CHAPTER 3

Analyzing Documents, Artifacts, and Visual Materials

Learning Objectives

After reading and reviewing this chapter, researchers should be able to

1. Discuss the qualities attributed to the materials of human production, and

2. Apply selected methods for analyzing narrative and visual empirical materials.

Introduction

This chapter explores how qualitative researchers analyze the material and digital products people create and use. The analytic emphasis in Chapter 2 was placed on researcher reflection through techniques such as observer’s comments (OCs) and analytic memo writing. Those same techniques will be applied to new data forms, and to additional analysis methods for narrative and visual empirical materials.

Qualitative researchers should spend some slices of time analyzing the many things humans own, create, and use on a regular basis, as suggested by the research topic or questions. The products in and of environments are inseparable parts of social worlds. Fieldwork attunes researchers not just to people’s actions, but also to what they work with, play with, need, and treasure. A focus on material culture heightens researcher awareness of the objects people accumulate across time. Each artifact evokes within its viewer a possible story of its history, or an explanatory purpose for its presence. These stories and explanations accumulate into a larger picture of a participant’s local world, and suggest a variety of emotional and affective human meanings connected to the objects. Social analysts have suggested contemporary life is lived in a digital culture or visual culture, meaning that the ubiquity of images found in digital technology is now an everyday part of many people’s lives. Professional research organizations dedicated to visual analysis such as the International Visual Sociology Association (www.visualsociology.org) have recently emerged. Kozinets (2015) examines netnography, the study of online cultures and the virtual worlds of cyberspace in Netnography: Redefined.

This chapter includes separate discussions about documents, artifacts, and visual materials such as photographs and video.
But you cannot always separate each format neatly when you're analyzing, say, Facebook pages—a digital document with texts and embedded photographs viewed on the artifact of a mobile phone. The best recommendation is to examine these material products through both their individual, constituent elements, and as a total representation of human production.

**On Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs**

Since many material objects are not just things but also potentially rich symbols of meaning, a discussion of three key interrelated concepts is in order since these concepts play an essential role in the analysis of documents, artifacts, and visual materials (as well as human interaction): values, attitudes, and beliefs. Each concept has a different meaning, but for clarity they combine into what will be referred to as a *values system*.

A **value** is the importance someone attributes to herself, another person, a thing, or an idea. Values are the principles, moral codes, and situational norms people live by (Daiute, 2014, p. 69). Saldana (2016) perceives value as an intrinsic process: “The greater the personal meaning [of something to someone], the greater the personal payoff; the greater the personal payoff, the greater the personal value” (p. 131). Today, many people view Facebook as a valuable Internet resource for the expression of significant moments from their lives and for maintaining instantaneous, electronically mediated communication with family and friends. Facebook provides meaning to most individuals because of its community-generating experience. The payoff of accessing the site is feeling better informed and connected to friends and loved ones. The value of Facebook is enhanced for its users through frequent access several times a day.

An **attitude** is the way someone thinks and feels about himself, another person, thing, or idea. Think of attitudes as evaluative perceptions and sets of cumulative reactions, reflecting the beliefs people learn through time (Shaw & Wright, 1967, p. 3). For example, whenever something on Facebook strikes a person in a positive way, he might click the Like button to inform the post’s author that she has posted something he likes and affirms. His attitude about the original post (or his reaction toward the individual poster’s action) and/or its previously posted comments, might motivate him to add a supplemental comment as an attitudinal remark.

A **belief** is part of a system that includes interrelated values and attitudes, as well as personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world. Wolcott (2008) reinforces that beliefs are embedded in the values attached to them. The content that users post...
on Facebook, especially if they are shared memes of quotable quotes or affirming messages (e.g., “How others see you is not important; how you see yourself means everything”), reflect their beliefs about life and living it.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs are formed, perpetuated, and changed through social interactions and institutions, and our cultural and religious (if any) memberships (Charon, 2013). Pools of Facebook friends most likely share comparable values systems. However, people often value some friends more than others since they hold varying attitudes toward the spectrum of people they know because of identical to opposing beliefs about matters such as politics, social issues, and current events. Sociological theories such as differential association posit that people’s values are influenced by the groups they interact with most intensively, suggesting that people’s values systems are not fixed constructs but are rather malleable and ever-evolving processes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 132), though they tend to become more firmly fixed as people age. Values, attitudes, and beliefs can be analyzed separately but not without reference to the other systems’ concepts. In fact, it is sometimes quite difficult to discern whether a participant’s statement is a value, an attitude, or a belief. This conundrum reinforces the intricate interconnectivity of a total values system.

Values, attitudes, and beliefs themselves are not intrinsic to documents, artifacts, and visual materials such as photographs. Rather, humans endow the material objects with meaning, based on how they’re perceived and interpreted. The value of an antique is not in the object itself, but in the value humans attribute to it because of its age, rarity, historic connections, condition, aesthetics, availability, and other factors such as its allure and demand by collectors, which determine not just its monetary value, but also its personal value.

