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Course of Study: Qualitative Social Science Research Methods

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10
DOCUMENTS

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CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- understand how you can analyse blogs, emails, official documents, lonely hearts advertisements and other texts
- treat documents as re-presentations of reality rather than as simply true or false
- learn about comparative key-word analysis
- analyse organisational documents and documents produced in everyday life (e.g. emails, diaries)
- analyse how people use categorisation devices to make sense of documents.

Having a separate chapter on 'documents' may look a little artificial. After all, to treat an interview as a narrative (see Section 5.4) can mean looking for the same **textual** features as researchers working with printed material. Indeed, the mere act of transcription of an interview turns it into a written **text**.

To make things clearer, in this chapter, I use 'document' to identify data consisting of words and/or images which have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher as happens in an interview or focus group. For presentational purposes, the chapter will focus on written texts such as blogs, emails or documents produced by organisations. The analysis of images will be discussed in Chapter 12.

Written texts and interviews have one more thing in common. Both underline the *linguistic* character of much qualitative data. Even if our aim is to search for supposedly 'external' realities in our data (e.g. class, gender, power), our raw material is inevitably the words written in documents or spoken by interview respondents. As Table 10.1 shows, texts are marvellous data for even novice researchers to analyse.

TABLE 10.1 The advantages of textual data

1. *Richness*: Close analysis of written texts reveals presentational subtleties and skills.
2. *Relevance and effect*: Texts influence how we see the world and the people in it and how we act – think of advertisements and CVs!
3. *Naturally occurring*: Texts document what participants are actually doing in the world – without being dependent on being asked by researchers.
4. *Availability*: Texts are usually readily accessible and not always dependent on access or ethical constraints. Because they may be quickly gathered, they encourage us to begin early data analysis.

Yet British and American social scientists have never been entirely confident about analysing written texts. Perhaps, in (what the French call) the 'Anglo-Saxon' cultures, words seem too ephemeral and insubstantial to be the subject of scientific analysis. It might seem better, then, to leave textual analysis to literary critics and to concentrate on definite social phenomena, like actions and the structures in which they are implicated.

This uncertain attitude to language is also reflected in the way in which quantitative researchers sometimes begin with fairly arbitrary but measurable definitions of their '**variables**'. The classic model is Durkheim's analysis of suicide which offers a 'conclusive' definition of the phenomenon in its first few pages and then rushes off to investigate it in these terms. As Atkinson (1978) has pointed out, this method rules out entirely any analysis of the very social processes through which 'suicide' is socially defined – particularly in the context of death certificates or of coroners' investigations.

Even in qualitative research, documents are sometimes only important as 'background material' for the 'real' analysis. Where documents are analysed, they are often presented as 'official' or 'common-sense' versions of social phenomena, to be undercut by the underlying social phenomena apparently found in the qualitative researcher's analysis of their interviewees' stories. The model is: the documents claim X, but we can show that Y is the case. According to this approach, documents are to be used as a *resource* for social scientists in order to get a better overall picture of how a social institution operates.

The problem with this position is that, in some respects, it replicates how ordinary participants in society use documents. Think, for instance, what happens when an insurance company decides whether to pay out on a claim for accidental damage to the contents of a house. In order to make a decision, insurance assessors will then examine documents like the householder's claim form and any accompanying builders' estimates. In doing so, the documents will be treated as a resource in order to establish the facts of the case.

By contrast, **constructionist** qualitative researchers are not specifically interested in working out what 'really' happened (in this example, we can safely leave that to the insurance assessors who are likely to be more expert in this field than we can ever be!). Our concern is rather with how such documents are assembled and evaluated.

Table 10.2 implies that constructionists are interested in documents as topics but not as resources (for further discussion of this issue in textual analysis, see Noaks and Wincup, 2004: 107–10).

TABLE 10.2 Constructionist research questions

- Documents, as other forms of data, do not speak for themselves, but must be made to speak by the analyst.
- This means that we must determine *who* the participating actors are, *how* they go about constructing or contesting the aspect of reality we are interested in, what the interpretive *content* of their activities and claims are, and what documentary *venues* for identifying these processes we might consult.
- Although constructionists do not ultimately evaluate texts in terms of their truth-value, they address truth-related issues such as (1) how particular biases push reality constructions in distinct directions, (2) which particular aspects of reality, if any, are subject to conflicting interpretations (or, in the absence of conflict, which are generally agreed upon), and (3) where the sources of interpretive divergence are located (e.g. in collective interests, in documentary conventions, or in the setting in which documents are produced).

Source: adapted from Linders (2008: 469)

The following case study shows how we can ask these kinds of questions about Internet blogs.

CASE STUDY

Studying 'Livejournal', a Weblog

Nicholas Hookway chose weblogs as his research data. He points out (Hookway, 2008) that weblogs, or 'blogs' as they are more commonly known,

> refer to a website which contains a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author. Blogs are characterized by instant text/graphic publishing, an archiving system organized by date and a feedback mechanism in which readers can 'comment' on specific posts. Blogs are

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typically housed by software programs that enable users of low technical competence to present attractive and regularly updated online material.

LiveJournal became [my] main data source. LiveJournal was deemed to be the most appropriate because it had the following features: (1) user-friendly interface; (2) systematic search engine which enabled identification of blogs by location (country, state, city) and age; (3) a sizeable share of the blog market in Australia and (4) a reputation as a site purely for online diaries

The online diaries of LiveJournal vary greatly in degrees of self-reflection and analysis. At one end of the 'self-reflection continuum' are purely descriptive blogs, which non-reflexively recount the events of the day, from what the blogger has eaten for breakfast to who they have seen that day.

At the other end of the continuum, are highly confessional and self-analytical blogs in which bloggers make sense of their identity and relationships with others. For my purposes, I trawled for the latter style of blog as they were more likely to be of a morally reflective nature. The following quotations illustrate these two extremes:

32-year-old male: Things i've done recently: been to ikea, been to my local furniture shop, been to ikea again, been to ikea yes i know, ... again ... bought a rug, bought a lamp, bought a bigger lamp ... dug my lawn up, re-sown lawn, bought some shredded bark ... walked along the beach, moved the shelving unit from the lounge to the kitchen, paid for my flight, cut my hair ... had a performance review at work, asked for a pay rise, got laid, filed a years worth of bill ... thats all for now.

36-year-old male: I wish i had the magic to give Janine the life i stole from her. of all the people i've hurt in my life, it's her that i feel most dreadful about. she put so much trust and faith in me ... and i really loved her. i still do. yet i screwed her over and tore that wonderful heart in two. if only i had some way to make it so i'd never happened to her life ... if i could just patch up my era [sic] with a big sander bandaid ... so that it had been him that she'd met and not me. admittedly, i'd lose a part of my life that means a lot to me ... but i'd really rather never to have hurt her. and no matter how sorry i am, and how deeply i feel the grief, the apologies i give her can never unhurt her. (2008: 102–3)

Hookway says that the first questions he is asked when he tells people that he is using blogs as a data source are: 'How trustworthy are the expressions of self that bloggers provide? How do you know what bloggers are telling you is true? They could be an elaborate fiction' (2008: 97).

This is his answer to such questions:

> **While I do not – and cannot believe that I can definitely answer this question – what I can do instead is animate a series of questions that are worth considering in response to *this* question. The first question is 'does it really matter?' Even if bloggers do not tell the 'truth', these 'fabrications' still tell us something about the manner in which specific social and cultural ideas such as morality are *constructed*. Here issues of 'truth' are not really at stake as the emphasis is on how the constitutive elements of blogs work to produce 'particular effects'. (2008: 97, my emphasis).**

EXERCISE 10.1

1. What features seem to differentiate the blogs of the two males in their thirties provided by Hookway?
2. Attempt to use any one data analysis method discussed in this book (e.g. content analysis, narrative analysis or membership categorisation device analysis) on these extracts. What further features can you see?

Hookway underlines the point that, from a constructionist viewpoint, documents such as blogs are properly used as a topic but *not* as a resource. However, this is by no means always the case, even in qualitative research. Take a further example. In the UK, academic disciplines in higher education are subjected to external scrutiny and inspection of their research. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) is a system of peer review of every academic department's national and international reputation for high-quality research. As part of this exercise, every four or five years, each academic department prepares a long and detailed statement of its research achievements.

Of course, what might be called the 'politics' of this process is deeply fascinating to academics. For instance, how do departments present themselves to the world and what influences the judgements of their peers?

Because of my interest in these matters, I recently attended a presentation of some research on this very topic. The research data consisted of interviews with members of several departments as well as the documents these departments had submitted for the RAE. Yet the paper I heard dealt only with what these academics said when interviewed about this topic. When I asked about the written material, I was told this was only being used as 'background' material.

Here we see how qualitative researchers can sometimes privilege the accounts people give of themselves over data drawn from what they actually do (when not being pestered by an interviewer's questions). Yet this is not the only way to proceed. A constructionist way of looking at documents from the RAE is demonstrated in the case study below.

CASE STUDY

Claiming Academic Distinction

Below is part of the document submitted by the Cardiff University Education Department for the 2001 RAE (cited by Atkinson and Coffey, 2011: 81).

Educational research at Cardiff has for some time adopted an explicit analytical perspective that views education as a 'cradle-to-grave' process, within which schooling constitutes only one, albeit very important, part. Learning is seen as taking place in a variety of social contexts; in schools, colleges and universities certainly, but also within homes, work-places and wider community settings. The impacts of educational change are understood not simply within the educational system itself, but also in relation to other elements of the social structure,

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such as families, labour markets and political and cultural institutions. This approach necessitates situating educational research within a strong social scientific framework, which fosters the development of interdisciplinary work. This counters any tendencies for educational research to be both intellectually isolated and dominated by its predominantly teacher education environment.

> It also facilitates contribution to the improvement of policy and practice in an era of increasingly 'joined-up' government and collaborative initiatives between professional disciplines.
>
> The creation of the School of Social Sciences has boosted capacity to deliver this ambitious research agenda. The School brings together almost 100 research-active staff in education, sociology, social policy, social work and criminology.

Atkinson and Coffey (2011: 81–4) indicate three lines of enquiry which help us to look at this document as a topic:

1. How the use of terms like 'cradle to grave', learning taking place in a 'variety of contexts' and 'interdisciplinarity' invites the reader to see what is *distinctive* about this department.
2. How these and other terms (e.g. 'a strong social scientific framework', 'capacity to deliver' and 'research-active staff') serve as linguistic building blocks which will be familiar to the audience of academic assessors who will read this document.
3. How the document draws upon the genre of other such documents and is constructed in terms recognisably appropriate to a situation in which claims are being evaluated by peers.

