysed and interpreted. Indeed, Marshall and Rossman (1995: 111) discussing this issue, state “data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data.”

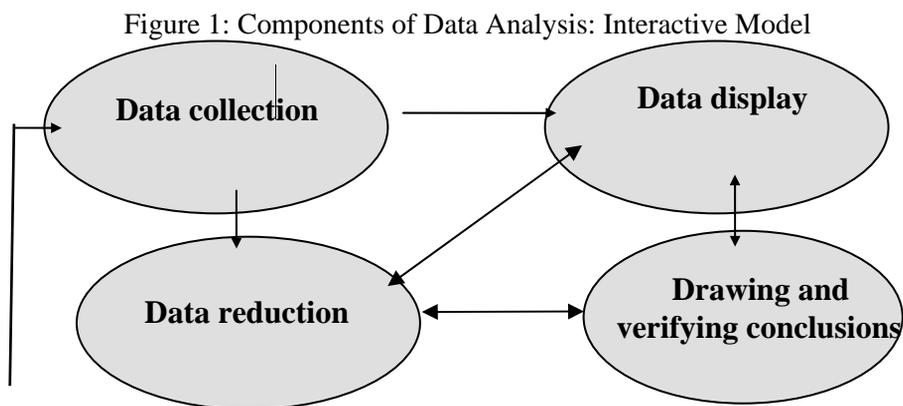
In a mixed methods research (quantitative and qualitative research) approach is employed for data collection purposes, in which respect, Blaxter *et al.* (1996: 177) note:

It may be that qualitative data offers more detail about the subject under consideration, while quantitative data appears to provide more precision, but both give only a partial description. Neither are ‘facts’ in anything but a very subjective sense. The accuracy of the representation is also likely to be reduced further during the research process, as we attempt to summarise or draw out key points from the vastness of the data available.

But in qualitative data analysis an external structure is imposed on the data, which makes analysis far more straightforward. With qualitative data, however, the structure used must first be derived from the data, which means systematically analysing it so as to tease out themes, patterns and categories (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1999). Punch (1998: 199) stresses, “there is no single right way to do qualitative data analysis - no single methodological framework.” Therefore, methods of data analysis need to be systematic and well structured (Punch, 1998). Mason (1996: 147) identified:

In the process of data analysis and the presentation of your explanation to others, you should therefore revisit those difficult questions, which you asked yourself about linking research questions, methodology and methods, when you were designing your research.

Similarly, Miles and Huberman (1994) describe analysing data, which is directed at tracing out lawful and stable relationships among social phenomena, based on the regularities and sequences that link these phenomena. The processes of data analysis would entail three main components - data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions- and give an overall view of data analysis (*see* Figure 1).



Source: Miles and Huberman, (1994, p. 12), *Qualitative Data Analysis*

These processes occur in three different time phases - before data collection, during data collection as interim and early analyses are carried out; and after data collection as final products are

approached and completed (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

#### **4.1 Data Reduction**

Data reduction is the translation of information from one form to another form to simplify problems of analysis, storage, and dissemination to others (Selltiz, Wrightsman and Cook, 1981). As Weber (1990: 41) argues: "...there is too much information in texts. Their richness and detail preclude analysis without some form of data reduction." The prime objective of data reduction is to reduce the data without significant loss of information. Each reduction act would help to bring the masses of data into more manageable proportions, thereby making them easier to comprehend and work with. Initially, a researcher takes a voluminous amount of information and reduces it to certain patterns and themes and then interprets this information by using some schema. Tesch (1990) called this process "de-contextualization" and "re-contextualization", which result in a "higher level" analysis: "While much work in the analysis process consists of 'taking apart' (for instance, into smaller pieces), the final goal is the emergence of a larger, consolidated picture" (Tesch, 1990: 97). Therefore, data reduction occurs continually throughout the analysis. The early stage of data reduction happens through editing, segmenting and summarising the unstructured data (Tesch, 1990).

