Clip 4: Scott's criteria for assessing documents

What are Scott's criteria for accessing documents?

It's fair enough to suggest that researchers haven't made as much use of documents as they have of other forms of data, documentary data are quite wide ranging and what the term document could actually cover is quite vast. After all, a document is anything that documents something. The documents can be a particularly creative form of data collection and Eugene Webb et al seminal collection of essays on the use of unobtrusive methods points to a delightful array of things and objects that can be utilised for social research.

That said, perhaps the more traditional forms of documents that have been used for social research include personal documents like letters, diaries, biographies, official documents from the state and private sources, prison records for example, or organisational documents like minutes or even the mass media newspapers, magazines, television programs. Indeed more recent innovations have expanded the primitive documents to include digital platforms such as websites, discussion boards and even social media like Facebook or Twitter. So as you can imagine documents exist in printed, visual and digital formats and the different kinds of documents, provide a rich and varied source of data.

However, whilst documents are highly reliable, that is they are fixed and relatively unchanging and valid that they are non-reactive and have been left in the world as people go about their daily business, there are issues of concern when using documents for social research. Documents are not neutral records of reality and can't simply be taken of face value. So some assessment always needs to be made of the quality of the material at hand. To this end, John Scott in his excellent book and matter of record suggest four criteria that we need to think about when using documents. And these criteria are: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. Indeed the merits of using documentary data can also be seen as being mediated through these criteria.

So in terms of authenticity, we are interested in questions about the origin of the document and whether it's genuine and according to Scott this has two dimensions. The first is whether the document is sound that is, 'Can you read it?', 'Is it legible?', 'Is anything crossed-out?', 'Has anything been removed or adapted?', for instance and whether you can authenticate the identity of those responsible for its production. Here we have questions about who wrote the document and why. Secondly, credibility, so whilst documents may be free from reactivity they don't necessarily record reality in a neutral way. Whilst this is true of all representations some recognition of the purpose of the document in its original context must be made. And indeed we need to think about how that representation has been distorted and there is always an element of selection in any attempt to describe social reality. So, to paraphrase Scott the question of credibility concerns the extent to which an observer is sincere in the choice of a point of view and in the attempt to record an accurate account from that chosen standpoint.

And then we come to representativeness. Now all documents exist within a wider nexus of objects, events and interpretations. So we can't study a document in isolation, we need to place it in that wider set of material from which it emerges.

Finally, we come to meaning and here we are largely concerned with what we are actually going to do with the document and Scott points to two areas of concern. Firstly, the literal meaning 'what does the document actually mean?' in relation to the other documents that surround it but also, what it means in terms of research.