By raising these issues, we recognise that this document:

> is not a transparent description ... This is not because the author(s) set out to deceive in some way. The issue here is not about honesty, or even about accuracy, in any simple sense. It reflects the extent to which documentary realities constitute distinctive levels of representation, with some degrees of autonomy from other social constructions. (Atkinson and Coffey, 2011: 84).

Analysing material like this RAE document shows that qualitative researchers are quite wrong to neglect textual data.

TIP

There is one obvious trap in analysing documents. Just as we may be tempted to treat interview responses as true or false depictions of inner 'experience', so we may scan texts in terms of their degree of correspondence to 'reality' (i.e. are they 'true' or 'false'?). If this tempted you when reading the last case study, remember that this is the way that the RAE assessors themselves will have read the Cardiff document. By contrast, the role of document researchers is not to criticise or to assess particular texts in terms of apparently 'objective' standards. It is rather to analyse how they work to achieve particular effects – to identify the elements used and the functions these play.

10.1 Four ways of analysing documents

Three commonly used ways of analysing texts are: **content analysis** (discussed in Sections 5.2 and 7.2.1); **thematic analysis** (discussed in Section 8.2.2); and **narrative analysis** (discussed in Section 5.4).

In this chapter, I will consider four more ways in which textual researchers have analysed how texts re-present reality. Each is set out below with a brief definition:

- *Comparative keyword analysis (CKA)*: CKA is based on corpus linguistics (Seale et al., 2006). This method uses the computational power of modern personal computers and WordSmith Tools software (www.lexically.net/wordsmith/), which supports the creation and comparison of lists of words appearing in different texts, to perform a conjoint 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' analysis of text. Hence it is a method that breaks free of the division between these forms of research that underlies much debate about qualitative secondary analysis, and indeed **methods** in general.
- *Constructionist analysis of organizational documents*: as we saw in Chapter 9, ethnographers seek to understand the organisation of social action in particular settings. Most ethnographic data are based on observation of what people are saying and doing (and of the territories in which this talk and action take place). However, in literate societies, written accounts are an important feature of many settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 128). Therefore, ethnographers must not neglect the way in which documents, tables and visual material like advertisements and cartoons (see Chapter 10) exemplify certain features of those settings. Notable attention has been paid to the common-sense practices involved in assembling and interpreting written records. Constructionist work has refused to reduce texts to a secondary status and has made an important contribution to our understanding of the everyday practices of organisations.
- *Constructionist analysis of documents of everyday life*: document-production is not confined to organisations. I show how we can analyse everyday texts like emails and diaries.
- *Ethnomethodology*: following Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodology attempts to understand 'folk' (ethno) methods (methodology) for organising the world. It locates these methods in the skills ('artful practices') through which people come to develop an understanding of each other and of social situations. Drawing on an important paper by Sacks (1974), a major focus of ethnomethodology has been on the skills we all use in producing and understanding descriptions – from a remark in a conversation to a newspaper headline. I will, therefore, conclude this chapter by an account of Sacks's concept of **membership categorisation**.

I now turn to a closer description of each of these three approaches.

10.2 Comparative keyword analysis (CKA)

CKA counts the frequencies with which participants use particular words. One of the disadvantages of the coding schemes used in other enterprises concerned with word counts, such as content analysis, is that, because they are based upon a given set of categories, they

furnish 'a powerful conceptual grid' (Atkinson, 1992: 459) from which it is difficult to escape. While this 'grid' is very helpful in organising the data analysis, it also deflects attention away from uncategorised activities (see my discussion of field notes in Section 5.2.6).

In part, Atkinson's critique vitiates the claims of many quantitative researchers who attempt to produce reliable evidence about a large **sample** of texts. The meat of the problem with content analysis (and its relatives) is not simply Atkinson's point about overlooked categories but how analysts usually simply trade off their tacit members' knowledge in coining and applying whatever categories they do use.

For instance, in a lecture given in the 1960s, Harvey Sacks compared the social psychologist Bales's (1950) tendency to produce immediate categories of 'interaction process' with the relatively long time taken by experienced physicians to read the output of electroencephalographs (EEGs). For Sacks, you should not 'categorize ... as it comes out' (1992, I: 28). Indeed, as we shall see in my later discussion of what Sacks called membership categorisation, our ability to categorise quickly is properly treated as a research topic rather than a research resource.

By contrast, in some qualitative research, small numbers of texts and documents may be analysed for a very different purpose. The aim is to understand the participants' categories and to see how these are used in concrete activities like telling stories (Propp, 1968; Sacks, 1974), assembling files (Cicourel, 1968; Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982) or describing 'family life' (Gubrium, 1992).

Although CKA appears similar to content analysis, its word counts are not based on researchers' categories. CKA has the advantage of rapidly identifying points of key difference in large bodies of text:

- Unlike content analysis, it removes the pre-existing preferences of the researcher from the initial identification of features of interest, as keywords are identified purely because of their relative frequency rather than that they catch the researcher's eye.
- Features can be identified that might otherwise go unnoticed in conventional content or thematic analysis (for instance, in the study that follows, unexpected features such as superlatives, or the focus of men on localised body regions were identified).

In this sense, CKA is a more purely inductive approach than conventional qualitative thematic analysis (see Section 7.2.2). As such, it fits other qualitative methods of data analysis such as **grounded theory** (see Section 3.4).

The following case study shows how Clive Seale used CKA to study gender differences in the content of a web forum for people with cancer.

CASE STUDY

Gender in a Cancer Web Forum

Web forums are a rich source of data about illness experience and gender differences. Forums and message boards provide online support, enabling individuals to post and respond to messages over time. CKA was used to compare the language of men and women with cancer in two popular Internet-based support groups for people with cancer. A complete retrieval (on 20 April 2005) was made of all current and archived postings

to the online forums/message boards of the two most popular UK-based breast and prostate cancer websites. Messages were converted into text files and grouped according to name of author. The content of messages was inspected to determine the gender of the author, whether the author was a person with cancer (PWC), a person investigating symptoms that they felt might be cancer, the relative or friend of a PWC, or some other type of person. Only postings by PWCs were analysed, comprising 12,757 posts and 1,629,370 words. Marked gender differences were evident. These differences followed linguistic and other behavioural patterns (such as social network differences) established in other contexts:

- Men used a somewhat greater number and range of key words concerning the disease and its actual and potential progression, such as 'spread', rate', 'enlarged', 'doubling' than did women (28 such words for men; 15 for women).
- Key words associated with research and the Internet featured more in men's than women's text, a difference not evident in the interview text. Thus men were frequently found citing other websites that contained information about aspects of cancer, reflected in the key words 'www', 'http', '.com', 'htm', '.org' and '.asp'. Women's key words involving Internet-related terms contained no such website references, being references to the forums themselves (e.g. '[chat] room' and 'forums'). While women's text contained no key words associated with research, men's contained four that were unambiguously categorised under this heading: 'study', 'data', funding' and 'median'. 'Cases' was also a key word in the men's text, though this word was 'split' in being categorised both under 'research' and 'people'.
- Women's forum postings orient much more towards the exchange of emotional support, including concern with the impact of illness on a wide range of other people. Women's use of superlatives as well as words referring to feelings indicate their enactment of greater emotional expressivity.
- Lifestyle key words differed between men and women on the web forums, with men being more concerned with 'wine', 'running', '[red] meat', 'cranberry [juice]', 'exercise', 'fitness', 'golf', 'drinking', 'intake' and in '[running a] mile'. Women's 'lifestyle' key words were 'birthday', 'party', 'organic', 'job', 'pay', 'chocolate' and 'Xmas'.
- Direct expressions of support and interpersonal greetings were present in the web forums. But their nature differed between men and women: women's expressions were effusive, with a higher emotional content ('love', [take] care, 'x', 'xx', 'hugs') whereas men's were more restrained ('regards', 'hello', 'welcome', [all the] best', 'regs' (regards), 'hi', 'bless [you]'). Additionally, the quantitative difference in words categorised as being about 'feelings' was, if anything, more extreme on the web forums than in the interviews (40 key words in women's web text, as opposed to 21 in their interview text). (Adapted from Seale, 2006, 2011)

Seale (2006) notes that CKA has potential for application in areas outside that of illness experience, for example in comparisons of the leadership styles of politicians (see, e.g., Charteris-Black, 2005). But Seale also identifies some disadvantages of CKA:

- It is suited to the detection of differences rather than similarities. It is possible that this leads to a greater sense of difference than is justified.

- Differences at the level of phrases or sentences may be missed. For example, journey metaphors are commonly used to describe cancer experience (Seale, 2002) and these may be differentiated by gender.
- Interactive and sequential features of communication (such as one speaker contradicting, praising or criticising another) may be missed. The detection of some of these features, though, can be assisted by concordance software, as has been shown by Skelton et al. (2002) who have used this to identify usage of metaphors in transcripts of medical consultations.

CASE STUDY

British Press Reports of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) used CKA to examine the discursive construction of refugees and asylum seekers (and to a lesser extent immigrants and migrants) in a 140-million-word corpus of UK press articles from 19 British newspapers published between 1996 and 2005. For example, they look at this report in the British tabloid *Daily Star*:

> MORE than 150 illegal immigrants are trying to sneak into the UK through the Channel Tunnel. Bosses say it's now time for an urgent crackdown by the British and French Governments. The daredevil refugees are risking their lives—and disrupting services for thousands of legitimate travellers. Eurotunnel finance director Richard Shireffs said hundreds of illegal immigrants were trying to creep through the tunnel or stow away on trucks. "It has been really getting quite serious for the last year. The immigrants are causing massive disruption to services. They are putting staff at risk and are a safety worry to themselves and to passengers. They try to walk through the tunnel, which has electrified rails. If we catch them they just turn round and try again." (*Daily Star*, 20 February 2001)

Note the terms 'illegal immigrants' and 'legitimate travellers' in this report. The researchers examine their corpus for the frequency distribution of a number of such expressions which indicate blatant negative bias: *illegal refugee(s)/asylumseeker(s)* and *bogus immigrant(s)/migrant(s)*, as well as their "positive" counterparts: *legal refugee(s)/asylum seeker(s)* and *genuine immigrant(s)/migrant(s)*. They find that the *Sun* was most likely to combine these terms, followed by other British tabloid newspapers. The *Sun* was ten times more likely to combine these terms than broadsheet newspapers

As they comment:

> Irrespective of the definition that one may operate on, none of these negative expressions makes sense. Also, their seemingly positive counterparts are equally nonsensical, and negatively biased, as they can only exist by virtue of their negative "opposites." In fact, their use prompted the Press Complaints Commission to issue a guidance note to newspaper editors informing them that "there can be no such thing in law as an 'illegal asylum seeker'" and asking them to refrain from the term's use. (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2008: 30)

TIP

Think long and hard before you categorise and code data. In particular:

- make sure your categories fit an appropriate model
- consider the relationship between your categories and those of the persons involved in producing your data.

