Book Reviews

Documentary Research in the Social Sciences, by Malcolm Tight. SAGE. 2019. 232 pp. £29.99
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Documentary research is ubiquitous within the social sciences. Most social research, whether qualitative or quantitative, involves documents, coupled with practices with those documents, during its unfolding. Endemic within the social sciences, documentary research "differs from other forms of research in that the objects of research (the data) exist already (in the form of documents). However, the processes involved in carrying out documentary research are analogous to, and should be just as rigorous as, those employed in other forms of social research" (Tight, 2019, p. 19). There are, in fact, many forms of social research and practices that depend heavily or exclusively on documentary research, such as library and archival science, historical research, policy research and analysis, literature and systematic reviews, secondary data analysis, and meta-analyses. Recognition of documentary research, however, remains seemingly underacknowledged, even taken for granted, in most discussions concerning social science and its variegated research projects and possibilities.

In *Documentary Research in the Social Sciences*, Malcolm Tight—a professor of higher education studies with expertise in explorations into the complex nature of research—calls for greater attention to the importance of documentary research within the social sciences. Specifically, documentary research is indagation that, in one way or another, creates, concentrates on, or otherwise deals with or employs documents; or, put differently, it is research involving sundry work with heterogeneous documents. Conventional documents—namely, articles, assignments, books, chronicles, circulars, journals newspapers, reports, and so on—tend to be the principal objects of focus for most documentary research; however, documentary research also extends to and embraces wide-ranging and cross-disciplinary kinds of documents, such as drawings, pictures, films, maps, augmented and virtual reality, digital platforms, and software applications. Investigations involving documents do not necessarily create new data but, instead, analyze existing data instantiated within myriad documents.

Claiming that "documents need to be treated with care," Tight (2019, p. 18) argues that "undertaking research into documents . . . requires an appreciation and understanding of their purpose(s) and usage(s). No document should be treated as an objective tabula rasa or 'tablet of stone'; rather, they have all been created by highly subjective and interested individuals such as you and me." This appreciation and understanding can be developed by reflecting on four main questions (Tight, 2019, p. 18) while working with documents during one's research activities, namely:

- Considering who created the document, for what purposes, and in what context;
- Reviewing how the document has been used and interpreted since its creation (what impact has it had?);
- Examining the document in relation to similar and related documents (what is its relationship to other documents?);
- Assessing what the document does and does not "say" ("reading between the lines"), and how it says it.

Standard elements of research in the social sciences, and beyond, invariably include discussions of existing research, literature, policies, and other documentary items. Tight (2019, p. 4) describes how most social science research "involves documents, even if only to dispense a brief literature review to contextualize a study; while, in writing up social research, other documents are produced." Documentary research, indeed, is practiced, to various degrees of application and focus, across a multitude of social science disciplines including anthropology, business, cultural studies, educational, healthcare, history, law, library and information science, media and communications studies, pharmacy, and political science.

Rectifying this seeming oversight of documentary research, Tight adroitly advocates for its greater acknowledgment within the social sciences. Synthesizing and explaining current approaches to documentary research, this book provides practical guidance on conducting and engaging with documentary research while illuminating its intimate connections to, and implications for, the social sciences. There are, according to Tight, numerous advantages associated with documentary research that make it an appealing avenue for different kinds of social science research. Benefits include the sheer multifariousness of documents in terms of kinds, formats, genres, and materials; the relatively convenient availability and accessibility of most documents, particularly in the virtual realm; the scale and flexibility of research that can be conducted with them; and often significant financial and temporal savings since work with (most) documents is relatively cheap and time is saved by not having to create or collect new data.

Existing data sets in documents, moreover, can sometimes be "much larger, more representative and more detailed than an individual researcher, or small team, could hope to collect" (Tight, 2019, p. 14). Considering the many constraints confronting most social science researchers, documentary research can be of great potential in minimizing, or even counteracting, at least some of those constraints. Yet, documentary research is not necessarily a straightforward or effortless exercise. It can often involve complicated considerations and detailed practices. On one hand, there are specific and specialized kinds of documentary research; on the other hand, there are also generic approaches shared among them. Different kinds of documentary research, in other words, can oscillate between narrow, specialized approaches to broad, generalized applications.

Arranged into four interconnecting parts, this book offers a solid overview of documentary research and its central place within the social sciences. The book's first part, titled "Starting Documentary Research" (Tight, 2019, p. 1), sets the proverbial stage for the subsequent sections. Comprised of the book's first four chapters, this part describes and contextualizes documentary research. The first chapter delivers a brief overview of the book and some of the ways in which it can be employed. The second chapter considers the complicated but critical question of the nature, features, and types of documents as well as how they are/can be used in research as either the focus of study or combined or mixed with other methods. The third chapter discusses the processes of locating, retrieving, and engaging with documents. The fourth chapter outlines some of the (inter and trans) disciplinary uses of documentary research within and beyond the social sciences.