Yet, an object does not have to be expensive to be treasured. A handwritten thank-you card from a close, personal friend might not be worth anything to anyone else, but to the recipient it is a beloved artifact that symbolizes a deep, enduring relationship. Values, attitudes, and beliefs about the person who gave the card are transferred onto it by the one who received it. But even the most seemingly mundane document/artifact such as a driver’s license can be assigned a range of meanings based on the holder’s values system. An older adult can perceive the license as an obligatory, legally required card that helps the holder conform to the rules of driving on public roads, and serves as a necessary item for airline travel and identity confirmation. But an adolescent receiving his first driver’s license probably perceives it as a significant rite of passage (i.e., ritual) toward adulthood that suddenly changes the teenager’s self-perception (i.e., social role). Prior (2004) attests, “Our identities are supported and altered by various forms of identification” (p. 88).
In sum, when analyzing documents, artifacts, and visual materials, explore the attributed values, attitudes, and beliefs about them from the participants’ perspectives. Also, as will be discussed in future chapters, recognize that people maintain a values system toward other people, and not just toward objects.

**Analyzing Manifest and Latent Contents**

**Manifest** refers to what is readily observable in the material—its apparent and surface content. **Latent** refers to what is hidden within or inferred about the material—the subtexts interpreted by the observer. Analysts explore the manifest and latent (or overt and covert) contents of documents, artifacts, and visual materials in order to describe their physical properties and assess their symbolic meanings.

A careful analysis of the manifest, constituent elements of an object might bring researchers closer to understanding the latent. In other analyses, the holistic impression one gets from a document, artifact, or photograph triggers a host of associated memories and experiences. These triggers endow the item with reads or takes (i.e., intuitive reactions about the manifest) that quickly lead toward the latent. Figure 3.1 is a photograph of a young married couple. Look at each person’s face and infer or interpret what might be going through each one’s mind. Now look at the woman and man’s body postures and physical relationship, and infer and interpret how each one feels about the other. We could offer our own reads or takes about the couple in this photo, but it is your own interpretations that matter here. However, the first impression you got from the image should be substantiated by supporting evidence.

What specific visual details in the photo led you to your inferences about their interrelationship?

**Content analysis** and **discourse analysis** are only two of the established methods for scrutinizing the manifest and latent of narrative and visual texts. Quantitative content
analysis (Krippendorff & Bock, 2009; Weber, 1990) is generally a systematic analysis of material that primarily counts the number of times particular words, images, or ideas appear in a set of data. Inferences and interpretations of quantitative results are then applied to assess any particular meanings to the material. Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) extends beyond counting to assess thematic features and concepts suggested by the data.

Discourse analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Gee, 2011; Rapley, 2007; Willig, 2008) examines not just the contents (what) but also the contexts (how) of narrative and visual texts. Discourse analysis focuses on selected nuances of language, conversation, and images to assess how elements such as vocabulary, grammar, intonation, topics, and so on work together in intricate combination to impart meaning about human relationships and big-picture ideas such as culture, identity, politics, and power. Content analysis targets the manifest by counting in order to get to the latent, but discourse analysis targets the latent from the very start by examining not how many but, rather, what kinds of words or images are used to convey something. Content analysis informs a researcher that automobiles are one of the products featured most frequently in primetime network television commercials. Discourse analysis informs the researcher how truck commercials generally employ hypermasculine visual action, vocabulary, and deep resonant voice-overs (e.g., “Guts. Glory. Ram.”) to target and appeal to a particular market of male consumers.

Qualitative researchers examine people’s discourse not just in documents and media materials but also in life: discourse occurs during participant observation, as well as during the analytic scrutiny of conversations and interview transcripts. It is a way of not taking everything at face value, of reading between the lines, interpreting subtexts and embedded meanings, detecting hidden agendas, digging underneath to reveal the covert, reading psychological clues, peeling back the layers, and assessing subliminal tactics that persuade or motivate us to action. We do not mean to imply that everything or everyone has something to hide, but there are subtleties and nuances that should not be overlooked. Qualitative researchers relish details, because in them lie stimuli for constructing richer meanings about life.

The Materials and Meanings of Human Production

A theory posits that the products people create are extensions of the human body. For example, fingernail clippers are extensions of teeth, a carpet is an extension of skin and hair, a camera lens is an extension of an eye, an audio
speaker is an extension of a mouth and vocal cords, and so on. Original material products also hold their designers’ creative and aesthetic preferences for form and function. Walk through a retail clothing store and notice the wide array of shirts and blouses for sale and the infinite combinations possible with fabric textures, colors, logos, motifs, fit, drape, and so on. When consumers are able to purchase clothing items that appeal to them, they adopt the designers’ aesthetic values and ascribe their own intrinsic values onto the clothing such as “the clothes are fancy,” “comfortable,” or “trendy.” Clothing, too, is an extension of the human body—nicknamed “the second skin” (Horn & Gurel, 1981)—and reflects the wearer’s persona and the desired presentation of self to others (Goffman, 1959).

The products people create also reflect their value, attitude, and belief systems. Humans write things, which transfer their thoughts and ways of thinking onto paper or digital formats. People decorate walls and rooms, which suggests not only what’s available but also what’s important and beautiful to them. Some professions build things, which reflect the craft, training, and standards of the manufacturers. Other professions deal primarily with creating and communicating original ideas, and the products of those ideas embody their creators’ imaginations. As the design folk saying goes, “We are what we make; we make what we are.”

When analyzing life, consider what participants own, create, and maintain. The things in people’s lives are not only extensions of their bodies, but are also extensions of their minds and identities. Anthropologists have long known that the artifacts of a culture symbolize the values system—the ethos—of the people who created them. That same principle applies to an individual’s everyday social environment and the products of and in that world.