In the middle stages, it happens through coding and memoing, and associated activities such as finding themes, clusters and patterns (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Punch (1998: 204) expresses his two views about coding, "on the one hand, coding is analysis. On the other hand, coding is the specific and concrete activity, which starts the analysis. ... in the sense that coding both begins the analysis, and also goes on at different levels throughout the analysis." While coding happens, at whatever level, all sorts of ideas occur to the analyst. These become the stuff of memos that record the ideas. Miles and Huberman (1994: 72) explain:

A memo is the theorising write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding ... it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages. ... it exhausts the analyst's momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration.

Thereafter, in the later stages, it happens through conceptualising and explaining, since developing abstract concepts is also a way of reducing the data.

#### **4.2 Data Display**

Data display as the process of presenting and analysing the data. Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) address the importance of creating a data display and suggest that narrative text has been the most frequent form of display for qualitative data. They have no doubt that better displays are a major avenue to valid qualitative analysis. There are many different ways of displaying data - charts, diagrams - and any way that moves the analysis forward is appropriate. Displaying data in these structures would force the researchers to consider what was known and not known about the phenomenon in question, and could suggest new relationships, propositions, and explanations for further analysis. Data display reflects on the main issue of research. As Miller and Glassner (1997: 101) observe:

Numerous levels of representation occur from the moment of 'primary experience' to the reading of the researchers' textual presentation of findings, including the levels of attending to the experience, telling it to the researcher, transcribing and analysing what is told, and the reading.

Therefore, displays are used at all stages, since they enable data to be organised and summarised, they show what stage the analysis has reached, and they are the basis for further analysis. Good qualitative analysis involves repeated and iterative displays of data (Punch, 1998).

### 4.3 Data Drawing and Verifying Conclusions

The reasons for reducing and displaying data are to assist in drawing conclusions. While drawing conclusions logically follows reduction and display of data, in fact it takes place more or less concurrently with them. Thus, possible conclusions may be noted early in the analysis, but they may be vague and ill-formed at this stage. They are not finalised until all the data are in, and have been analysed. The conclusions would become more explicit as they were verified by the data in increasingly grounded analyses. The first two, data reduction and display, rest mainly on the operations of coding and memoing. For each part of the third component, drawing and then verifying conclusions, the researcher relies on interpretations. As Marshall and Rossman (1995: 129) comment, “all three would combine to present a comprehensive and robust explanation of the successes and challenge of implementing inclusion initiatives.”

## 5. USING DOCUMENTARY SOURCES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Although the use of documentary sources may not be very popular in mainstream social research, documentary research is not new. It has been extensively used by such classical social theorists as Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), for example. Marx made extensive use of documentary sources and other official reports, such as, Her Majesty Inspectors of Factories Reports made between 1841 and 1867 (spanning over a period of 26 years), reports by the Medical Officer of the Privy Council, Royal Commission and Inland Revenue Reports, as well as reports on the employment of children in factories, the Banking Acts, the Corn laws, the 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 (spanning over a period of about 45 years). Marx also used newspapers and periodicals, such as, *The Times*, *Economist* and *New York Daily Tribune* (Harvey 1990). On the other hand, 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 among other things at suicide records by religious affiliation, race, age group, gender, marital status, class, economic position and occupation. According to Simpson (1952) Durkheim’s book on *Suicide* is regarded as the first modern example of a consistent and organized use of statistical method 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 the fact that, suicide, which looks like a very individual and personal act, is in fact induced, perpetuated or aggravated by certain *social conditions*. Needless to say, the use of documentary sources in sociological research is not something confined in Europe. It can be argued that ‘literature review’ is in fact one very good example of documentary research that even the skeptics of documentary research carry out unconsciously. All research projects always require a section on ‘Literature Review’. On the basis of a comprehensive literature review on a particular topic, a researcher can be able to formulate a conceptual or theoretical framework within which to locate data analysis. As Mogalakwe (2006a) demonstrates through a review of literature, information from secondary sources can be reconfigured and reinterpreted to yield new insights into a particular social phenomenon.