The book's second part, titled "Genres of Documentary Research" (Tight, 2019, p. 59), comprised of six chapters, overviews the major designs involved in documentary research. The fifth chapter, in fact, explains the diversity of documentary research designs along with their qualitative and quantitative approaches and relation to other research designs. It further identifies five key designs in documentary research, namely, literature reviews; systematic reviews and meta-analyses; secondary data analysis; archival and historical research; and policy research. The next five chapters of this section—specifically Chapters 6 through 10, further unpack these designs.

The book's third part, titled "Techniques for Documentary Analysis" (Tight, 2019, p. 133), comprised of four chapters, presents the major methodological approaches to documentary research. The 11th chapter shows the ways in which documents, whether featuring written or audiovisual text, can be analyzed. The 12th and 13th chapters delineate qualitative and quantitative methods, respectively. Tight (2019, p. 176) repeatedly notes that "quantitative and qualitative

methods [are] complementary rather than oppositional." Their strict separation, he argues, is misleading and unhelpful. They are indeed suitable for combining in various mixed-methods approaches. To that end, the 14th chapter examines various mixed-methods approaches, including the nature and importance of triangulation, to documentary research.

The book's fourth and final part, titled "Where Next?" (Tight, 2019, p. 181), comprised of two concluding chapters, explores the current status of, and points toward the possible future of, documentary research. The 15th chapter provides pathways for sharing and disseminating documentary research and ways in which to plan further such work. The 16th chapter summarizes the book, re-emphasizes its messages and "takeaways." Tight (2019, p. 192) ends the book with a provocative, and also arguably accurate, proclamation that "the future of social research is documentary research!"

The various approaches to and arguments for documentary research are strongly supported by illustrative, and indeed revelatory, examples and extensive references selected from a broad range of social science disciplines and world regions. This disciplinary and regional diversity imbues the book not only with inclusivity but also with a firm foundation upon which various scholars, students, and practitioners can build and consult in/for their research endeavors and practices. Tight offers an interdisciplinary approach to this topic since its coverage spreads across the social sciences, while simultaneously acknowledging a transdisciplinary focus as it extends well beyond the book's preoccupation with the social sciences to also include the humanities and (formal and natural) sciences.

It is important to note that this book does not advance novel approaches or methods for the social sciences. Tight, in fact, admits that cultivating new ideas is not his intention; instead, a renewed light is shed on the position of documents within contemporary social research activities and practices. The main point, after all, is to clarify and show how documentary research is already embedded within most methodologies across the social sciences. Although intended for a broad audience within the social sciences, this book will have varying degrees of application for different kinds of social research. For example, researchers performing desktop, rather than field, research might find this book a more serviceable resource for immediate, ongoing, and even daily reference. Since desktop researchers, from archivists and historians to legal scholars and policy analysts, are constantly engaging with documents for their research, this book should prove to be welcome assistance for their activities. Nonetheless, field researchers, in addition to others creating or collecting new data, should also find this book of value for the portions of their work that inevitably employ documentation, whether it is compiling and composing reports or conducting (shorter) literature reviews. While they might not require or exploit it as often as their desktop research counterparts, they will appreciate its convenience as a handy resource. Furthermore, this book's purview and perspectives are also pertinent for other disciplines in the humanities and sciences that similarly involve or depend on the aspects and practices of documentary research.

Regarding my position to this book, as a Library and Information Science (LIS) scholar with a research and teaching background, and continued interest, in documentation studies, I was immediately drawn to this book's content. I was particularly interested in its impressive coverage of documentary research in addition to its practical guidance, extensive bibliography, and in-depth cases and references. Some of my own academic work, in fact, is presented and unpacked as one of the book's many paradigmatic examples of documentary research. My main hope for reading this book was to acquire additional advice and profitable recommendations for documentary research that I could possibly apply in my own scholarship and lecturing. This hope has been fulfilled.

Ultimately, Tight makes a convincing case that documentary research matters. *Documentary Research in the Social Sciences*, as an introductory overview of documentary research, can be functionally consulted and applied as a heuristic manual for documentary research. It is also, arguably, an overdue—and concomitantly needed—intervention in the social sciences that have, apparently, overlooked and underappreciated this line of research for so long. Indeed, this book successfully

serves as "a useful starting point" (Tight, 2019, p. 5) for conducting and applying documentary research in inter- and transdisciplinary settings. By providing "the support which is largely lacking in the social research methods literature for those interested in and undertaking documentary research" (Tight, 2019, p. 5), it will therefore be of interest to assorted scholars, students, and practitioners across the social sciences who not only deal with documents but also who desire to improve or expand their awareness of these objects constituting and shaping so much of their research practices. The present and future of social research depends on documentation.

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