**Analyzing Documents**

Language is a symbol system that conveys messages to readers and listeners. Particular words in particular combinations expressed by the writer or speaker are intended to communicate a particular intent. But other individuals might interpret the sender’s original message in a completely different way. Much has been written about transactions with texts, and we could devote this entire book to that topic alone. Instead, we focus on the qualitative researcher as an interpreter of narratives written by others. In this section we explore documents, in their broadest sense, as forms of textual and sometimes visual communication. Documents can consist of materials such as business or organizational hard-copy.
letters and e-mails; printed newspapers and magazines; Internet Web sites and digital modes of communication (e.g., tweets, Facebook posts, text messages, blogs); books in various formats; print advertisements and circulars; and personal materials written by participants in the form of journals, diaries, poetry, and so on.

Documents are social products that reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 130) and carry “values and ideologies, either intended or not” (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 231). Official documents in particular are “site[s] of claims to power [and] legitimacy” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 232). Analyzing the values system suggested by documents through manifest readings and interpretations of their latent content and discourse are the primary foci for this section. More systematic quantitative methods of textual analysis can be accessed from related sources (e.g., Franzosi, 2010; Krippendorff, 2013; Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003).

Collecting materials

We recall an anecdotal factoid that says that 90% of all filed paper documents for business purposes are never accessed or referred to again. We have no statistical data about comparable frequency of saved and deleted electronic communications and files, but we speculate that the number of reopened documents is also strikingly minimal. The good news is that these amassed materials are a rich repository of data for analysis. But since one of the key analytic skills of a qualitative researcher is to condense large amounts of data, it is not necessary to gather anything and everything in print at the field site.

Pay particular attention to how forms of written language are used in the participants’ social worlds—that is, what do they read and write (if anything)? Workplace ethnography, for example, examines partly how business is conducted and accomplished through written communication. Educational ethnography in particular examines what teachers and students write and read, and the administrative materials of schooling that permeate each day such as official forms, records, and data bases. Some documents are considered confidential for personal or legal reasons, so the researcher should respect the limitations of access.

Upon entering the field site, just one of your many initial tasks is to scout the setting for documents that are written and read—both frequently and rarely. If possible, maintain a copy as part of your own records (e.g., one brochure.
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from many copies available in a health-care clinic's literature rack). When only one copy of something important exists, make a hard copy or scan/digitally photograph the document. There are a number of mobile apps for this task that can also convert the images into a PDF. Sites such as Dropbox or Google Drive can serve as repositories for the data. A researcher also takes cognitive ownership of one-of-a-kind texts when she herself handwrites or types them directly into her field notes.

For larger documents available electronically, request or download a copy. Bookmark and regularly access all field- or participant-related Internet sites (e.g., home pages, PDFs, Facebook accounts). It might be helpful to save or print copies of Web pages when you first visit them since they can be deleted or updated with completely different content the next time you access them. Failing to create a physical or virtual copy the first time could mean losing the data permanently. The same applies to Facebook and other social media accounts: users can delete or modify content at any time. You might not read or analyze everything you collect, but the materials are there on an as-needed basis.

Below, we offer two analytic frames for documents: how they capture attention, and how they embody the identities of their writers.

Analyzing attention

When analyzing a document's contents, there are several researcher lenses, filters, and angles for interpreting it. One of the first tasks for the researcher to examine is how it gets the reader's attention. In other words, analyze what strategies the writer uses to maintain a reader's focus on and engagement with the text. The attention-getting tactics employed can reveal the creator's objectives or goals, knowledge of rhetoric (i.e., persuasion), values system, and presumptions of authority or expertise. Reflection on these aspects offer a critical examination of the document's latent contents—its discourse.

Print advertisements are certainly in the business of attention-getting through such strategies as large fonts, eye-catching images, triggers to positive emotions (e.g., happiness) or negative emotions (e.g., fear), and so on. But what about noncommercial documents? As an example, below is a text excerpt from a weight-loss workbook developed and distributed by a health insurance company for its clients (Cigna, 2012, pp. 18–19). This self-help material, titled A Healthier Point of View: Living at a Healthier Weight, offers readers information and guidance for proper diet, nutrition, and exercise. One section on snacking includes this advice:
BE SNACK SMART

A midmorning or midafternoon snack can help boost your energy and satisfy your hunger until the next meal. If you choose well, your snacks can contribute to your recommended daily intake from each food group. Snacking is not bad as long as you use judgment and moderation.

Snack smart by choosing snacks that provide the calories and nutrients that fit with your eating plan. Include them as part of your daily calorie allowance, and limit portions to one serving.

What types of snacks do you tend to eat? Try to think of some healthy snacks to replace the less healthy ones.

Instead of . . .
| Potato chips | Popcorn (no butter/salt) |
| Ice cream    | Frozen yogurt            |
| Candy        | Nuts or sunflower seeds  |
| Chocolate bar| Granola bar               |
| Nachos       | Celery sticks or baby carrots with hummus |

Analytic memos, explained in Chapter 2, are certainly one approach to inquiry about textual materials. But a variant of OCs helps focus on the constituent elements of attention-getting strategies employed in the document. Simply list or bullet point the specific ways the writer achieves a particular objective, how the writer persuades its reader, what values system operates in the material, and what authority or expertise is suggested. For an anonymous document, the analyst can speculate on its possible authorship. Likewise, researchers can reflect on the document’s targeted readership and how its author writes with a particular audience in mind. This item-by-item method makes the analyst more aware of the nuances of rhetoric, especially when direct quotes from the document are used as supporting evidence. A few analytic bullet points about the above workbook text include the following:

• “Be snack smart” is a short proverb that’s easily remembered.
• The reader is reassured that snacking is not bad, lessening the dread of not eating to lose weight.
• There are several conditions listed throughout, placing responsibility on the reader/dieter: “If you choose well,” “as long as you.”
• Frequent parameter-like word choices appear to reinforce minimal amounts of eating: “recommended,” “allowance,” “moderation,” “daily,” “fit,” “limit,” “no.”
• The healthier options are listed on the right side of the page, subliminally suggesting they’re the right (i.e., correct) snacks to eat.