## 6. VALIDITY AND CRITICISMS OF DOCUMENTARY METHOD

The documentary research method has been incorrectly identified with the professional historian, librarians and information science specialists, whilst the social surveys and in-depth interview methods have been associated with the professional sociologist in particular and the social scientist in general. Social scientists use the documentary research method only to supplement information collected through social surveys and in-depth interviews, but seldom is this method used as the *main* or *principal* research method. Scott (1990) argues quite correctly that textbooks on research methods have generally failed to recognize this research method, and have given most of their space to discussions of questionnaires, interviews and participant observation. This bias creates an imbalance that should be rectified. In this paper, we make a case for the use of the documentary research method and argue that the use of documentary research method in social research is a respected research method which should be utilized by social scientists with full confidence. It is also a scientific method that requires rigorous adherence to research ethics. This paper does not give an in-depth exposition of documentary research methods. The task has been ably dealt with elsewhere (Platt, 1981; Scott, 1990). The purpose is much more modest, namely to introduce the topic to those who are not familiar with it, or to demonstrate the applicability of this research method to those who are just skeptical.

May (1997: 164) observes, “[documents] ... do not simply reflect, but also construct social reality and versions of events. The search of documents’ ‘meaning’ continues, but with researchers also exercising ‘suspicion’. It is not then assumed that documents are neutral artefacts, which independently report social reality (positivism), or that analysis must be rooted in that nebulous concept, practical reasoning.” In spite of their strengths, documentary methods are criticized by many social science researchers because of their data collection nature. As Denscombe (1998: 170) comments:

- While using documents as a source of data, researchers generally rely on something that has been produced for other purposes and not for the specific aims of the investigation.
- Documents can owe more to the interpretations of the producers of documents than to an objective picture of reality.
- Documentary research is regarded as being not clear-cut, not having a method and nothing on how a researcher uses it (<http://uk.geocities.com>). There are several criticisms of documentary research methods.
- Given its social context and identity, the researcher will give a selective and biased understanding of a document, and may even deliberately chose and select particular documents. This is a common criticism against researchers using any technique of data collection.
- Inevitably, authors of documents will decide to record and leave out information informed by their social, political and economic environment of which they are part. Historical documents, thus, are amenable to manipulation and selective influence. In undertaking documentary research, researchers should be aware of these influences and not assume that documents are simply neutral artifact from the past. Indeed, uncritical readings of texts can reproduce and reinforce marginalization of groups, such as working class, women and ethnicities.
- While new technologies (e.g., the internet) offer possibilities for acquiring documents, researchers have to exercise a critical reflexivity since much of the documents on the internet are produced by powerful political, cultural and economic groups, who want to ensure that particular images reach the public domain, and wish to counter bad images with more favorable representations.

- While digital technology (e.g., computers) provides opportunities for new forms of research, it should be remembered that it lends to the creation, modification, destruction and replacement of information with very little effort and cost.
- More generally, using documents without due consideration to the process and social context of their construction, leaves researchers (especially semioticians) open to the charge of being unreflexive and uncritical in their ‘readings’.

In analyzing the documents it was not feasible to address criterion-related validity- “This is the validity estimated by comparing the test outcome with one or more external variables, or criteria, known or assumed to measure the attribute under consideration” (Herbert, 1990: 52). Another major issue for document is the construct validity and reliability of the data for research purposes (Webb *et al.*, 1981). Construct validity in relation to the documents would be concerned with the extent to which the results of applying the documents reflect the underlying theoretical concepts, the vulnerability indices. This would be “the extent to which the theoretical concepts have been successfully operationalised” (Polit and Hungler, 1991: 650).

A further strength of the use of documentary evidence is its non reactivity (Webb *et al.*, 1984: 114), the fact that records tend to be unbiased as the documents are collated usually for other purposes. As Bailey notes ‘the data collection methods itself generally does not change the data being collected’ (Bailey, 1982: 303). The researcher is not in a position to bias subjects and the authors of documents are unlikely to assume their future use in research studies. Another advantage is the fact that the researcher can obtain data without being present in the field.

