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Rethinking Documentary Research: Multimodality, Dual Paradigms and the Emotional Context

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Introduction

An increasing interest in qualitative data archiving and data sharing raises interesting challenges for researchers in terms of the ways in which they approach and treat documentary data and other secondary sources. Exploring the potential of documents to make sense of complex social worlds enables a consideration of the distinctive and multidimensional qualities of ‘documents of life’. In ‘a qualitative sociological autopsy of gendered suicide’, a project of the Cardiff Node of the ESRC National Centre of Research Methods’, particular attention has been paid to the ways in which documentary data can be handled in a sociologically informed and qualitatively driven way.
Project overview

‘A qualitative sociological autopsy of gendered suicide’ set out to demonstrate the use of diverse kinds of qualitative data in combination, as evidence about the social context of suicide. There was also a particular concern to involve policy makers, practitioners and the general public in making sense of qualitative research on this topic.

The research team read 100 suicide case files in a UK coroner’s office which covered a medium-sized city, an adjacent rural area and an industrial town. The sample was of the first one hundred suicide verdicts encountered from 2002 onwards. These covered a three-year period and the age and gender profile of the sample were broadly similar to the picture for England and Wales as a whole. The suicide files contained very diverse data, including forms filled out by the coroner; scribbles on file wallets; police statements from witnesses to the death, family members, friends and partners; forensic pathology reports; medical letters and reports; suicide notes, mobile phone records, photographs; letters to the coroner and newspaper clippings. In addition, media reports on the 100 cases were located and analysed.

Multi-modality in documentary research

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Multi-modality is clearly an appropriate concept for projects that include, for example, written text, speech and moving images, as these obviously represent distinct modes of representation and communication. However, it might also be argued that within data categories that are more conventionally thought of as mono-modal, such as ‘documents’, the diverse sources of the written texts might just about warrant the description ‘multi-modal’. The acknowledgement of different modes within the same medium is important as it serves to strengthen the validity of conclusions drawn from documentary data. With one obvious exception (that of photographs of corpses), the artefacts in the coroner’s files are all written documents; however, the origins of these documents vary considerably. Some derive originally from processes of speech, others writing. Observations about dissection of the body and the subsequent documentation are as different in their abstract meaning-making from an account by a distraught witness to a suicide as to be considered modally different, because of the conditions under which they were designed and produced.

Dual paradigms and integrated methods

The project’s overall aim of exploring the use of multi-modal qualitative inquiry as ‘evidence’ begs the question ‘evidence of what?’ Our consistent argument in relation to this project is that we need to seek insights into two different dimensions of reality revealed by the case file data. The first of these dimensions is the way that evidence is constructed by all parties (both living and now dead) and the second is the evidence we have about the beliefs and actions of suicidal individuals. This is a sociological necessity, as understanding the social context of suicide inevitably involves attention to how knowledge about suicide is constructed by professional and lay actors as well as attention to the circumstances of the suicidal individual, insofar as it is possible to know about these circumstances. This project is therefore an ex-
ample of the simultaneous use of dual paradigms as well as the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. We would argue that social researchers should relax about the juxtaposition of objectivism and constructionism and feel comfortable with simultaneously drawing on both approaches.

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A more specific contribution is the use of dual paradigms in media research. Media reports are clearly a source for research on media construction of suicide and, in the case of our project, for comparison of local and national media discourse. Newspaper reports can also be, however, a source of direct information about suicidal individuals, at least for the more spectacular cases which are reported in some detail. For research on murder-suicide, for example, the print media and in local newspapers in particular, can reveal highly relevant information, as journalists may report inquest hearings in great detail. We have found in our project that in such cases, for a variety of reasons the level of information about the deceased that can be gained from newspaper reporting can be considerably more useful for research purposes than coroners’ files.

In contrast to mainstream psychological autopsy studies of suicide conducted by psychiatric and psychological research teams, we have aimed to recognise the inevitably interpretive dimension of the analysis of suicide cases. We have also attempted to go beyond a small case study qualitative sample by generating a robust sample of 100 suicides over a three-year period. This has allowed us to conduct a quantitative analysis of themes that were originally generated via qualitative code-and-retrieve analysis. Ours is a qualitatively-driven mixed method study\(^1\) that affords the opportunity for both case-based and variable-based analysis. Our approach was to export a tabular summary of thematic coding of whole cases from N-vivo to SPSS for bivariate analysis. In contrast to the Durkheimian tradition of quantitative research on suicide rates, we would argue the sociological relevance of qualitatively-driven mixed method research on individual suicides for generating insights into the social structural context of suicide. This methodological approach could also usefully be employed in other kinds of social autopsy.

Emotion in documentary research

The impact of emotion on social research is often acknowledged by those who seek to put the research process in a human and social context and there are many examples of studies where researchers have written about emotionally disturbing primary data sources, with references to interviews and participant observation. The face-to-face proximity of the researchers to these upsetting research topics makes it easy to understand that there will be an emotional cost to these kinds of studies. However, there is relatively little comment in the literature on social research methods and methodology about the impact on researchers of working with secondary sources. By ‘secondary’ here, we mean evidence that has been assembled by someone else rather than data originally gathered by a researcher. This evidence is most likely to be documentary, but could also include visual and aural data.

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Several commentators have raised the question of whether emotion can be harnessed creatively as part of the interpretive process. Is this possible, or is such an approach not ‘rigorous’ or ‘systematic’ enough to be included within the realms of what is rightly termed ‘research’? Our conclusion is that there is much to be gained from connecting our emotional responses with wider discourse about death and distress. It is important, for example, to locate our emotional reactions within the sequestration of death in late modernity\(^2\) and the routine denial of suffering in society\(^3\). But what about our emotional reactions to specific cases? Do these tell us anything useful? Some authors have claimed that emotional reactions to, for example, particular interviews can yielded analytic insights. We would argue that this is not a fruitful approach to our study of suicides. We do not see it as helpful, for example, to privilege in any way a particularly upsetting case. There is a risk with reflexive accounts of the social research process that they slip into self-indulgence. Reacting to aspects of cases that chime with our own experience, for example as partners or as parents, may be unavoidable, but it would be inappropriate to mistake this emotional reaction for an analytic insight, when there may be just as much to be gained from understanding a case with no particular personal resonance.

There might perhaps be something to be said about dominant societal sympathies that we tap into – for example which suicides seem more ‘understandable’ than others in terms of our own empathetic reactions as lay observers – but this would be as far as we should go with emotional/analytic insights into individual cases.

Communication

The project has yield a number of methodological as well as substantive academic papers. The research has been presented to audiences of academics, medical and social care practitioners and bereaved families. For suicidologists who are relatively unfamiliar with qualitative methods the project organised a panel on qualitative suicide research at a major international conference and a whole-day seminar in Cardiff.

Key publications on methodology


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