10.3 Organisational documents

Constructionist who study documents are more concerned with the processes through which texts depict 'reality' rather than with whether such texts contain true or false statements. As Atkinson and Coffey put it:

> In paying due attention to such materials, however, one must be quite clear about what they can and cannot be used for. Documents are 'social facts', in that they are produced, shared and used in socially organised ways. They are not, however, transparent representations of organizational routines, decision-making processes, or professional diagnoses. They construct particular kinds of representations using their own conventions. (2004: 58)

The implications of this are clear:

> Documentary sources are not surrogates for other kinds of data. We cannot, for instance, learn through records alone how an organization actually operates day by day. Equally, we cannot treat records – however 'official' – as firm evidence of what they report ... This recognition or reservation does not mean that we should ignore or downgrade documentary data. On the contrary, our recognition of their existence as social facts (or constructions) alerts us to the necessity to treat them very seriously indeed. We have to approach documents for what they are and what they are used to accomplish. (2004: 58)

How can we study organisational documents 'for what they are'? Table 10.3, overleaf, provides some answers to this question.

Table 10.3 shows many interesting questions that can be asked about organisational documents. Some of these questions (e.g. how are documents read and for what purposes?) take us beyond Seale's concern with the internal structures of **narratives** and moves us towards a concern with the social contexts in which narratives are articulated. As Gubrium has argued:

> Much narrative analysis has centered on the internal organization of stories. Less attention has been paid to their production, distribution, and circulation in society. This requires that one step outside of narrative material itself and consider questions such as who produces particular kinds of stories, what interests publicize them, how do they gain popularity, where are they likely to be encountered, what are the consequences, and how are they challenged? ... I have found that the internal organization of stories, while important to understand in its own right, does not tell us very much about the relation of stories to the worlds in which they circulate. (2005: 525)

Gubrium reveals how his own research on dementia support groups in the United States (Gubrium, 1986) illustrates this very point:

> The Alzheimer's disease movement transformed, virtually overnight, the way professionals, families, the senile, and significant others narrated their relation to the aging brain and its associated cognitive functions. As the senile became victims of a disease, the aging enterprise – from the new National Institute of Aging to local caregivers – went into high gear to construct the associated social problems that became issues of national and international importance. It became evident that what was new and what was being affirmed were interwoven. (2005: 527)

TABLE 10.3 Questions to ask about documents

1. How are documents written?
2. How are they read?
3. Who writes them?
4. Who reads them?
5. For what purposes?
6. On what occasions?
7. With what outcomes?
8. What is recorded?
9. What is omitted?
10. What is taken for granted?
11. What does the writer seem to take for granted about the reader(s)?
12. What do readers need to know in order to make sense of them?

Source: Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 142–3)

Gubrium is concerned with spoken narratives (e.g. in support groups) as well as with written texts. Similarly, Prior (2011) has shown how medical staff at a cancer genetics clinic discuss their understanding of the degree to which a given patient is at risk of inheriting a certain type of cancer mutation by drawing upon documents such as referral letters and drawings of families' medical histories.

In this chapter, however, I will focus just upon the internal organisation of written texts. Such texts may include novels, newspapers and magazines, blogs, email messages and official documents. In this section, I will focus on organisational documents because they have been a fruitful area for ethnographic research. Subsequently, I will examine how newspapers, email messages and diaries have been analysed using other approaches.

I discuss below different kinds of documents, taken in the following order:

- files
- statistical records
- records of official proceedings
- documents about corporate social responsibility.

It should be stressed that this is not a hard and fast or an all-embracing list of every kind of document. It is organised in this way purely for ease of presentation. Nonetheless, the discussion that follows tries consistently to pursue the analytic issues involved in dealing with textual data. Although there are always practical problems which arise in data analysis and techniques that can offer assistance, methodological problems should never be reduced to merely practical issues and 'recipe' solutions.

TIP

Remember that people who generate and use such documents are concerned with how *accurately* they represent reality. Conversely, ethnographers are concerned with the *construction* or social organisation of documents, irrespective of whether they are accurate or inaccurate, true or biased.

10.3.1 Files

Like all documents, files are produced in particular circumstances for particular audiences. Files never speak for themselves. The document analyst seeks to understand both the format of the file (for instance, the categories used in blank printed sheets) and the processes associated with its completion.

Selection interviews provide a good example of a setting where an interaction is organised, at least in part, by reference to the categories to be found on some document that will later constitute a 'file'. For instance, a large British local government organisation used the following record of job-selection interviews with candidates in their final year at university (Silverman and Jones, 1976):

- name
- appearance
- acceptability
- confidence
- effort
- organisation
- motivation
- any other comments.

Following Hammersley and Atkinson's set of questions in Table 10.3, we can immediately ask about which items are represented on this list and which are omitted. For instance, the fact that 'appearance' and 'acceptability' are cited and located at the top of the list, while 'ability' is omitted, gives us clues about the culture of the organisation. So, 'successful candidates will be recognised in their preparedness to defer to "commonsense" and to the accumulated wisdom of their seniors; to "sell themselves" without implying that a university degree provides any more than a basis for further training' (Silverman and Jones, 1976: 31). Some of this is seen in the completed file of one (unsuccessful) applicant to whom we gave a fictitious name. This is set out in Table 10.4.

TABLE 10.4 A completed selection form

Name:	Chadwick
Appearance:	Tall, slim, spotty-faced, black hair, dirty grey suit
Acceptability:	Non-existent. Rather uncouth
Confidence:	Awful. Not at all sure of himself
Effort:	High
Organization:	Poor
Motivation:	None really that counts
Any other comments:	Reject

Source: Silverman and Jones (1976: 31–2)

It is tempting to treat such completed forms as providing the *causes* of selection decisions. However, two important points must be borne in mind before we rush to such a conclusion. First, such forms provide 'good reasons' for any selection decision. This means that we expect the elements of the form to 'fit' the decision recorded. For instance, we would be surprised if the 'reject' decision had been preceded by highly favourable comments about the candidate.

Thus the language of 'acceptability' provides a rhetoric through which selectors define the 'good sense' of their decision-making. It does not determine the outcome of the decision.

EXERCISE 10.2

The following is a completed selector's report using the same form as found in Table 10.4.

Name: Fortescue

Appearance: Tall, thin, straw-coloured hair. Neat and tidy

Acceptability: High. Pleasant, quite mature sensible man

Confidence: Very good. Not conceited but firm, put himself across very well

Effort: Excellent academic record

Organization: Excellent, both at school and university

Motivation: Keen on administration and very well informed on it. Has had considerable experience. Quite well informed about both organization and its functions generally.

Any other comments: Call for interview. First-rate.

1. What conclusions may be drawn from how the selector has completed this form (e.g. what sort of features does the selector find praiseworthy or not needing comment?).
2. Does the completed form help us in understanding why certain candidates are selected at this organisation? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. If you were told that this selector came to a different decision when played a tape recording of the same interview some months later, what would you make of this fact? What research questions could be asked now?

A telling example of this was provided when we played back tapes of selection interviews to selectors several months later without meeting the selectors' request to remind them of their decision. Predictably, on hearing the tapes, selectors often made a different decision than they had made at the time. Nevertheless, when told of their earlier decision, they were able to adjust their comments to take account of it. The 'acceptability' criterion (and its converse 'abrasiveness') thus served more as a means to **rewrite history** (Garfinkel, 1967) than as a determinant of a particular selection decision.

The second point is that the files themselves are not simple 'records' of events but are artfully constructed with a view to how they may be read. For instance, in a study of a promotion panel at the same organisation, I showed how the committee organised its discussion in a way which made its eventual decision appear to be sound. In particular, I identified a three-stage process:

1. Beginning with premises all can accept (e.g. 'facts' everyone can agree upon).
2. Appealing to rules in ways which make sense in the present context.
3. Reaching conclusions demonstrably grounded in the rules as applied to the facts. (Silverman, 1973)

In order to produce 'sound' decisions, committees attend to relevant background circumstances which shape how 'facts' are to be seen. For instance, in the case of one candidate who had not made much progress, the following was said.

Extract 10.1 [extracts adapted from Silverman and Jones, 1976: 157–8]

Chair: and, um, is no doubt handicapped in, you know, his career development by the fact that that Department suddenly ha, ha
?: yes, yes
Chair: came to an end and he was, had to be pitched forth somewhere

Even when the facts are assembled, they ask themselves further questions about what the facts 'really mean'. For instance:

Extract 10.2

May: He's been there a long while in this job has he not? Does he do it in exactly the same way as when he started?

Or again:

Extract 10.3

May: supposing he had people under his control who needed the softer form of encouragement (...) assistance rather than pushing and driving; could he handle that sort of situation?
?: Yes, and not only could he, but he has done
May: He has, ah good

Gubrium and Buckholdt's (1982) study of a US rehabilitation hospital shows that a concern to assemble *credible* files may be a common feature of organisational activities. The authors examine how hospital staff select, exchange and present information about the degree of physical disability and rehabilitation of patients and potential patients. Like reports of selection interviews, such descriptions are never context-free but are assembled or 'worked up' with reference to some audience: 'staff members work up descriptions of activities ... using their knowledge of audience relevance in organizing what they say and write' (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982: ix).

The case study below illustrates such 'working up' in the context of what the authors call 'third-party description'. This refers to descriptions assembled for insurers and government agencies rather than for patients or their families.

CASE STUDY

Third-Party Description at a Hospital

Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982) show that rehabilitation at a US hospital was paid for through government funds (via Medicare and Medicaid programmes) and insurance companies. An essential constraint, established by the US Congress in 1972, was a review agency called the Professional Standards Review Organization (PSRO). The PSRO looks at decision-making over patient intake and discharge with a view to limiting costs. For instance, the acceptable average stay for a rehabilitation patient had been calculated at 38 days.

A further constraint on the organisation of patient care was two rules of insurance companies. First, the hospital's charges would not be paid if a patient could not have rehabilitation because of additional medical problems (e.g. pneumonia). Second, if a patient's stay is very short, the insurance company may decide, retrospectively, that the patient should not have been admitted in the first place. These constraints shape how admissions are organised and how patient 'progress' is described.

Admissions staff have to make an initial decision about whether or not a potential patient is suitable for rehabilitation or needs other services involving chronic or acute care. A rule of thumb when considering whether a patient should be admitted is that the patient should be able to benefit from at least three hours of therapy per day. However, staff recognise that the files they are sent are not conclusive and may 'shade the truth'. For instance, another institution may wish to discharge the patient or the family may have exerted pressure for a transfer to the rehabilitation hospital. Consequently, admissions staff appeal to 'experience' and 'professional discretion' in working out what a potential patient's notes 'really mean'.