The literature reveals the disadvantages and weaknesses of documentary data (Bailey, 1982; 1994; Treece and Treece, 1982; Stewart, 1984; Webb *et al.*, 1984; While 1987; Hakim, 1993). Documentary analysis is limited by the availability of material, missing or incomplete data, inaccuracies in material and inherent biases. Webb *et al.* identify the major sources of bias in documentary evidence when they describe the two problems of ‘selective deposit’ and ‘selective survival’ (Webb *et al.*, 1984: 114).

Table 1: Some Advantages and Disadvantages of using Documentary Method

| <b>Advantages</b>  | <b>Disadvantages</b>                                      |
|--|---|
| 1) Data readily available.   | 1) Limited by the availability of data.                   |
| 2) Inexpensive and economical form of data.                        | 2) Inaccuracies in original material.                     |
| 3) Save time.  | 3) Bias - ‘selective deposit’.                            |
| 4) ‘Non-reactivity’ - records unbiased by data collection process. | 4) Bias – ‘selective survival’ - missing/incomplete data. |
| 5) Researcher does not have to be present during data collection.  | 5) Total document or part of document?                    |
| 6) Useful for hypothesis / problem formulation.                    | 6) Data studied out of context.                           |
|  | 7) Preparation before analysis.                           |

Source: Appleton and Cowley (1997), *Journal of Advance Nursing*, 25, 1008-1017.

As Bailey notes, “many documents provide an incomplete account to the researcher who has had no

prior experience with or knowledge of the events ...” (Bailey, 1982: 305). The content of a document might be judged to be appropriate if a literature review has been undertaken which informs and supports its content (Grimshaw and Russell, 1993). However, these methods demonstrate a number of strengths and weaknesses. So, these methods are used only if and when the strengths outweigh the weaknesses. Denscombe (1998: 169) states they generally provide:

a source of data, which is permanent and available in a form that can be checked by others. The data are open to public scrutiny.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

To gain knowledge about a research problem, McGrath (1982) argues that there is no one best methodological research strategy. Fielding and Fielding (1986: 27) believed that qualitative work can uphold quantitative work in “providing theoretical framework, validating survey data, and interpreting statistical relationships” The strengths and weaknesses of the documentary method available were also revealed. The most common mistake is to think of documentary records “as ready to use research data whereas they usually require more preparation, care and effort than an equivalent analysis of a research data set” (Hakim 1993: 1141). Despite these criticisms, this approach is particularly useful when the researcher is faced with the task of analyzing a variety of documents which have no common format and which appear to be being developed without sufficient empirical evidence (Appleton and Cowley 1997). Internal validity, and the limited application of external validity and reliability, was explored. Documentary evidence can provide the researcher with a wealth of rich and detailed information which is unbiased by the data collection process (Appleton and Cowley 1997). This paper has described the processes which the researcher undertook when developing a method for data analysis of social research. The conclusions that can be drawn from this discussion of documentary methodology is that, in this instance, the methods selected and approaches taken are robust, rigorous, appropriate and have produced valid and useful data, and therefore confirm the value of different research contexts and their implications by doing any research.

The main purpose of this paper was merely to introduce documentary research method to those who may not be familiar or just skeptical, 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, documentary research method requires rigorous adherence to research ethics. It is important to mention that quality control formula of handling documentary sources do exist and must be adhered to. However, these dangers are no more pronounced in documentary research method than in other research methods. Every method of inquiry has its strength and weakness. It applies to documentary research method as any other research methods. There is no one particular 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 a method’s appropriateness. Documentary research method should be utilized by social scientists with full confidence that it is also a respected scientific method. It can not be overemphasized, however, that the weaknesses and strengths of various research methods are subjects of ongoing debates, and no one can pretend to have risen above the fray of these debates.

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