Documents in a Field of Action: Using Documents to Address Research Questions about
Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations

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Keywords: Document analysis, nonprofit and voluntary organizations, qualitative methodology

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Abstract

In this article we show the potential of using documents to answer research questions pertinent to nonprofit and voluntary sector studies. We start by introducing what the methodological literature has to say about how documents are employed as a data source, along with their strengths and weaknesses. Then, we review 178 articles in three main nonprofit journals to analyze how researchers have used documents to understand nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations. We also provide a case example of document analysis to reveal the processes involved in using documents as a source of evidence. We emphasize that situating documents in a field of action invites researchers to pay attention not only to the information they contain but also what their production and consumption reveal about organizational life. Finally, we conclude with the implications and considerations for using documents in nonprofit and voluntary sector research.

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the use of documents to answer research questions about nonprofit and voluntary organizations. According to John Scott, “a document is an artefact which has as its central feature an inscribed text” (Scott 1990, p.5). For third sector scholars, documents created by and about these organizations offer important and unique sources of evidence for answering a range of research questions, including questions about the formalization and institutionalization processes so central to understanding the sector. We discuss how researchers can use the information in documents to confirm findings from other sources and to deepen understanding of a particular case, but we also highlight how researchers can examine the way documents are produced and consumed to glean additional insights about these organizations. This article begins by providing an overview of documents, including how to collect and analyze them. We then turn to research in three journals, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Voluntas*, and *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, to consider how nonprofit scholars have used documents to answer their questions. Finally, we describe one of our own studies to illustrate the potential of documents to address research questions about nonprofit organizations and to illuminate the experience of using documents for this purpose. We conclude by discussing the possibilities and considerations for researchers interested in using documents to answer questions about nonprofit and voluntary organizations.

OVERVIEW OF DOCUMENTS

Documents are one of three primary categories of data used in qualitative research, along with interviews and observation. They are distinctive from these other sources of data in that they are created outside of the research process and do not reflect the researcher’s point of view. Scholars have used a range of different types of documents to address their research questions. For example, they have used passenger manifests to examine migration patterns (McCulloch, 2004); environmental impact statements to trace how technical analysis and political interests interact to frame issues (Ginger, 2006); and personalized gravestones to understand changing attitudes toward death (Prior, 2003). Documents belong to a broader category of what are referred to as artifacts (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011), which are material objects created by humans, such as tools, art, and clothing. Documents, unlike these other artifacts, have text as their central feature.

Against this backdrop, we briefly outline basic considerations for using documents. First, the researcher must identify and select the documents. How does one identify the universe of possible documents and select within this universe? Here access and representativeness become central concerns (Prior, 2003; Rapley & Rees, 2018). Researchers have easier access to public documents e.g., annual reports, websites, etc. But even when researchers have access to internal documents, such as client records and meeting minutes, they may not have access to less formal documents that staff produce to do their work. For example, in our research staff have described producing documents as work-arounds to formal systems, such as using separate spreadsheets to track clients because formal systems are too cumbersome and keeping separate notes about clients to remember more detail than is logged into formal case notes. Consequently, the issue of

access makes it difficult to identify the universe of relevant documents and select purposefully from them. This also makes it difficult to gauge the representativeness of the documents that are obtained, but it does not negate what can be learned from them.

This brings us to our second point. Once the researcher has collected documents, they must make decisions about analysis. Depending on the research question, different aspects of the documents may be significant including: (1) what the documents say (i.e., content or information); (2) what they look like (i.e., language and structure); (3) their purpose (i.e., public or private use, solicited or unsolicited) (Coffey, 2014; Hodder, 1998); and (4) how they are related to one another (i.e., intertextuality between documents) (Atkinson & Coffey, 2011; Coffey, 2014). Lindsay Prior describes four analytical approaches to documents that we find particularly useful (2008, p. 825). The first approach treats documents as sources of information about the social phenomenon, for example when documents are used to verify what interviewees reported. However, treating documents as fixed containers of facts or information limits their potential as a source of evidence about social life.