Appealing to these kinds of grounds, staff establish a basis for deciding what is 'really' meant by any file. Thus, in sorting out 'facts' from 'fancy', participants use a body of interpretive and rhetorical resources to define what will constitute 'reality' or 'the bottom line'.

Once a patient is admitted, the 'work-up' of descriptions continues. 'Progress Notes' are prepared at regular intervals and staff work at making them internally consistent and appropriate to the recommendation (just like selectors). For instance, staff talk about 'the need to make sure that the figures tell the right story' and regularly try out their accounts on colleagues by asking, 'How does that sound?'

The institutional interest is to show some sort of progress which will be sufficient to satisfy the funding agencies. Consequently, there is a pressure to identify simple problems where progress can readily be made and to seek patient statements which accord with the therapist's version of progress.

Gubrium and Buckholdt's work shows that hospital files can be treated as the outcome of a series of staff decisions grounded in the contingencies of their work. Similarly, Silverman and Jones reveal how records of selection interviews satisfy organisational conceptions of what is appropriate.

Both studies confirm that qualitative researchers are not primarily concerned with whether files are factually 'true' or 'false'. Instead, they focus on how such files reveal the practical decision-making of employees in the context of the constraints and contingencies of their work.

EXERCISE 10.3

In a discussion of how records are assembled on 'juvenile delinquents' in the US justice system, Cicourel (1968) considers the case of Linda, aged 13. Linda first came to the attention of the police when she reported that she had been kidnapped by four boys. She said that she had been coaxed away from a party by them and admitted that she had told them that she would get drunk and then have sexual intercourse with one of them. After stealing some alcohol, the boys took her to a club where they all got drunk and she had sex with the youngest boy. Although the boys sought to depict Linda as a 'slut', the police viewed Linda as an 'attractive' victim with no prior record. However, some weeks later, acting on information from Linda's parents, the police saw Linda in a drunken state and obtained an admission that she had had sex with ten boys. She was now charged as in danger of leading a lewd and immoral life. Extract 10.3 is from an interview between Linda (L) and a female probation officer (PO) after Linda's arrest:

PO: You're not pregnant?
L: No
PO: Have you used anything to prevent a pregnancy?
L: Once X (one of her boyfriends) used one of those things
PO: Did you ever feel scared about getting pregnant?
L: No, I was always trying to get even with my parents
PO: You sort of wanted to get even with them?
L: Yes. I always wanted to get even with other people. My mother gets mad at me. I love my father. I know that's what's wrong with me. I talk about this with my parents. I don't know why.

The PO's report suggests that Linda needs psychotherapy and suggests that she be institutionalised for three to six months' treatment.

1. How does the PO organise her questioning to support her eventual recommendation?
2. Is there any evidence that Linda is colluding with the PO in a particular interpretation of her past behaviour?

10.3.2 Statistical records

Until the 1960s, official statistics, like files, were treated as a more or less accurate representations of a stable reality. Of course, this did not mean that their **reliability** or **validity** were taken for granted. Particular statistics or measures were often found to be of dubious

scientific status. However, it tended to be assumed, in these cases, that such data or measures could always be improved.

The 1960s saw a massive shift of focus among sociologists as documented below:

- Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) showed how school statistics on educational performance depended upon the organised, practical judgements of school staff.
- Garfinkel revealed how coroners writing death certificates formulated accounts 'of how death really (for-all-practical-purposes) happened' (1967: 12). As Garfinkel noted, 'really' in these cases, referred, unavoidably, to common-sense understandings in the context of organisational contingencies.
- Sudnow (1968a) showed how hospital 'death' was recognised, attended to and disattended to by hospital staff.
- Sudnow (1968b) revealed that US criminal statistics depended, in part, on a socially organised process of 'plea bargaining' through which defendants were encouraged to plead guilty.

Now, of course, many of these processes had already been recognised by sociologists and demographers. The difference was that such processes were no longer viewed as 'problems' which distorted the validity or reliability of official statistics. Instead, they were now treated in their own right, not as distortions of the phenomena they ostensibly measured but as constitutive of those phenomena. In other words, inspired by these studies, many sociologists now treated such phenomena ('death', 'guilt, 'ability') as arising within the very record-keeping activity which was supposed passively to record them.

This shift of focus did not mean that demography, based on official statistics, suddenly became worthless. As Hindess (1973) showed, one can pay attention to the social context of statistical production and still make use of statistics for both practical and analytical purposes. So the work that developed out of the insights of the 1960s is properly seen as having taken a divergent but non-competitive path to the continuing studies based on the use of official statistics.

For instance, Prior (1987) follows Garfinkel by looking at how 'deaths' are investigated by coroners. Prior puts it this way:

> men are more likely to have their deaths investigated, and to have their deaths regarded as 'unnatural', than are women. The same is true of the middle class as against the working class, the married as against the unmarried, widowed or single, and the economically active as against the inactive. (1987: 368)

However, in the case of decisions to do a post-mortem (autopsy) after 'violent' deaths, Prior finds that the figures go in the other direction: manual workers and the single, widowed or divorced are more likely to have an autopsy than the middle class or married.

Prior suggests that coroners use their 'common-sense knowledge' to treat sudden and violent death as more suspicious among the former groups. Although autopsy is generally more common after a death defined as 'violent', Prior notes that, 'in its search for the origins of death, forensic pathology tends to reserve the scalpel as an investigatory instrument for distinct and specific segments of the population' (1987: 371).

The implication is that statistical tables about causes of death are themselves the outcome of a decision-making process which needs to be described (see also Prior, 2003, 2004). Consequently, for the qualitative researcher, statistics, like files, raise fundamental questions about the processes through which they are produced.

10.3.3 Official proceedings

Public or official records are not limited to statistical tables. A common feature of democracies is a massive documentation of official business covering legal proceedings, certain business meetings and the work of parliaments and parliamentary committees.

Such public records constitute a potential goldmine for sociological investigation. First, they are relevant to important issues – revealing how public and private agencies account for, and legitimate, their activities. Second, they are accessible; the field researcher does not have the problem, so common in observational work, of negotiating access.

Despite the potential of such work, it has been sadly neglected by field researchers. However, an important source of studies in this area has been provided by the journal *Discourse and Society*.

I will take just one example: a study of the 1973 Watergate Hearings in the US Congress. Molotch and Boden (1985) show how their work on the text of these hearings arises in the context of a debate about the nature of power. They are not concerned with explicit power battles or with the ability to set agendas. Instead, they are concerned with a 'third face of power': 'the ability to determine the very grounds of the interactions through which agendas are set and outcomes determined ... the struggle over the linguistic premises upon which the legitimacy of accounts will be judged' (1985: 273).

As they show, a problem resolved in all talk is that, while accounts are context-bound, a determinate account has 'somehow' to be achieved (see Garfinkel, 1967). Molotch and Boden apply this insight to the interrogation of President Nixon's counsel (John Dean) by a pro-Nixon senator (Senator Gurney). Dean had made public charges about the involvement of the White House in the Watergate 'cover-up'. Gurney's strategy is to define Dean as someone who avoids 'facts' and just relies upon 'impressions'. This is seen in the following extract:

Extract 10.4 [Molotch and Boden, 1985: 280, adapted]

(G = Sen. Gurney; D = John Dean)
[Transcription conventions are given in the Appendix]

G: Did you discuss any aspects of the Watergate at that meeting with the President? For example, did you tell him anything about (1.4) what Haldeman knew of or what Ehrlichman knew?
D: Well, given the- given the fact that he told me I've done a good job I assumed he had been very pleased with what ha- what had been going on...
G: Did you discuss what Magruder knew about Watergate and what involvement he had?
D: No, I didn't. I didn't get into any – I did not give him a report at that point in time
G: Did you discuss cover-up money money that was being raised and paid?
D: No, sir...
G: Well now how can you say that the President knew all about these things from a simple observation by him that Bob tells me you are doing a good job?

As Molotch and Boden show, Gurney's strategy is to insist on literal accounts of 'facts' not 'impressionistic' ones. Throughout Extract 10.4, for instance, Gurney demands that Dean state that he actually discussed the cover-up with Nixon. When Dean is unable to do this, Gurney imposes limits on Dean's ability to appeal to a context (Dean's 'assumptions') which might show that Dean's inferences were correct.

However, as Gurney knows, all accounts can be defeated by demonstrating that at some point, since they depend upon knowing the context, they are not 'really objective'. Hence: 'Demands for "just the facts", the simple answers, the forced-choice response, preclude the "whole story" that contains another's truth ... [consequently] Individuals can participate in their own demise through the interactional work they do' (1985: 285).

10.3.4 Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Many contemporary organisations pay attention to their relation to the wider community by generating documents to legitimate their activities. Examples are 'mission statements' and claims to 'social responsibility'. Brei and Böhm suggest CSR documents attend to two sets of claims:

- claims that a firm's financial performance depends on positive 'stakeholder management'; that is, successful cooperation with stakeholders and not just company shareholders
- more widely, the continuing commitment by businesses to contribute to economic development and, simultaneously, improve the quality of life of the workforce, their families, the community and society at large. (2014: 6–7)

Brei and Böhm comment that in recent years it has become an increasingly common marketing practice to connect the sale of consumer products to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, such as aid and development projects in so-called 'developing' countries. They cite the example of Volvic's pioneering '1L = 10L for Africa' campaign (2005–2010), which linked the sale of each litre of bottled water in 'developed' countries with the promise by Danone, Volvic's owner, to provide 10 litres of drinking water in Africa.

CASE STUDY

CSR and Bottled Water

Using **critical discourse analysis (CDA)**, Brei and Böhm show how Volvic was able to transform an ordinary commodity, bottled water, into a consumer activist brand through which consumers could take part in solving global social problems, such as the access to safe drinking water in 'developing' countries.

They collected 257 web pages, 129 pictures and 102 minutes of video material from Volvic/Danone, UNICEF and their partnering NGOs. As they put it:

> Volvic's marketing, advertising language, focused on persuasive messages that tried to create negative feelings of guilt and shock, associating them with contemporary concerns for aid, philanthropy, ethics, sustainability and development. But, despite such efforts, the core idea was always explicitly shown: buy Volvic! (2014: 17).