The collection of bullet points can be woven into a more coherent narrative for an analytic write-up.

An item-by-item list of attention-getting tactics is just one approach to documents. It serves well for discourse analyses and studies that examine values systems in written materials.

Analyzing identity

Another method for analyzing a document, particularly when its origin and creator are unknown, is to profile its writer. By profile, we mean to reflect on the possible identity of its creator(s). But even when an analyst knows who wrote the document, profiling its elements can generate a better understanding of the participant. Note that we do not refer to profiling in its negative sense, meaning to stereotype, but instead as an investigative method to analyze the contents and contexts of narratives.

If we operate under the assumption that the document a person wrote is the product of her thinking, then the document should suggest something about its writer's identity—not who she is, but how she perceives herself. What are things you can deduce about the person who created the document, based on what you infer from the document’s appearance and content? There might be some clues in the text that permit a researcher to infer demographic factors such as the writer's gender, age, and so on. The vocabulary and narrative style could suggest something about the person's education level. An analyst can also infer something about the writer's ways of working. What do such things as the layout, color choices, and/or font tell you about this person's work ethic? Since the writer's values system can be found embedded in the document, the researcher can make inferences regarding what she finds important.

Hager, Maier, O'Hara, Ott, and Saldaña (2000) conducted focus group interviews with high school teachers to gather their perspectives on a forthcoming state-issued standards document for their class instruction and curriculum planning. The teachers themselves had little to no input on the standards and performance objectives drafted by the state department of education, which listed no specific names of contributors or committee members. Teachers could not identify the standards writer(s) by name but they speculated on general characteristics of their developers, which included who and what they were (and were not):
The entry-level standards were not developmentally appropriate for young children, suggesting writers who were not teachers who were experienced with youths.

The higher-level standards set unrealistic expectations for adolescents, suggesting writers who did not teach on a daily, long-term basis in high schools.

The discipline-based premise of the document suggested writers who were unfamiliar with the needs of rural and Native American districts' vocational curriculum mandates.

Selected phrases in the document (e.g., “reflect the conditions of their time and place,” “analyze and interpret how technological and scientific advances,” “Greek drama, French classicism”) suggested writers who taught at the university level rather than at K–12 levels.

These premises suggested that the author(s) of the standards were most likely well-educated, possibly older university faculty who did not maintain frequent contact with elementary and secondary educators or their students, and writer(s) who seemed to push their particular approach to the discipline through autocratic means. Gender could not be deduced, but it was speculated that the writer(s) were most likely White due to the primarily Eurocentric contents and token multiculturalism in the document. The cell-by-cell matrix formatting of the standards suggested writers who valued conformity, linearity, and systematic approaches to education, rather than the open-ended, site-specific, and signature curricula promoted by teachers.

The study by Hager et al. (2000) used the standards document as a prompt for participant interviews. Likewise, a researcher might share a document that intrigues him with a participant and ask her about its contents, relevance, influence, and so on. If she is unfamiliar with the document and can speak freely about it, he might get some rich first impressions that hone in on the spontaneous read of it. Jointly dialoguing about the material could build a cumulative understanding of its contents and the identities of its writers.

**Analyzing Artifacts**

The term artifact is to be interpreted broadly here, and does not usually refer to the stereotypical view of an ancient, worn down relic buried underneath layers of dirt. Artifacts include any object made by humans (handmade or manufactured) or natural object that can be touched and handled. Artifacts are the things people
use for their daily routines and rituals. They range from this book you’re reading to the chair you’re sitting on. A home is filled with artifacts such as furniture, decor, and smaller functional objects such as televisions, lamps, bowls, and so on. Artifacts refer to both the materials necessary to get work done and the items considered ornamental or decorative. Artifacts are also residual traces of human presence such as trash left on the ground, or other unobtrusive measures or evidence of past activity such as footprints left in the dirt, a teacher’s writings that remain on a classroom white board, spray-painted graffiti, or a Web browser’s history of previous sites visited.

Qualitative researchers observe and record artifacts included in environments, making special note of items that seem to suggest particular meaning to either the researchers or the participants. Researchers employing participant observation should pay occasional attention to the material objects used by participants. Some might be used frequently out of utilitarian necessity, while others gather dust as they rest untouched. A few might stand out if researchers infer they are souvenirs or mementoes of some kind that could hold emotional value by their owner. Artifacts have stories—origins, histories, moments, reasons—about how they were collected, created, inherited, and/or purchased. Since artifacts can’t speak for themselves, researchers need to infer their history or use them as conversation pieces with participants to learn more about the relationship between objects and humans.

Since researchers cannot collect and keep one-of-a-kind artifacts from field settings in data bases, digitally photograph key items for additional reflection and meaning making. There’s also nothing wrong with old-school methods such as hand drawing a quick sketch of an item when photography is not possible. Below we offer four analytic frames for artifacts: analyzing how they belong, their symbolic connotations, their processes, and how they are extensions of human beings.