Prior outlines three additional approaches, encouraging researchers to situate documents in a “field of action” by examining how documents are produced and consumed, and how they shape interactions. For example, when looking at document production researchers might consider the number of authors involved, what was edited out, and why. Prior gives the example of Anne Frank’s diary, a seemingly sole authored document and the editing done by her father. Researchers might consider how documents are consumed, and how it may differ from what the authors intended. For example, a newspaper article may be written to inform readers about a public health issue such as high levels of lead in low-income communities, but it may motivate community activists to organize a public protest. Researchers can also consider how documents shape interaction, such as how intake forms structure the conversation between staff and clients.

With this in mind, the analytical approach one brings to documents will be shaped by the questions one asks and by the type of document. For example, if a researcher is interested in how an organization has responded to George Floyd’s murder and the Movement for Black Lives, she might examine the organization’s production of a formal policy on racial justice by process tracing, consulting meeting minutes, emails, etc. But if the researcher were also looking at how the organization communicated its position via social media feeds, then she might employ an automated content analysis, given the sheer volume of material. We provide examples of different analytical approaches to documents in our review of published studies below.

Finally, researchers need to consider the strengths and weaknesses of documents as a data source. Documents have several strengths. First, because documents are a pre-existing data source, researchers can collect and analyze documents with less intrusion compared to what is required for observations and interviews. Because they are not generated by the researcher they can become an important check on what the researcher may capture through interviews or observation. Finally, because documents are created at specific points in time, they can provide unique information on historical decisions, operating procedures or concerns in the organizations that may not be evident from interviews and observations. In this way documents can reveal social contexts, processes and relationships in distinct and important ways.

However, documents have weaknesses too. For example, the documents available to scholars may be selective, both in form and content. Apart from retention bias, documents themselves often have a purpose, and may present only a partial account of events, circumstances, or phenomena. To this point, the documents often reflect the perspectives of social or political elites rather than lay people or marginalized groups. In other words,

documents contain silences. In this respect looking at documents in a field of action, particularly considering their production, can draw attention to such silences.

If researchers decide to use documents in their research, Scott (1990) suggests using the following criteria when evaluating their quality: (1) Authenticity: Is the document original? Although authenticity may seem more of a concern for historians, this question is one that researchers using contemporary documents may consider as well. (2) Credibility: How accurate and sincere is the document? Here researchers might consider the circumstances under which the document was created, and its purpose. (3) Representativeness: How representative or typical is the document? Again, this question may be more important in some types of research than in others. And finally, (4) Meaning: Is the document clear and comprehensible? We now turn to how nonprofit scholars have used documents to answer their research questions.

USING DOCUMENTS: A Review of Published Studies

In this section we describe how scholars studying nonprofits have used documents to answer questions about the third sector. This description is based on our review of articles published in *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* and *Voluntas* that contained the following key terms anywhere in the article: “document* analysis”, “content analysis” and “text* analysis”. After screening out articles that were not empirical or did not analyze written text, we identified a final corpus of 178 articles, or 3.3% of all the articles on the three journal websites. We then analyzed the articles to discover what types of documents were employed and how they are used to answer research questions. For a complete description of the search methodology, see Appendix A. For the list of articles analyzed, see Appendix B. Throughout our description below we provide examples to illustrate the depth and range of ways that nonprofit scholars use documents.

The Varieties and Volume of Documents

The studies reviewed used a wide variety of documents, ranging from email correspondence, case notes and meeting minutes to tweets, political manifestos, and student journals. About a third of the documents came from external sources, such as government agencies and news media. The remainder were generated by the organization, for either internal use or outward-facing communication. The most frequently used organizational documents related to marketing and public relations, such as websites, press releases, or promotional materials, and organizational impact and performance, such as annual reports and financial statements.

Overall, the preponderance of documents used were publicly available, which is not surprising given that one of the major challenges of document analysis is accessibility. Even so, some scholars obtained documents from organizational archives (Bar-nir & Gal, 2011; Lee, 2011; Shaul Bar Nissim, 2019a, 2019b; Svensson & Gallo, 2018), and a study by De Waele & Hustinx (2019) had unlimited access to one organization’s internal computer drives. In a few cases, the documents were solicited by the researchers. For example, Hansen (2020) analyzed donor appeal letters prepared by professional fundraisers in response to a writing prompt.