This campaign to link Volvic to quality of life in the Third World was not just designed to improve sales of bottled water but also to improve the company's image. As Brei and Böhm comment:

> The short-term goals of improving sales and responding to concrete consumer concerns about bottled water consumption only provide half the explanation for why Volvic engaged in this major cause-related marketing campaign. Equally important, in our view, are the long-term benefits of binding consumers to a 'good' brand by positioning it in a favorable web of discursive representations. That is, Volvic did not simply want to sell a utilitarian good, water, but an idea, a particular symbolic system of representation and discourse tightly connected to positive, altruistic images of improving the lives of underprivileged people in poor countries. This is probably why the word 'buy' was rarely used in the campaign. Instead, terms such as 'drink' and 'for Africa' were used much more frequently. This language de-emphasized the importance of the act of buying what some would argue is an unnecessary and environmentally damaging commodity, instead connecting what one has to do anyway (drinking) to a highly symbolic, ethical and meaningful act of doing something for 'other' people, who are perceived to be poor and in urgent need of help. (2014: 23).

Brei and Böhm's analysis shows the ways that CSR often operates to deflect ethical critiques, consolidate brand loyalty and corporate profits, and defuse political struggles around consumption. By doing so, they suggest that CSR forms part of a complex strategy deployed to legitimise particular brands and commodities. In this way CSR can be seen as playing an important role in the ideological make-up of contemporary consumer capitalism.

TIP

The journal *Discourse and Society* is an excellent source of articles examining how organisations work through the production of documents.

EXERCISE 10.4

Analyse the following extract from Enron's Ethical Code as a narrative (see Section 5.4) or as a set of membership categories (Section 10.4). Explain why Enron won prizes for this statement.

The material that follows can be found at: www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/crime/enrons-code-ethics

Principles of Human Rights

As a partner in the communities in which we operate, Enron believes it has a responsibility to conduct itself according to certain basic tenets of human behavior that transcend industries, cultures, economics, and local, regional and national boundaries.

And because we take this responsibility as an international employer and global corporate citizen seriously, we have developed the following principles on human rights.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Enron's Vision and Values are the platform upon which our human rights principles are built.

Vision

Enron's vision is to become the world's leading energy company – creating innovative and efficient energy solutions for growing economies and a better environment worldwide.

Values

Respect

We treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment. Ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance don't belong here.

Integrity

We work with customers and prospects openly, honestly and sincerely. When we say we will do something, we will do it; when we say we cannot or will not do something, then we won't do it.

Communication

We have an obligation to communicate. Here, we take the time to *talk* with one another ... and to listen. We believe that information is meant to move and that information moves people.

Excellence

We are satisfied with nothing less than the very best in everything we do. We will continue to raise the bar for everyone. The great fun here will be for all of us to discover just how good we can really be.

10.4 Documents of everyday life

So far we have been dealing with documents assembled within organisations. However, ethnographers have also shown how we can fruitfully examine textual material generated in more mundane settings. This is illustrated in my next two examples: diaries and Internet communication.

10.4.1 The Internet

It is now commonplace to remark that communication is increasingly mediated by information technology. Originally, telephone calls were a great impetus to research. Somehow,

without visual cues, people managed to communicate with each other. Researchers investigated how we create an orderly structure here with stable expectations of the rights and obligations of, for instance, 'caller' and 'called' (see Section 9.3).

More recently, as we saw with Hookway's blog data earlier in this chapter, the Internet has been a crucial medium of largely text-based communication. Dependent upon ethically appropriate access, this has opened up a whole new field for ethnographic investigation of textual data including home pages, chat rooms and email correspondence.

Markham (2004) has argued that three different frameworks can help illustrate how the Internet is typically conceptualised in qualitative research. These frameworks are presented in Table 10.5. They show the qualitative researcher might use or study the Internet as a context in itself or use it as a tool in a traditional study.

TABLE 10.5 Frameworks for conceptualising the Internet

- As a *medium for communication*, the Internet provides new channels for people to communicate with each other, new channels for researchers to communicate with participants and new venues for conducting research.
- As a *network of computers*, the Internet collapses physical distances between people, thus creating the potential for collectives and collaborations not heretofore available. This network extends the potential reach of the researcher to a more global scale. Understanding and utilising time and notions of space in creative ways can significantly augment research practice, particularly in terms of collecting information for study.
- As a *context of social construction*, the Internet is a unique discursive milieu that facilitates the researcher's ability to witness and analyse the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and communities, and the construction of social structures as these occur discursively.

Source: adapted from Markham (2004: 96–7)

The three frameworks shown in Table 10.5 can, as Markham shows, be collapsed into two different ways of analysing the Internet. The qualitative researcher can use it as a *resource* or can treat it as a *topic*, studying it as a social and technological context in itself.

TIP

Before you set out to gather new data using research instruments (such as interviews or **focus groups**), consider whether the kind of material you need is available on the Internet. If it is, not only will you save a lot of time but your data will be naturally occurring.

To give a taste of what such topicalising of the Internet can reveal, I will use a case study drawn from analysis of Internet discussion forums.

CASE STUDY

Racism or Prejudice

Goodman and Rowe (2014) studied the ways in which opposition towards Gypsies is debated, with particular regard to whether or not this opposition constitutes racism or prejudice towards a group shown to be vulnerable and subject to discrimination.

Three Internet discussion forums were studied:

- One arose following an article on the *Independent* newspaper's website, entitled 'No Blacks, no dogs, no Gypsies', which highlights the prejudicial treatment of Gypsies in the UK.
- A second forum followed an article on the website 'Foreigners in the UK', entitled 'Gypsy child thieves: controversy over BBC documentary', which responded to the BBC documentary *Gypsy Child Thieves* and argued that the documentary unfairly, and prejudicially, represented Gypsies.
- The third forum followed an article on the *Sun* newspaper's website, entitled 'Paradise lost to JCB gypsies', which described the local response to Gypsies laying the foundations for a permanent caravan site

They show that although contributors to these websites go to rhetorical lengths to dissociate themselves from being presented as racist, there is nevertheless an acceptance that opposition to Gypsies may constitute prejudice. This prejudice is presented as an inevitable and acceptable result of Gypsies' behaviour. This implies that there is a hierarchy of prejudices where only racism is deemed too extreme to acknowledge, while prejudice towards Gypsies is not denied but rather is presented as an inevitable outcome given the actions of Gypsies themselves.

This is seen in the posting below:

Extract 10.5 [Independent, kuma2000, 26 February 2010, 01.40pm]

1. I always find this politically correct bollocks to be annoying. The 'Travellers' who have
2. made my life hell in the past have been white like me and I have no idea where their
3. origin is. People hate them because they are a bunch of thieves who have a disregard to
4. other people and the law. Their visits around my previous homes and workplaces have
5. left children's playing fields and areas of natural beauty strewn with debris and waste
6. and local homes hit by a mini crimewave. Their colure or where they are from is
7. completely beside the point, there is no racism here.

Goodman and Rowe comment that

> the use of 'bollocks' to insinuate nonsense dramatises the remark, making it seem more striking and vivid. After making this initial claim, the writer goes on to give a personal account of the difficulties s/he has purportedly suffered at the hands of Travellers. It is noteworthy that the category 'Travellers' (line 1) is placed in quotation marks in a way that questions this description and potentially serves to present these people as illegitimate. Once again, Travellers are presented as problematic through an association with crime (lines 3, 4 and 6) ... The point about hatred is made by speaking on behalf of other, unspecified people (line 3), which is an interesting footing (Goffman, 1981) as it means that the writer doesn't have to align with feeling hatred her/himself. (2014: 39)

The next extract begins with a partial acceptance of the suggestion that opposition to Gypsies is prejudiced.

Extract 10.6 [Independent, kuma2000, 26 February 2010, 07.03pm]

1. Maybe it is prejudice. But its prejudice derived from experience not hearsay. But it is
2. NOT racism. That is throwing in a buzzword that is designed to provoke a reaction of
3. denial, you could do the same thing by saying 'all people who hate Travellers are
4. paedophiles' and get a similar immediate reaction. My multiple experiences of different
5. Traveller groups found them to be people who have a complete disregard for the people
6. around them. They expect us to provide free campsites for them and to pay to clean
7. up the filth and mess they leave around our houses and workplaces when they decide
8. to leave and to turn a blind eye to the things that go coincidentally go missing when
9. they are around.

Acceptance of the possibility of prejudice is signalled through the term 'maybe'. Goodman and Rowe remark:

> [this] is a hedging term that neither fully denies nor confirms that this is the case. However, the next sentence does concede that this opposition is caused by prejudice (signalled through the 'but'), which changes the meaning of the previous 'Maybe' to an acceptance. This prejudice is accounted for in a way that is designed to present the speaker as rational rather than bigoted, on the grounds of 'experience' (line 1), which is a difficult thing for others to argue against. What this means is that prejudice based on 'hearsay' (line 1) is irrational and wrong, whereas prejudice based on experience is understandable and acceptable. Interestingly, this statement is followed by an explicit denial that this opposition is racist, which is emphasised through the capitalisation of 'NOT' (line 2). (2014: 41)

EXERCISE 10.5

Select an Internet forum that interests you. To simplify analysis, limit your data to posts which total no more than 20 lines.

Now identify the identities invoked and the activities described in these messages..

10.4.2 Diaries

Diaries can be rich sources of data which detail how people make sense of their everyday lives. In contemporary society, handwritten diaries have almost entirely been replaced by the kind of weblogs discussed earlier in this chapter. Like organisational documents, blogs are **naturally occurring data** which vividly represent how people represent their activities and experiences.

Haldar and Wærdahl (2009) have mined some marvellous diary data from Norwegian and Chinese schools. Following Gubrium and Holstein (1987), they are interested in family life within a constructionist framework. As the following case study shows, 'teddy diaries' show how 'families need to be "displayed" as well as "done"' (2009: 1141).

CASE STUDY

Teddy Diaries

Norway has used 'teddy diaries' as a common tool to bridge the transition between family and school for pupils entering school for the very first year. A teddy carrying a diary is circulated between the children's homes and the school. The diary entries are written by the children and their parents. As Haldar and Wærdahl put it:

> The child is encouraged to be the author of the diary on behalf of the bear. Given the young age of the child, he/she naturally enlists the aid of adult family members in making the entries. Regardless of the actual author, the child or the bear are understood to be the voice of the story. Even if the adult members of the family do the actual writing, it is very likely that the content of the story is discussed with the child before it is written. After all, it is the child who is going to bring the story back to the classroom to talk about. The family representations in these books can thus be seen as a child-adult negotiated perspective on family life. (Haldar and Wærdahl, 2009: 1144)

The written stories from the teddy's experiences in the children's home are shared with the others in class, as well as with the school and the next families to receive the book. In other words, they are not produced for research, and usually not even initiated by researchers. In this sense, they are naturally occurring data.