Analyzing belonging

In this section we discuss the particular assemblage of objects in a setting we broadly refer to as a place where people and things “belong.” Belonging occurs in homes, workplaces, retail stores, outdoor areas, hospitals, prisons, and so on. There might or might not be feelings of comfort, neatness, safety, or community in these spaces, but those are aspects or values that merit discernment and analysis.

Some people put careful thought into the visual appearance of each room in their homes and the strategic location of each artifact. Others, often for financial reasons or space limitations, assemble miscellaneous objects that are primarily functional and utilitarian. Some workplaces limit decoration to promote
efficiency, while other organizations permit employees to create how their own workspaces look with personal items such as family photographs and stress-relieving toys. Retail businesses arrange their products and design their spaces to promote product access and sales. Airports are designed to handle thousands of travelers daily with concerns for their safety and security, along with necessary objects such as luggage, tickets, and boarding area seating. Outdoor sporting events include the equipment necessary to play the game; within athletic arenas, spectators often hold signage, food and drink items, and assorted memorabilia to show their team support.

In other words, each social space is a specific place where things in it generally belong. One analytic task is to survey the things in fieldwork sites to reflect on their ways of belonging. This is where the analytic skill sets of discerning unity and relationships come into play. One needn’t conduct an extensive written inventory of each and every item in a space, but the guiding principle to apply to an analysis is, “What is the first and general impression we get about this environment, and what details within it lead us to that impression?” The details most often refer to the collection of artifacts in the setting. For example, a shelf in Omasta’s university office holds seemingly unrelated odd things such as a five-year-old dried pineapple, a pasta sauce jar with a butterfly in it, an elegantly framed fake leaf, and a placard from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. At first glance, this random assemblage makes absolutely no sense in the space until one learns that these different things do indeed belong together and belong in his office: they are all personally treasured mementoes of play productions Omasta directed.

Spaces most often contain a logic—an organization and management—to the items within them. It is important to identify not just what’s in a setting but also why those items are there. Put simply, what are the artifacts for? What function do they serve? Analyzing their purpose can bring an understanding of their perceived value, and especially the attitudes and beliefs held toward them. Even merely decorative items serve functions. There are, of course, sometimes anomalous things in settings that seem oddly out of place. But considering these is also part of the analytic exercise. Their presence offers researchers opportunities to speculate or inquire about their purpose or the participant’s logic of placement.

Just as a researcher can dialogue with participants about a document, she should dialogue with them during an interview about a significant artifact as if it were a conversation piece, pointing out the item and asking about its history, purpose, and meaning to its owner—and especially why it’s located in a particular place. Certainly researchers can learn much more about a space’s occupants and its
artifacts by having participants give them a guided tour of the site, accompanied with questions and answers about significant items that attract their visual attention. After the tour, it can be worthwhile to ask, “What are three things in this space that you would most likely try to save in the event of a fire? Why?” The participant’s choices suggest a hierarchy of value, again signaling the values system that could be at work.

**Analyzing symbolism**

Anthropologists explore the symbolism of and in a culture’s artifacts. The assumption is that a people’s ethos—their values systems—are embodied in the objects they create:

Symbols . . . are human constructions and condensed attributions of specific associations, memories, and meanings. They consolidate various properties into a single representative entity. The function of a symbol can range from practical utility (e.g., shorthand) to maintenance (of customs and traditions) to aesthetic achievement (in literature and the arts). Symbolizing may be our brain’s way of creating order and making meaning from disparate pieces of information. It consolidates various parts into a significant whole. (Saldaña, 2015, p. 66)

Artifacts’ meanings can be inferred through a process of historic research and interpretive insight. Analyzing symbolism enables discernment of what an object presents (the manifest) and represents (the latent) to its creators, owners, and/or viewers.

Berger (2014), in *What Objects Mean: An Introduction to Material Culture*, examines the smartphone as a technological artifact of modern culture. Through various theoretical lenses (e.g., developmental, sociological, psychological), he posits that the device symbolizes everything from a surrogate for human contact to the multitasking minds of humans themselves. Selected products, such as the latest Apple iPhone, are symbols of status. The ability to text message, especially among adolescents, symbolizes social connection and identity affirmation in an era of social and cultural alienation. Berger offers varied interpretations in his analytic essay, reinforcing that there are more than one way to decode the symbolism of an object. A researcher’s disciplinary interests and experiential knowledge will influence and affect how she perceives an artifact, and participants themselves hold varied meanings toward a single object. Researchers should therefore gather a spectrum of perceptions to learn about people’s
relationships with artifacts. Interview questions and prompts might include the following:

- Tell me how you got this [artifact].
- What is this [artifact] used for and how often?
- How important is this [artifact] to you?
- What three words or phrases would you use to describe this [artifact]?
- How might this [artifact] be part of you?

People can also attribute specific symbolic significance and meaning to an artifact that is not readily observable in the object. This is when the artifact’s story, as told by the owner-participant, reveals aspects such as history, purpose, and value. For example, in Saldaña’s home office there sits a glass paperweight on a bookshelf (see Figure 3.2). Someone new to the space might first assume that the object is merely a decorative item, perhaps even a gift, purely for aesthetic purposes. But the paperweight’s history is that it previously belonged to a former faculty colleague who died of AIDS in the mid-1980s. This beloved professor kept a collection of more than 20 paperweights in his office as decorative mementoes. When he passed, the executor of his estate informed us he wanted certain faculty members to each inherit a paperweight as a remembrance of him. Thus, the artifact has sentimental value attached to it. Its purpose is to remind—to maintain tangible evidence of a particular human life, and to occasionally evoke memories of that life from its owner. Analyze not just what artifacts are, but also what they symbolically represent.