Documents may be fixed in form and content, but some scholars drew their documentary evidence from Web 2.0 platforms like Weibo, Facebook, and Twitter, which promote user-generated content and interaction. These social media sources may also offer a corrective to the claim that documents amplify official versions of events, or are biased in favor of elite or privileged voices. For example, Zhou & Han (2019) analyzed online texts from the websites,

blog posts and forum discussions of informal organizations to understand how grassroots philanthropy is defined by the participants themselves.

The number of actual documents consulted for each article ranged from a handful to 5,000 archival documents (Shaul Bar Nissim, 2019a, 2019b), over 100,000 Facebook posts (Lam & Nie, 2020) and nearly one million donor transactions (Tian et al., 2021). The vast number of available documents raises issues of selection, which some studies addressed by using random sampling (Chandra & Shang, 2017; Guo & Saxton, 2014); specifying a given time period (Campbell & Lambright, 2019); identifying critical events, such as mass protests (Zhang et al., 2020); or choosing documents from one organization related to a single issue of interest, such as workfare volunteering (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019). Scholars have also been able to deal with the magnitude of documents through creative uses of technology.

How Documents Were Used and Analyzed

Some scholars find documents useful as background or context for a subject of inquiry, or as a secondary source for purposes of triangulation. We found that to be the case in about one-fifth of the articles we analyzed. For example, Gasman (2010) gathered information from IRS Forms 990 and websites to bolster survey responses from African American family foundations. In other situations scholars may draw upon documents as the only, or clearly the primary, source of inquiry. For example, Meyer et al. (2013) examined annual reports of a sample of organizations to learn how legitimating accounts changed over a decade and a half. About a third of the articles fell into this primary source category.

In the remainder, or nearly half of the articles, documents played a prominent role as sources of data along with information gathered using other methods, such as interviews, surveys or participant observation. This complementary role for documents as a source of data is often recommended as a way to take advantages of their strengths while compensating for their weaknesses. For example, in a study analyzing the tensions arising from dual consumer/provider roles in an HIV prevention organization, Bonell and Hilton drew on data from both interviews and documents, asserting:

“While the analysis of documents was useful in developing an understanding of process and relations, interviews were more useful in exploring motivations and values. [...] We assumed that neither documents nor interviews provided a straightforward account of what happened but, that in examining both, a coherent, though unavoidably partial, interpretation of events was possible...” (2002, p. 33)

There was substantial variation in the ways that documents were analyzed and the tools that were employed. More than half the articles said they used content analysis, about 40% used document analysis and less than 10% used text analysis, but we found that those terms could not accurately portray the wide variations in their approaches to documentary evidence. In addition to traditional historical approaches to archival records, scholars used a range of quantitative, qualitative and interpretive methods. To name a few, Fyall et al. (2018) used an automated dictionary method to analyze mission statements; Meyer et al. (2013) employed semantic analysis for their study of legitimating accounts in annual reports; and De Waele & Hustinx (2019) used a “governmentality-inspired discourse analysis” on documents related to workfare volunteering.

In addition, some articles gave consideration to authorship or technical production of documents, how they are used or function in mediating social relationships, and how they might become actors in their own right. In terms of document authorship and production, Sinclair and Bolt (2013) examined whether a third sector regulatory body incorporated recommendations they had solicited from stakeholders in their final accounting standards. Therkelsen (2011) brought attention to document consumption by analyzing the ways in which *New York Times* articles about charitable need may act upon readers, eliciting behavioral responses (such as making a donation) that reduce cognitive dissonance. Finally, Appe provided an illustration of documents as agents in her study of how NGO networks use collective texts, such as policy analyses and accountability reports, “to diffuse and adapt managerial practices” (2016, p. 187).

It is difficult to do justice to the unique characteristics of all of the studies reviewed, but we have tried to capture the wide variation in types of documents and analytic approaches used, and to feature articles that illustrate the strengths of documents in voluntary sector research. We turn now to our own experience of using documents.