Teddy diaries provide rich data on how family life is represented:

> The diaries allow for multiple authors to create stories of the teddy bear's home visits. Likewise, the voice of the narrator in the diary can be the product of many voices. In this way, the singular voices often weakening family studies can be avoided (Gubrium and Holstein, 1987). For each visit by the teddy, it is the child, the child together with the parents or the parents alone that make an entry telling the other children in the class what the bear has been up to while it has been away from the classroom. (2009: 1143-4)

To provide comparative data, ten schools in the centre of Beijing, China, were asked to introduce a teddy and a diary for their first-grade school classes. Around 250 teddy diaries were collected from each country. For each teddy-visit, the child, the child with its parents or its parents make an entry in the book telling the other children in class what the teddy has been up to while gone from the classroom. The diary usually has a greeting page with a greeting from the teddy written by the teacher, sometimes with a photo of the teddy. The greeting page would be written in the teddy's voice and say something like:

> Hello, my name is Bobby and I am a special friend of this class. This is my book. I will be very happy if you write and draw in my book about the things you and I experience together. I am sure that your Mama or your Papa can help you.

> Warm regards,
>
> Bobby

Here is a child entry from one of the Chinese books:

> October 28th 2006 [Sunny].
>
> In the morning, I and [Bangbang] slept/took a bath together, brushed our teeth, washed our faces, played together. I did homework together with [Bangbang].
>
> Before noon, I and [Bangbang] [skipped rope] and slept/took a nap.
>
> In the afternoon, I and [Bangbang] went outside to play/went to do outdoors activities. Together we jumped high, jumped long, spun around. Bangbang and I played quite happily together. Di. (Chinese entry 2.1)

This is a typical child entry, and it is fair to say that they look trivial and maybe insignificant at first sight. But remember that this is not just any list of daily activities. It is a list of the activities worth mentioning, an image of what an ideal day should look like. In this entry Bangbang gets to take part in the hygienic routines, in doing homework and in play activities. The togetherness in play is also described as happy. Among other possible interpretations, the entry shows a balance between duty and play, and also gives a sense of the expectations of how these tasks are to be performed. This is not just a repetition of 'what we did today', but a list of 'what we did today for others to read and judge'.

One could read the Chinese children's brushing of teeth and keen reference to homework as explicit norms. These things are mentioned because they are of true and explicit value. Explicit norms build character and carry tradition. In the Norwegian sample, washing is not mentioned but the other relations and activities mentioned can also be read as narratives of what are considered good things to do or good places to be. Being with your grandparents, outdoor life, baking wheat buns and trips to the cabin or feeding ducks are all considered good and healthy activities for children.

In sum, teddy diaries provide answers to questions that researchers never think to ask and provide exactly the sort of data about the construction of identities that a constructionist approach demands.

The issue of identity takes us full circle back to my earlier critique of other approaches to textual analysis. My problem with content analysis was that its numerical outcomes were achieved through counting in terms of analysts' categories. While such categories can be well defined, they have an unknown relation to how participants themselves categorise (and count) (see Section 5.2).

By contrast, narrative analysis does claim to access the active story-telling formats of participants (see Section 5.4). However, it sometimes reverts once again to an analyst's set of categories (e.g. hero/villain; leader/led).

Such forms of textual analysis leave themselves open to exactly the same charge that can be made about some observational research. This is why Sacks made the following comment about much sociological research, whether qualitative or quantitative: 'All the sociology we read is unanalytic, in the sense that they simply put some

category in. They may make sense to us in doing that, but they're doing it simply as *another Member*' (1992, I: 41–2, my emphasis).

Fortunately, the kind of document analysis we have just been discussing does attempt to identify the categories used by ordinary participants ('members'). In my view, however, ethnography lacks a well-developed model to describe these categories. To find such a model, we must turn to ethnomethodology and, more particularly, Sacks's account of membership categorisation devices.

10.5 Ethnomethodology: membership categorisation analysis

As we saw in Chapter 3, the work of the sociologist Harvey Sacks has raised some vital methodological questions for ethnographers and anyone else attempting to construct the social sciences as a set of 'observational' disciplines. Sacks puts the issue succinctly:

> Suppose you're an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation – his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have the(se) kinds of systematic problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterize or identify that person at hand. (1992, I: 467–8)

The classic statement of this problem is found in Moerman's (1974) self-critical treatment of his attempt to do a standard ethnography upon a Thai tribe. But the message has also been taken by intelligent ethnographers who, like Gubrium (1988), are centrally concerned with the descriptive process (both Moerman and Gubrium's work is discussed in Section 2.2.2).

Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply 'by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards' (1992, I: 468). Instead, our aim should be to try to understand when and how members do descriptions, seeking thereby to describe the apparatus through which members' descriptions are properly produced.

Consider this description in which the identities of the parties are concealed:

> The X cried. The Y picked it up.

Why is it that we are likely to hear the X as, say, a baby but not a teacher? Furthermore, given that we hear X as a baby, why are we tempted to hear Y as an adult (possibly as the baby's mother) (Sacks, 1992, I: 248–9)?

In fact, Sacks looks at the first two sentences of a story written by a child: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.' Why do we hear the 'mommy' as the mother of this 'baby' (I: 236)? Why do we hear the baby's cries as the 'reason' why the mommy picks him up?

Not only are we likely to hear the story this way, but we hear it as 'a possible description' without having observed the circumstances which it characterises. Sacks asks: 'Is it some kind of magic? One of my tasks is going to be to construct an apparatus for that fact to occur. That is, how we come to hear it in that fashion' (I: 236).

No magic lies behind such observations. Instead: 'What one ought to seek is to build an apparatus which will provide for how it is that any activities, which members do in such a way as to be recognizable as such to members, are done, and done recognizably' (1992, I: 236).

Returning to the way we read the children's story, Sacks observes that our reading is informed by the way we infer that the categories 'baby' and 'mommy' come from a collection of such categories which we call 'family' (I: 238). While the 'family' connection can include many categories (i.e. not just 'baby' and mommy' but also 'daddy', 'daughter', 'grandmother', etc.), some categories are or can be built as two-set collections (e.g. gender, race) (I: 47–8).

Of course, not any set of categories will be heard as a collection. As Sacks says: 'We only talk about a collection when the categories that compose it are categories that members do in fact use together or collect together, as "male" and "female" go together' (I: 238). Sacks notes that, as here, younger children's stories may have just one collection of categories – the 'family'. Young children apply this collection to virtually everyone, for example parents' friends become called 'aunt' and 'uncle' (I: 368).

However, for children, like any population, there are always at least two collections of categories available (1972b: 32). This means that young children can at least choose between, say, 'auntie' and 'woman' as a way of categorising a female.

Of course, one only has to read accounts of the 'same' event in two different newspapers to realise the large number of categories that can be used to describe it. For instance, as feminists have pointed out, women, but not men, tend to be identified by their marital status, number of children, hair colour and even chest measurement. Such identifications, while intelligible, carry massive implications for the sense we attach to people and their behaviour. Compare, for example:

> A: Shapely, blonde, mother of 5
> B: 32-year old teacher.

Both descriptions may 'accurately' describe different aspects of the same person. But each constitutes very definitely how we are to view that person (for instance, in A, largely in terms of certain ways of constructing gender).

Each identity is heard as a category from some collection of categories. For instance, in A and B above, we hear 'mother' as a category from the collection 'family'. By contrast, 'teacher' is heard as located in a collection of 'occupation'. The implication is that to choose one category from a collection excludes someone being identified with some other category, from the same collection.

Sacks calls such a collection a 'membership categorisation device' (or MCD). This device consists of a collection of categories (e.g. baby, mommy, father = family; male, female = gender) and some rules about how to apply these categories. Sacks gives the definition of an MCD as follows:

> Membership categorization device: 'any collection of membership categories, containing at least a category, which may be applied to some population containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application'. (1972b: 332)

What are these 'rules of application' to which Sacks refers? First, returning to the child's story, we can note that the characters are described by single categories ('baby', 'mommy'). So we are not told, as we might be, about, say, the baby's age or gender or the mommy's

occupation or even hair colour. And this did not cause us a problem when we first saw 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up.'

The intelligibility of single category descriptions gives us what Sacks calls the 'Economy Rule' as defined below:

> *The Economy Rule*: 'a single category from any membership categorization device can be referentially adequate'. (I: 246)

Of course, single category descriptions are not confined to children's stories – sometimes categories like 'man', 'nurse' or 'pop star' are entirely referentially adequate. Nonetheless, the Economy Rule gives us a very interesting way of addressing how children's socialisation may occur. First, children seem to learn single names ('mommy', 'daddy'). Then they learn how such single categories fit into collections ('family') and come to understand various combinatorial tasks (e.g. man = daddy or uncle). So, even at this early stage of their lives, say before they are two years old, children have already learned 'what in principle adequate reference consists of' (1972b: 35) and, in that sense, entered into society/ been 'socialised'.

A second rule of application of MCDs suggests that once one category from a given collection has been used to categorise one population **member**, then other categories from the same collection may be used on other members of the population. Sacks refers to this as the 'Consistency Rule'. It is formally defined below:

> *The Consistency Rule*: 'If some population of persons is being categorized, and if some category from a device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection *may* be used to categorize further members of the population'. (1972b: 33, my emphasis; see also 1992, I: 225, 238–9 and 246)

The import of the Consistency Rule may be seen in a simple example. If we use an abusive term about someone else, we know that a term from the same collection can be used on us. Hence one of the reasons we may avoid name-calling is to avoid the development of this kind of slanging-match.

However, any category can belong in more than one collection. For instance, as Sacks points out, 'baby' can belong to the collection 'stage of life' ('baby', 'child', 'teenager', adult') as well as the 'family' collection (I: 239). 'Baby' also used to be a term of endearment heard in Hollywood movies; here it belonged to a different collection ('romance'?).

Sacks suggests a 'hearing rule' (I: 239) or 'Consistency Rule Corollary' (I: 248) which provides a way for members to resolve such ambiguities. When a speaker uses two or more categories to describe at least two members of a population and it is possible to hear the categories as belonging to the same collection, we hear them that way. That is why, in the story with which Sacks begins, we hear 'baby' and 'mommy' in relation to the collection 'family'.