Figure 3.2 This glass paperweight has a symbolic representation by its owner. (Photo by Johnny Saldaña.)
Analyzing process

Since artifacts are not just things but are also stimuli for human action, reaction, and interaction, one analytic strategy is to identify key items as gerunds (“-ing” words). Transform what the items actually are into what they do or are used for, from the mundane to the conceptual:

- Pencil → writing, erasing
- Book → reading, learning
- Picture of a loved one in a frame → remembering, honoring
- Wall calendar → keeping track, marking time
- Mobile phone → staying connected, digitizing life

Assembling the artifact gerunds related to the participant and the sites they inhabit provides a list of what happens in those spaces—the actions and reactions of interactions between people and their objects. Review this list of gerunds suggested by artifacts in a doctor’s waiting room:

- Managing appointments (receptionist’s counter with sign-in sheets, pens, business cards)
- Managing bodies, comforting clients (chairs)
- Cautioning (posted signage about patients’ responsibilities for referrals, x-rays, blood work, etc.)
- Informing, preparing (brochures about medical equipment, hospices, transportation, etc.)
- Cleansing the environment (a portable air purifier)
- Entertaining, occupying time (TV set to CNN, assorted magazines)
- Decorating, filling the space (artwork on walls)

These gerunds and gerund phrases are Process Codes—summative, symbolic representations of larger data. Simple observable activity (e.g., reading, playing, watching TV, drinking coffee) and more general conceptual action (e.g., struggling, negotiating, surviving, adapting) can be coded as such through Process Codes. The processes of human action can be “strategic, routine, random, novel, automatic, and/or thoughtful” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 283). Process Coding is appropriate for all forms of qualitative data, and particularly...
for studies that search for the routines and rituals of human life, and the actions and reactions that occur as we deal with conflicts or problems to solve.

The observable, manifest action of people in the doctor's clinic space is waiting (comprising constituent actions such as reading magazines, watching TV, filling out forms, looking at watches, talking to others, accessing mobile phones, etc.). But there are also latent actions within patients consisting of emotional processes such as worrying, regulating impatience, raising spirits, comforting a spouse, and so on. The analytic task here is to discern how the human actions within the space and the artifact actions within the space interrelate. How does one action set unify with the other?

Reflecting and synthesizing are the most suitable heuristics for arriving at an answer. In the example above, three of the seven bullet-pointed processes could be chosen to represent what the artifacts were doing: managing, regulating, and caring. For example, we could posit that the portable air purifier was managing the indoor environment, regulating air quality, and caring for patients' respiratory health. We could also posit that the cautionary signage about patients' responsibilities was managing administrative matters, regulating proper procedures for insurance coverage, and caring for patients’ complete medical records and history.

Since unity is the analytic goal in this particular case, researchers next attempt to codeweave the three processes by composing an **assertion**—a declarative, summative statement that synthesizes various observations, supported by confirming evidence from the data corpus (discussed further in Chapter 10). **Codeweaving** integrates the primary codes of interest into a brief narrative to analyze their interrelationship. One assertion that could be put forth about the doctor's office artifacts and the patients using them is as follows:

> This clinic's waiting room is a site where patients' pre-appointment emotions are managed through a balance of regulating the administrative matters of health care with temporary, time-filling comforts of human care.

Analyzing the processes of artifacts enables you to observe them not just as inanimate objects around the participants, but also as materials integrated with human action.

**Analyzing extensions**

The beginning of this chapter discussed how the products people create are extensions of human beings—their bodies, minds, and actions. Analyzing the
possible extensions of a field setting and key artifacts at the site could provide some insight into the participants who inhabit it:

The environments we establish for ourselves may also embody who we are. Spaces have a macro “look” and “feel” to them based on the collective assembly of its micro details of specific items, organization, maintenance, cleanliness, lighting, color, and other design elements. When I walk into a new space, the primary analytic task that runs through my mind is, “Tell me something about the person or people who work/live here.” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 61)

A popular saying about the secrets people keep and the lives they’ve led goes, “If these walls could talk . . . .” Researchers can capitalize on that concept as an analytic strategy. What would a field setting’s walls and artifacts say if they really could talk? Researchers can anthropomorphize them and write “in role” from the objects’ point of view. If the products humans create are extensions of human beings, they can be endowed with human qualities. A field note reflection as an extended memo about a doctor’s office waiting room might read like the following:

Please, come in and sit down. The chairs are deliberately comfortable to make you feel relaxed and at ease. If the wide variety of magazines doesn’t amuse you as you wait for the doctor, look at my large aquarium and get lulled and soothed as you wait to learn if you have just a cold or a terminal illness. And don’t forget to browse all the informational literature about your health and well-being in the literature rack—we care. We’re sorry if the TV’s news programming, always set to CNN, doesn’t entertain you, but we take things seriously here. The room is moderately lit and decorated in neutral colors to calm you—and look: potted plants all around let you know we value life in all its forms. This place is spotless because we’re professionals here. And we expect you to maintain a sense of decorum as well: as the posted sign says, “Please turn off all cell phones in the waiting room.”

This same strategy can be applied to key artifacts in a setting. In this example, a stethoscope in the doctor’s office “talks”:

I am the ears of the doctor. She places me against your chest and back to listen carefully to your heartbeats and breathing. In a way, I’m also her eyes since she cannot see directly inside your torso,
but the sounds I pick up clue her as to what might be happening inside your heart and lungs. I’m almost always draped around her neck and shoulders—an invaluable tool of the trade.