USING DOCUMENTS: A CASE EXAMPLE

There are some things that just don't seem to be an easy fit for the [logic] model... So that's why part of the concern is that if you strictly follow the outcome measurement model you may not be adequately representing your agency. Yeah, you'll have the things down there but there may be a whole list of other things that may be most important that are not being included. (Personal communication, 8/15/2002)

The above quote from a nonprofit leader reveals that documents are not simply records of past activities; they also represent particular normative ideas. Here the logic model document requires that organizations represent their organizational effectiveness in a particular way that does not capture important aspects of the work, according to this leader. The specific logic model created by an organization, in turn, can inform future action, in this case funding. This quote, along with similar concerns expressed by other nonprofit leaders in a comparative case study, motivated one author's decision to look more closely at these outcome measurement materials (Author Cite). Why did nonprofit leaders believe that these frameworks did not fully capture the difference their organizations made for individuals, families and communities?

In this section, we describe the process of using documents to help answer this question. The results of this study have been published elsewhere (Author Cite). Briefly, the study involved comparing how nonprofits were being instructed to measure their results, in ten outcome measurement guides, with what the literature identified as necessary to achieve those results. The research concluded, among other things, that outcome measurement models instruct nonprofits to track program activities, program outputs and intended program outcomes, but published research on frontline work in nonprofits showed that achieving change required building partnerships with participants, which shaped what staff did, how outcomes for specific individuals were defined, and the pathway for achieving these outcomes. Here we focus on the experience of identifying and analyzing these ten outcome measurement guides.

The identification of the ten publications was the result of an extensive effort to identify how nonprofits were directed to measure their outcomes. The research assumed that if nonprofits had to learn how to measure their outcomes, they were likely to turn to their peers, capacity builders or funders for direction. Acting on this assumption, a manual search of over

500 websites was conducted, including the websites of funders, intermediary capacity builders and nonprofit associations. Using terms such as “outcome measurement,” “evaluation” and “impact,” the search was intended to unearth instructions targeted to nonprofits on how to measure their outcomes. The search process turned up four different lists of recommended outcome measurement resources. Of the 19 resources listed, 10 appeared on more than one list and were chosen for analysis. This process illustrates one of the central challenges of using documents in research: identifying and selecting documents in a way that is purposeful to enable researchers to answer their questions.

Once the outcome measurement publications were identified, they were scanned and uploaded to ATLAS.ti. The first and second levels of analysis involved three specific steps: identifying the instructions in the guides about what to measure, comparing these instructions across the guides and then comparing them with how nonprofit staff described their work in published literature. In the first step, the analysis identified instructions for three types of measurement: process, responsiveness and outcomes. It may sound simple, but analyzing these measurement instructions meant deciding what counted as an instruction. Did the vignette of a case example count as an instruction? How about the diagram or the worksheet in the appendices? Would this be understood as an instruction by nonprofit staff? The sheer volume of material required making some choices. For example, rather than identifying all of the instructions about outcomes, the analysis focused on the initial description of “what is an outcome?” But what we hope is also apparent in this account is how the researcher becomes part of the “field of action” they are investigating (Prior 2003). Their approach to the review and analysis of the document is shaped by decisions they make to render the task manageable as well as an informed understanding they bring to it (e.g., findings from previous research, readings of the literature). In this way, their reading of the document brings a new “expanded understanding” of the document itself (c.f., Schwandt, 2015, pp. 136-137).

Finally, in addition to the analysis described above, the study took into account the production and use of the guides, but not as a formal part of the study. For example, in a previous study, the author had interviewed nonprofit leaders about their experience using material from some of these publications. During the course of this study, the author also tried to track down distribution numbers for guides to understand how widely they were disseminated. The author also had previously learned more about the authors of these publications (e.g., by attending workshops or having informal conversations). These efforts provided context for the analysis but were not included in the final article. Appendix C provides a table which pairs the description of the research in the published article with a more expanded account of the obstacles and hurdles along the way. The table also notes the key questions and general challenges researchers can face when using documents to answer research questions.