> *Consistency Rule Corollary*: 'If two or more categories are used to categorize two or more Members to some population, and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then hear them that way'. (I: 247)

The Consistency Rule and its Corollary have explained why we hear 'mommy' and 'baby' as part of the same 'family' collection but it remains to be seen 'how "the mommy" is heard as "the mommy of the baby"' (I: 247). The answer stems from the way in which

'the family' is one of a series of collections that may be heard as constituting a 'team', that is as part of the same 'side'. In this respect, 'mommy' and 'baby' belong together in the same way as, say, 'defender' and 'striker' in a football team. Sacks suggests that one of the central properties of teams is what he calls 'Duplicative Organization':

> *Duplicative Organization*: means that we treat any 'set of categories as defining a unit, and place members of the population into cases of the unit. If a population is so treated and is then counted, one counts not numbers of daddies, numbers of mommies, and numbers of babies but numbers of families – numbers of "whole families", numbers of "families without fathers", etc.' (1972b: 334; see also 1992, I: 225, 240, and 247–8)

Duplicative Organization helps us in seeing that 'mommy' and 'baby' are likely to be heard as part of the same 'unit'. But a further rule suggests that this is not just likely but required (in the sense that if you saw things differently then your seeing would appear to other Members to be 'odd'). This rule is the 'Hearers' Maxim for Duplicative Organization' as set out below:

> *The Hearers' Maxim for Duplicative Organization*: 'If some population has been categorized by use of categories from some device whose collection has the "duplicative organization" property, and a Member is presented with a categorized population which can be heard as co-incumbents of a case of that device's unit, then hear it that way.' (I: 248)

Given that the MCD 'family' is duplicatively organised, the Hearer's Maxim shows us how we come to hear 'the mommy' as not anyone's 'mommy' but as 'the mommy of this baby' in the children's story (I: 248).

However, 'mommy' and 'baby' are not only more than co-incumbents of a team but a pair of positions with mutual rights and obligations (e.g. the baby's right to be fed but, perhaps, obligation not to cry all the time). In this respect, mothers and babies are like husband–wife, boyfriend–girlfriend and even neighbour–neighbour. Each party has certain standardised rights and obligations; each party can properly expect help from the other.

Sacks refers to such groupings as standardised relational pairs (SRPs). SRPs, in turn, are found in 'Collection R' which is defined below:

> *Collection R*: a collection of paired relational categories 'that constitutes a locus for a set of rights and obligations concerning the activity of giving help'. (1972b: 37)

One aspect of the relevance of such paired **relational** categories is that they make observable the absence of the second part of any such pair. In this way, we come to observe that a player in a sporting team is 'missing' or, more seriously, treat non-incumbency of, say, a spouse as being a criterion of suicidalness (see the discussion of suicide at the beginning of this chapter and Sacks, 1972b: 38–40).

Such absences reveal what Sacks calls the 'Programmatic Relevance' of Collection R:

> *Programmatic Relevance*: 'if R is relevant, then the non-incumbency of any of its pair positions is an observable, i.e. can be proposedly a fact'. (1972b: 38)

Just as Collection R consists of pairs of categories who are supposed to offer each other help, there are also categories of 'experts' who offer specialised help with particular 'troubles'. When paired with some 'troubled' person (e.g. a client), they constitute what Sacks refers to as 'Collection K'.

Collection K: 'a collection constructed by reference to special distributions of knowledge existing about how to deal with some trouble'. (1972b: 37)

Collection R and its Programmatic Relevance allow someone to analyse their situation as, say, properly 'suicidal'. Collection K then allows such a person to know who can offer dispassionate 'advice'.

Collection K implies something about the proper activities of particular categories of people like professionals and clients. This helps to resolve one further issue in our reading of the children's story. Why do we have no trouble with the description: 'The baby cried. The mommy picked it up'? To put it more pointedly: why might it look odd if the story read: 'The mommy cried. The baby picked it up'?

The answer, of course, lies in the way in which many kinds of activities are commonsensically associated with certain membership categories. So, if we know what someone's identity is, we can work out the kind of activities in which they might engage. Similarly, by identifying a person's activity (say, 'crying'), we provide for what their social identity is likely to be (in this case, a 'baby').

Sacks refers to activities which imply identities as 'Category-Bound Activities'. His definition is set out below:

Category-Bound Activities (CBAs): 'many activities are taken by Members to be done by some particular or several particular categories of Members where the categories are categories from membership categorization devices'. (I: 249)

CBAs explain why, if the story had read 'The X cried. The Y picked it up', we might have guessed that X was a baby and Y was a mommy. Crying, after all, is something that babies do and picking up (at least in the possibly sexist 1960s) is something that mothers did. Of course, as Sacks points out, no description is ever completely unambiguous. For instance, 'crying' is not confined to 'babies' and an adult can themselves sometimes be called a 'baby' (I: 584).

Members employ their understandings of CBAs to recognise and to resolve such ambiguities. Above all, everyday understanding is based on the assumption that, as Sacks puts it, 'they (i.e. some category of people) do such things' (I: 179). As Sacks shows, through this means, you can do 'racism' while avoiding the use of explicitly ethnic or religious categories.

Moreover, what we know about CBAs allows us to construct what he calls 'a search procedure' when some problematic occurrence appears to have occurred. For instance, Sacks shows how, at the end of 1963, the claim that the assassin of President Kennedy was a 'communist' clinched the case for many people – after all assassination of capitalist leaders appears to be category bound to the category 'communist infiltrator'. In this way, CBAs allow us to 'tie' certain activities to particular categories. As Sacks puts it: 'if somebody knows an activity has been done, and there is a category to which it is bound, they can damn well propose that it's been done by such a one who is a member of that category' (I: 180). So, even though we know people other than babies do cry, we are unlikely to say 'the baby cried' if we mean 'the baby of the family'. In this way, the selection of a category makes many potential ambiguities 'non-arisable' (I: 585).

However, on the face of it, when we observe an activity, it could be ambiguous to find the right category to which the activity is bound. Take the case of a 'confession'. As Sacks points out, we know that both Catholics and criminals often 'confess'. Have we observed a Catholic or a criminal?

We see at once that, in everyday life, there is rarely such an ambiguity. For, of course, we all know that a Catholic confessional 'looks' very different from a criminal confessing (I: 584–5). So, if we read about a 'confession', the surrounding features of the story (e.g. as part of a 'criminal' story) will tell us immediately how we are to understand it. And all this happens without any sense of problem or ambiguity.

For instance, we do not have any problem of seeing a struggle between two adults (a man and a woman) and a younger person as a 'family fight' (I: 90–1). Ambiguity about this interpretation is much more likely to appear when parties subsequently review an incident. So in a legal context, what unambiguously appeared to be merely a 'family fight' can be transformed into a 'kidnap'. At the time of the incident, however, witnesses properly treat things as 'normal' partly because they assume it is not your job but the police's to note crimes (I: 92). Thus we invoke our knowledge of CBAs and SRPs as ways of resolving incongruity.

Returning to our children's story, 'baby' is also a member of a class which Sacks calls 'Positioned Categories' (i.e. baby ... adolescent ... adult) in which the next category is heard as 'higher' than the preceding one. This creates the possibility of praise or complaint by using a higher or lower position to refer to some activity. So an adolescent can be described as acting in a very 'adult' way or as acting just like a 'baby':

Positioned Categories: a collection has positioned categories where one member can be said to be higher or lower than another (e.g. baby ... adolescent ... adult). (I: 585)

The fact that activities are category bound also allows us to praise or complain about 'absent' activities. For instance, a baby that does not cry where it might (say at a christening) can be properly praised, while an older child that does not say 'thank you' when passed some food or given a present is properly blamed (I: 585).

In both these cases, certain activities become remarkable because of the way their presence or absence is tied to a stage of life. Stage of life is important not only, say, around the dinner table, but also in the compilation of official statistics. As Sacks points out, statisticians, like the rest of us, know that, for instance, being unmarried or unemployed are not usually descriptors appropriate to school-age children (I: 68).

As we have seen, because of the category-bound character of many activities, we can establish negative moral assessments of people by describing their behaviour in terms of performing or avoiding activities inappropriate to their social identity. For instance, it may be acceptable for a parent to 'punish' a child, but it will usually be unacceptable for a child to 'punish' a parent.

Notice that, in both cases, 'punish' serves as a powerful picture of an activity which could be described in innumerable ways. Social life, unlike foreign films, does not come with subtitles attached. Consequently, how we define an activity is morally constitutive of it. So if, like other sociologists, Sacks is talking here about norms, unlike them (and members) he is not treating norms as descriptions of the causes of action. Instead, he is concerned with how 'viewers use norms to provide some of the orderliness, and proper orderliness, of the activities they observe' (1972b: 39).

How viewers use norms takes us back to the way we read 'the baby cried'. For instance, babies can be boys or girls. Why, then, might not a 'cry' be reported as, say, 'the boy cried'? The answer, says Sacks, lies in a 'Viewer's Maxim' for CBAs which is set out below:

> *Viewer's Maxim*: 'If a Member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one sees it being done by a member of a category to which the activity is *bound*, see it that way'. (I: 259, my emphasis)

Through the Viewer's Maxim, we can understand why we would see a 'baby' rather than 'a boy' crying, since a 'baby' is a category that we treat as having 'a special relevance for formulating an identification of its doer' (I: 259).

Finally, why do we treat it as unremarkable that the story reports as the next activity: 'The mommy picked it up'? As we have already seen, part of the answer lies in the way in which we hear 'mommy' and 'baby' as part of a 'team'. In this respect, 'Duplicative Organization' is relevant here.

In addition, however, picking a baby up is likely to be heard as a norm such that where a baby cries, a mother properly picks it up. In this regard, we have, therefore, a 'Second Viewer's Maxim' as defined below:

> *Second Viewer's Maxim*: 'If one sees a pair of actions which can be related by the operation of a norm that provides for the second given the first, where the doers can be seen as members of the categories the norm provides as proper for that pair of actions, then (a) see that the doers are such Members, and (b) see the second as done in conformity with the norm'. (I: 260)

Through using this Second Viewer's Maxim, viewers provide for the 'proper orderliness of the activities they observe' in at least two ways:

1. by explaining the occurrence of one activity given the occurrence of the other; and
2. by explaining the sequential order of the two activities (first one, then the other). (I: 260)

Until now, you may have got the impression that because membership categorisation allows people to make sense of people and events, Sacks is implying that everything always proceeds smoothly in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. First, we have already seen how categorisation can just as easily serve to maintain racism as to preserve harmony. Second, the use of quite innocent knowledge of CBAs can unintentionally allow horrible crimes to be committed.

For instance, in the case of the young British boys who murdered the child Jamie Bulger, witnesses who had seen Jamie holding the hands of his two assassins reported that they had assumed they were watching a child with his two elder brothers. Similarly, as Sacks notes, people working in organisations, faced with possibly life-threatening events, do not take remedial action themselves but report what they have seen to the next person up the hierarchy (I: 64). This is because in organisations categories are organised into hierarchies. So people assume that they need to refer to another category to confirm some act or to take some action.

LINK

The International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis:

www.iiemca.org

Ethno/CA news

Most readers, I suspect, will by now be pretty sated with **concepts**. I therefore want to slow down the pace somewhat and offer two illustrations and applications of these concepts here. The first comes from one of Sacks's own lectures.