The purpose of analyzing a key artifact’s extensions is to better understand its qualities and intrinsic values, as perceived by self or others.

Analyzing Visual Materials

People rarely photograph at random. Instead, they purposefully select particular moments to document visually because they are important and meaningful in some way. A photograph, as an extension of the human body, is a cognitive memory of what was visually experienced. But the photo also embodies the photographer’s values system. In addition, viewers, who were not present when the photo was taken, interpret meaning from the photo through their values-laden reading of its contents. Pezzarossi (2015), reflecting on 19th-century tintype technology and popularity, observes that the functions of portraiture in the past have not changed all that much for 21st-century purposes. People take selfies today as a vehicle to explore their personal identities, to express desires and fantasies, and to make durable their presentations of self for future memory.

Visual analysis (Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Spencer, 2011; Thomson, 2008) consists of a variety of methods for studying material products, landscapes, architecture, photographs, video, digital media, and artwork, from children’s drawings to public sculptures. Analytic methods range from documenting the principles of design seen in the visual work (e.g., the use of line, color, texture, composition), to the fundamentals of content analysis, to the arts-based rendering by the researcher of participant portraits, to the intricate frame-by-frame microanalysis of video. Figure 3.3 shows a screenshot from Transana, a video coding and analysis software package. The windows illustrate the audio track components alongside the visual images and codes.

Though highly systematic methods have been profiled by other writers for analyzing the visual, we offer that researchers should place more trust in their intuitive reactions first, followed by a more formal review of how those responses came to be, which then supplement the initial responses with a possible reanalysis of the work. In other words, analyzing the visual (like analyzing narrative) is a reverberative process. Researchers look at the visual image and get a first impression. Then they reflect on that impression and carefully reexamine the image to consider what elements in it support or disconfirm their initial read. They then return to the image with those analytic musings in mind to consider
how they and the work newly interact. As with social life, visual analysis is action, reaction, and interaction.

We offer two analytic methods for visual materials: analyzing video collaboratively, and analyzing what photographs evoke.

**Analyzing collaboratively**

Sometimes researcher-initiated video is used for occasional documentation of fieldwork. It is not the video technology itself that is analyzed, but rather the social action captured on it. One of Saldaña's studies examined a video of Figure 3.3  A screenshot from Transana video analysis software. (Courtesy of David K. Woods, the Wisconsin Center for Education Research/Transana, www.transana.org.)
children in participatory play with adults. He watched the video with a research assistant and both of them took individual written notes about what they observed, comparable to field note taking. They stopped the sixty-minute video every ten minutes to discuss and compare their observations thus far to note any similarities and to share anything their individual captures might have missed. If necessary, they reversed the video to confirm an analytic insight or to clarify a disagreement about their findings. Their reflections in-between each 10-minute segment enabled them to shop-talk and come to a consensus about how the children interacted with adults. The exchange and development of ideas between two researchers—dyadic analysis—was richer than either of them could have generated on their own (Saldaña, 2016, p. 63).

The analytic methods for video are actually quite comparable to Chapter 2’s recommendations for analyzing field sites. The advantage with video recording is the ability to view and scrutinize the nuances and details of short, social moments repeatedly for microanalysis. Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff (2010) offer exceptional guidance for video in qualitative research. They promote collaborative viewing with participants, colleagues, and stakeholders to better guarantee the trustworthiness of observations and thus findings. The methodologists support an analytic inductive approach that favors “the ways in which social action and interaction involve the interplay of talk, visible and material conduct” (p. 9). Paulus et al. (2014) also offer state-of-the-art technological guidance in Digital Tools for Qualitative Research. Altheide and Schneider (2013) and Berger (2012) provide recommendations for analyzing commercial broadcast videos such as newscasts and fictional works like dramas and situation comedies.

In a way, researchers’ video analysis is comparable to a video camera/player’s functions. Their eyes can zoom in and out to capture the big picture as well as the small details. When necessary, they can freeze the frame, play a portion in slow motion, or loop a section to replay continuously in order to scrutinize the details of social action. Their written analysis of video is like the translation subtitles or DVD soundtrack commentary that accompanies the original footage.

**Analyzing evocation**

Since visual analysis is a tacit, intuitive process, researchers should place analytic emphasis on what is first evoked within them as they look at an object or image. Subjective first impressions are documented in writing to note their initial interpretive read. For example, we reviewed a weight-loss workbook (Cigna, 2012) quickly to get a general idea of its contents. When we examined the document, our eyes naturally gravitated toward the full color images included throughout (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5 for comparable photos from other noncopyrighted sources). We jotted down the thoughts and emotions first evoked within us:
Positive, upbeat, happy people! The goal is to make the reader think that weight loss, eating right, and exercise are fun. There’s no pain, no dread, just people of all ages and all ethnicities leading happy, healthy, fulfilling lives.

Next we conducted more-careful and more-systematic reviews of the photographs to assess the legitimacy of those first impression jottings. A simple content (counting) analysis reveals that

51 full photographs of people and/or food images appear throughout the 82-page document. Of these 51 photographs, 15 feature people exercising (running, bike riding, swimming, etc.), and 14 exhibit people interacting with food in some way (preparing, eating, shopping, etc.). Of these 29 photos with people, 3 of them show either a neutral face or faces not in view of the camera. That leaves 26 photos (50% total) of people in various poses of exercising or eating—and all of them with smiles on their faces or in mid-laughter. No one appears exceptionally obese or physically strained, and no perspiration appears on the skin or clothing of those
exercising. Five ethnic groups of people are included (White, Hispanic, Asian, Black, and one ethnicity we are unable to identify), ranging in age from young children to the elderly with an equal balance of males and females. The photos are professional, posed model shots, not captures of everyday people doing everyday things. The photo credit at the end of the document states: “All models are used for illustrative purposes only.”