In sum, this case example offers a few lessons for scholars considering documents as a source of evidence: (1) Documents available to researchers are always a small fraction of the universe of possible documents; (2) documents identified and selected for analysis need to be significant in light of the questions considered; (3) because documents are not structured around the researcher’s questions, as are interviews, this can make analysis more difficult and require additional decisions to delimit the analysis; (4) documents may contain pictures, diagrams, vignettes and so on, and these may require special treatment in the analysis; and (5) documents are not simply records of past activities, but exist in a field of action, opening up a rich source of evidence about institutionalization in the sector, e.g., outcome measurement guides with similar instructions about measurement.

IMPLICATIONS OF USING DOCUMENTS IN NONPROFIT RESEARCH

In the previous sections, we described the range of documents researchers have used and how they have used them to answer questions about nonprofit and voluntary organizations. We also recounted our own experience of using documents in one study. In this final section, we want to point to three areas that seem to have been less explored by researchers studying nonprofit and voluntary organizations, and then offer some final considerations for using documents in research based on our own experience.

Possibilities

In our review of nonprofit journal articles, we noticed several opportunities for scholars interested in using documents for voluntary sector research. We highlight three that address the “silences” that are contained in documents. First, as we note above, internal organizational documents appear to be underrepresented in the literature. Here we’d like to draw particular attention to the value of *informal* documents such as those sometimes created by staff as workarounds, that provide unofficial accounts of the work. Learning why these informal documents are created and how they are used can reveal the hidden life of organizations that may not be captured in official, public-facing documents.

Second, rather than depending on existing sources, there are promising opportunities to solicit documents from nonprofit stakeholders, such as beneficiaries or volunteers, whose experience in the organization may not be as well represented in formal documents. Researchers could solicit photographs, drawings or journals for research purposes. These may offer insights into or offer alternative narratives about organizational practices and experiences.

Finally, we’d like to draw attention to silences in documents that may have been deliberately imposed. Certainly one cannot analyze documents, or the text within them, that do not exist, but one can still be attentive to their absence. For example, board minutes may omit references to deliberations or decision-making processes by simply recording a vote or indicating that a discussion on a sensitive matter was held in executive session.

Considerations

We close with three suggestions for those considering documents as a data source. First, one can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of documents. This is true particularly if researchers move beyond those documents that are more easily accessible and formal. In this respect, identifying a way to select or draw a boundary around the possible universe of documents becomes important, as is understanding how that boundary may affect one’s understanding of the social phenomenon. Second, understanding documents requires attention to the relationship between the whole and the parts of document—the sections, sentences, pictures—that are of interest given the research question. In other words, in the face of an overwhelming volume of information, it is easy to want to search for relevant material and extract it. To be sure, sometimes this type of approach, such as automated word counts, can be useful and appropriate. However, the risk here is that we miss the larger context in which the material is situated and thus misunderstand the “part” itself. We do not have an easy answer here but more a word of caution.

Third, focusing on the information in documents is one approach. Examining how documents are generated, used and in turn structure action are three additional types of analysis. We have given examples of what this could entail earlier, but here we want to point out that in

this case the volume of information in the document and the sheer number of documents may be less of an issue. Instead, the focus is on how their creation, use and function in structuring interactions help us understand the social setting. Finally, the weaknesses of documents as a data source that were mentioned earlier, such as selectivity in retention and the challenges of dealing with large quantities of available sources, may raise concerns with some scholars about the validity of documents as a data source. Analytical methods that explicitly situate documents in a field of action by interrogating their source, production and use, and which articulate systematic processes of selection and analysis, can both address concerns about validity and strengthen the contributions that documents bring to social inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Documents are an important resource for understanding nonprofit and voluntary organizations. In this article we provided a brief overview of the methodological considerations when using documents generally, then described how scholars have used documents to understand nonprofit and voluntary associations. We also recounted our own experience using documents and some challenges we faced in doing so. In so doing, we sought to show that documents not only record past activities, but also can shape future action. They can tell us a lot more about an organization than might be assumed.

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