10.5.1 A newspaper headline

Father and Daughter in Snow Ordeal

This headline appeared in the inside pages of *The Times*. I want to examine how we can understand the sense it makes using MCD analysis. A schematic reading of this headline, using MCD analysis, is set out in Table 10.6.

TABLE 10.6 'Father and daughter in snow ordeal'

Concept	Explanation	Headline
Category	Any person can be labelled in many 'correct' ways	Persons later described as 'supermarket manager' and 'student'
Membership categorisation device (MCD)	Categories are seen as grouped together in collections	MCD = 'family'
Economy Rule	A single category *may* be sufficient to describe a person	Single categories are used here
Consistency Rule	If one person is identified from a collection, then a next person *may* be identified from the same collection	'Daughter' is from same MCD as 'father'
Duplicative organisation	When categories can be heard as a 'team' hear them that way	'Daughter' is the daughter of *this* 'father'
Category-bound activities (CBAs)	Activities may be heard as 'tied' to certain categories	'Snow ordeal' is *not* heard as tied to 'father-daughter' categories; this is why the story is newsworthy
Standardised relational pairs (SRPs)	Pairs of categories are linked together in standardised, routine ways	'Father' and 'daughter' assumed to be linked together through 'caring' and 'support'; how could 'snow ordeal' have happened?

EXERCISE 10.6

I want to develop Table 10.6 by asking you a series of questions. In answering them, you will see the skill involved in constructing headlines which encourage us to read the story beneath the headline.

First, note that the persons are described as 'father' and 'daughter'. Given that people can be described in many 'correct' ways, what are the implications of choosing these categories? For instance, the story below the headline tells us that the 'father' is also a 'supermarket manager' and the 'daughter' is a 'school student':

- How would we have interpreted the story if the headline had read as follows? 'Supermarket Manager and School Student in Snow Ordeal'
- Given that headline, would we have felt like reading the rest of the story and, if so, why?
- What are the implications of the chosen categories being derived from the MCD 'family'? And what does it tell us about the saliency of this MCD, that single categories will do (remember that the Economy Rule is not obligatory)?
- Why do we not doubt that this is not any daughter but the daughter of this 'father'?
- Why is 'snow ordeal' newsworthy in the context of the MCD 'family'?

10.5.2 A 'lonely hearts' advertisement

Move over Nigella. Funky F.26, a whizz with spaghetti and meatballs & music-mad WLTM M, 25-33, with a wicked SOH. (*Guardian*, 22 October 2005)

Like the headline, this advertisement was chosen at random in order to show how MCD analysis can fruitfully analyse any material of this kind. Now I take it that, while successful newspaper headlines make you want to read the story, the success of a 'lonely hearts' advertisement is judged by the number of appropriate responses that it elicits.

Let us begin by focusing upon the category 'Nigella' to see what function it serves. Sacks points out that when you just use a first name like this, the hearer is expected to use it to find some person that they already know (1992, II: 445). This means that the reader of this ad must try to work out a person whom they know in common with a stranger. The implication is that Nigella can only be a celebrity – somebody whom everybody knows.

Nigella is a pretty unusual name and the only celebrity who uses it is Nigella Lawson (a British TV cook). In this context, to say 'move over Nigella' will be heard to claim something like 'I can do anything better than her'. However, this claim cuts two ways. Although it might suggest a very attractive person (with more spark than a celebrity), like any such claim about oneself it can be heard as tied to the category of 'boasting'.

Now note how the advertiser next refers to herself as 'a whizz with spaghetti and meatballs'. By choosing such an everyday meal, she works to downplay the (implied) category of 'boasting'. Now she is claiming neither great cooking skills nor, by implication, celebrity.

So the reference to spaghetti serves as a category-modifier which retrospectively recasts the reference to Nigella as ironic. As a consequence, we now hear the advertiser not to be claiming celebrity status but simply to be someone with an ironic sense of humour. Moreover, this explains and justifies her search for a man with 'a wicked SOH'.

EXERCISE 10.7

Here is another lonely hearts advertisement:

> Good looking (so I am told!) Englishman, 35, tall, professional, seeks very attractive lady, preferably non-smoker, to wine, dine and make her smile. Age unimportant. Photo appreciated.

1. What does this advertisement imply about the advertiser or the 'lady' sought even though it does not tell us these things directly?
2. Show how we can see this by examining how this advertisement uses the following devices:
   - MCDs
   - Economy Rule
   - Consistency Rule
   - Category-Bound Activities
   - Category-Modifiers
   - Standardised Relational Pairs
   - Positioned Categories.

10.5.3 Summary

The examples that we have just been considering demonstrate that membership categories are far from being the inert classificatory instruments to be found, say, in the more rigid forms of content analysis.

By contrast, MCDs are local members' devices, actively employed by speakers and hearers to formulate and reformulate the meanings of activities and identities. Unlike more formalistic accounts of action found in content analysis and some versions of narrative analysis, Sacks shows us the nitty-gritty mechanisms through which we construct moral universes 'involving appropriate kinds of action and particular actors with motives, desires, feelings, aspirations and sense of justice' (J. Gubrium, personal correspondence).

TIP

How to Choose (the Right) Documents

The determination of which kinds of documents to choose as data sources is first and foremost linked to the research questions asked ... The selection and or/sampling of document types, as well as the selection of subsets or sub-segments of those documents, go

(Continued)

(Continued)

hand in hand with the evaluation of how, by whom, for what purpose and with what audience in mind particular documents are produced, all of which impact the content and structure of documents in various ways ... For constructionists, one of the most prominent challenges is to ensure that our findings are not artifacts of the particular documents we have chosen to interrogate (unless that is a purpose of the study).

How to Select Document Types

Given that different document types constrain the information contained in them in more or less distinct ways, it is important to consider the ramifications of such variations for our ability to reconstruct a process of social construction ... analyses of the news (or other documents) should ideally be based in an understanding of how the news (or other documents) are produced ... As a distinct document type, institutionally generated data, especially in the form of statistics, warrant special consideration.

How to Select Documents within a Type

The strategy most commonly used among constructionists is *targeted sampling* of documents pertaining to the emergence, persistence and/or evolution of a particular social construction. The challenges involved in drawing a good targeted sample are linked to the constructionist aim of placing the analytical spotlight on a particular process of social construction in conjunction with the requirement that the findings are not predetermined by the particular selection of documents and the conclusions not foregone in the sense that we pick only documents that fit. *Anything-you-can-lay-your-hands-on* is sometimes the only possible strategy for locating enough information pertaining to research involving marginal, obscure, delicate, or clandestine topics, either because the pool of data itself is so scarce as to make any example an important find (e.g., authentic slave narratives) or because a particular content is only rarely addressed directly in the documents we are searching (e.g., interviews with clients in news reports about prostitution).

When do you have enough data?

As a general methodological rule of thumb for projects that do not rely on a pre-determined sample size, which few constructionist projects do, we have enough data when we learn nothing new by adding additional items. (Drawn from Linders, 2008: 469–76)

10.6 Conclusion

I hope that, by the end of this chapter, the reader is not feeling punch-drunk! We have indeed covered an enormous amount of ground.

The wide scope of the chapter arose for two reasons. First, I am convinced that qualitative sociologists make too little of the potentialities of texts as rich data. Second, I am also convinced that there are several powerful ways of analysing such data.

Three threads have run through my presentation of different ways to analyse such textual data (for a development of this argument, see Silverman, 2013a: 51–7).

The importance of a clear analytic approach

Successful textual studies recognise the value of working with a clearly defined approach. Having chosen your approach (e.g. narrative analysis, ethnography or Sacks's analysis of membership categorisations), treat it as a 'tool box' providing a set of concepts and methods to select your data and to illuminate your analysis.

The relevance of theory to textual analysis

The distinctive contribution that qualitative research can make is by utilising its theoretical resources in the deep analysis of small bodies of publicly shareable data. This means that, unlike much quantitative research, including content analysis, we are not satisfied with a simple coding of data. Instead, we have to work to show how the (theoretically defined) elements we have identified are assembled or mutually laminated.

The importance of detailed data analysis

Like many other qualitative approaches, textual analysis depends upon very detailed data analysis. To make such analysis effective, it is imperative to have a limited body of data with which to work. So, while it may be useful initially to explore different kinds of data (e.g. newspaper reports, scientific textbooks, magazine advice pages), this should usually only be done to establish the data set with which you can most effectively work. Having chosen your data set, you should limit your material further by only taking a few texts or parts of texts (e.g. headlines).

In the course of this chapter, we have rapidly moved between several complex and apparently different **theories** – all the way from narrative analysis to ethnomethodology. However, if the reader has grasped at least one useful way of thinking about textual analysis, then I will have achieved my purpose.

KEY POINTS

- Texts provide rich, naturally occurring, accessible data which have real effects in the world.
- I considered three ways in which textual researchers have analysed how texts represent reality: comparative key-word analysis, ethnography and membership categorisation device analysis
- From a constructionist perspective, the role of textual researchers is not to criticise or to assess particular texts in terms of apparently 'objective' standards. It is rather to treat them as representations and to analyse their effects.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the advantages of working with textual data?
2. Can documents be analysed in the same way as interviews?
3. What questions do constructionists ask about documents?
4. What does the topic/resource distinction imply?
5. How does comparative key-word analysis analyse documents? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
6. List *three* research questions that you might ask about one kind of Internet data (e.g. blogs, emails, company reports).
7. Select any lonely heart advertisement (in a newspaper or on the Internet). Show how you can analyse it in terms of members' categorisations.
8. On what basis can you select documents to study?
9. When do you know that you have enough material?

RECOMMENDED READING

The most useful texts on document analysis are: Alasuutari (1995), Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and Czarniawska (1998, 2003). More advanced texts are Atkinson (1990) and the chapters on documents in my edited collection *Qualitative Research* (2011). Linders (2008) offers a useful chapter-length discussion of how constructionists use documents.

My book *Harvey Sacks: Social Science and Conversation Analysis* (1998) is an introduction to the ideas of Harvey Sacks (Chapters 5 and 7 deal with MCD analysis). Volume 1 of Sacks's *Lectures on Conversation* (1992) is a marvellous resource. See especially his discussions of Category-Bound Activities (I: 179–81, Lecture 8, Fall 1965; I: 301–2, Lecture 4, Spring 1966; I: 333–40, Lecture 8, Spring 1966; I: 568–96, Lectures 11–14, Spring 1967). See also: the Consistency Rule (I: 326–7, Lecture 7, Spring 1966); the hotrodders example (I: 169–74; Lecture 7, Fall 1965; I: 396–403); the navy pilot example (I: 205–22; Research Notes, Fall 1965; I: 306–7, Lecture 5, Spring 1966); the child's story (I: 223–31; Appendix A and B, Fall 1965; I: 236–66; Lectures 1–2(R), Spring 1966).