After this basic content analysis, we conducted a discourse analysis—that is, a more-interpretive and more-critical read of the latent contents after we have examined the manifest contents. This again is a reverberative act—returning to the initial jottings, photos, and content notes for additional reflection on what is evoked, and how and why:

The goal of the weight loss workbook is to inform and persuade its readers to live a healthier lifestyle through proper diet and exercise. The discourse of the photos suggests that, no matter what your age, gender, or ethnicity, exercise can be a pleasurable activity that leads to happiness. But the reality—for many if not most people—that exercise can be a physically demanding activity which makes some individuals grimace in pain or strain, is missing from the photographs. (When was the last time we saw anyone smile as he did push-ups? The workbook cover features this image.) Such negative imagery can dissuade sedentary readers from giving exercise a try. Thus, through positive reinforcement, the photos subliminally suggest that various forms of physical activity are not effortful but enjoyable. (And they can be for the physically fit, but those people are not the workbook’s targeted readership.) The workbook smartly notes in large type: “Although increasing your physical activity will require hard work and dedication, the benefits you gain will far outweigh the amount of effort you put in.”

More systematic methods for photographic analysis are available. But for visual images that supplement or accompany primarily narrative texts, we believe that open-ended interpretations of photographs and illustrations are most appropriate.

The Routines, Rituals, Rules, Roles, and Relationships in Documents, Artifacts, and Visual Materials

There is action when a person or organization creates a product, as well as action that emerges from someone who reads, handles, or views the product. That person
also reacts to the product as she interacts with it. Analyzing how the five Rs work through documents, artifacts, and visual materials still comes into play, because the principles are applicable not just to people but also to things in the social world.

Some documents are created to establish relationships with their readers. The weight-loss workbook is intended as a user-friendly product to break the user of bad routines and to establish new, healthier ones. It even attempts to generate new exercise rituals such as walking or running. The weight-loss workbook expresses rules through what to eat and what not to consume. The reader assumes that the document (created by people with special knowledge) plays an authoritative role as expert in health, fitness, and well-being.

Many routines and rituals employ necessary artifacts for their completion. Some material products, like surgical equipment, should only be used (a rule) by those in certain roles, such as health-care professionals. Every video watched has an audience of some kind—a relationship between media and a viewer. The five Rs are woven throughout analyses of documents, artifacts, and visual materials. Integrating them into an examination of attention, belonging, or evocation enriches insights regarding the things humans make, buy, and use on a regular basis.

A current analytic theme in some academic circles is consumption—that is, critical analysis of the excessive material production of first-world cultures and the obsessive drives for purchase and ownership found in people from those cultures. Visualize the blocks-long lines of customers waiting outside big box stores the day after Thanksgiving, and crowds of holiday shoppers in malls the week before Christmas, and the notion of consumption is clear. Think of how documents such as sales coupons, the artifacts of gifts in display windows, and the barrage of seasonal television advertising inundates and motivates a populace to buy. The discourse of consumption is a fascinating lens, filter, and angle to examine how the five Rs play out with material products and media.

**CLOSURE AND TRANSITION**

Keep in mind that the analytic frames described above are interchangeable. Analyzing attention and identity are not just limited to documents—they can also be applied to artifacts and photographs, just as analyzing symbolism and process can be applied to documents and video. We have not directly addressed the forms of visual representation.
and presentation of data that are more creative and arts-based, such as participant-created collages and photovoice (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Knowles & Cole, 2008), but these too can be analyzed with several of the methods profiled above.

In the next two chapters, we focus on the data collection method used most frequently for qualitative research: interviewing participants and analyzing transcripts.

RESOURCES FOR ANALYZING DOCUMENTS, ARTIFACTS, AND VISUAL MATERIALS

The following resources will offer you additional guidance for methods of analyzing documents, artifacts, and visual materials:


ANALYTIC EXERCISES FOR DOCUMENTS, ARTIFACTS, AND VISUAL MATERIALS

1. Access the Internet home page of a major national commercial retailer. Analyze the home page's contents (texts, images, layout) for its attention-getting strategies.
2. Read a day's Letters to the Editor section of a local newspaper. Describe the values systems of respondents based on how they address various issues and your interpretation of their language.
3. Select an artifact from your own living space that has personal meaning to you. Anthropomorphize it to compose a brief monologic account from the point of view of the artifact.
4. Go through the artifacts contained in a kitchen or bathroom. Select a few manufactured objects and speculate how they are extensions of the human body.
5. If you belong to a social media site, scroll through a day's posts and content analyze the visual images uploaded by your friends. Also examine the discourse of selected memes.
6. Brainstorm a list of what some people collect (e.g., baseball cards, coins, refrigerator magnets). Discuss with a peer why humans maintain collections of artifacts.

7. Read and examine a personal legal document of some kind (e.g., birth certificate, passport, rental agreement, terms of service, etc.). Reflect on the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships suggested by the document.

SAMPLE PHOTOGRAPH

Figure 3.6 shows two university students engaged in conversation in a lounge. Review and analyze the image for its manifest and latent contents using one of more of the methods discussed in this chapter.