Reusing qualitative data

"A unique opportunity to study the raw materials of the recent or more distant past"
Reuse guide

Since the mid-1990s we have witnessed a growing body of knowledge and practical guidance on reusing qualitative data, sparked in the UK by the funding of Qualidata by the ESRC. We provide some insight into the ethical, methodological and epistemological issues, offer practical ways to get started, and showcase scholars' and teachers' creative use of secondary data.

Resources on reusing qualitative data

- Our short guide on reusing qualitative data
- UK Data Service teaching resources relating to reusing qualitative data
- Timescapes Secondary Analysis Project

Reuse articles

There is a growing body of literature on the reuse of qualitative data, addressing ethical, methodological and epistemological issues. Here we cite a selection of articles that cover a range of perspectives and provide links to case studies of reuse of data.

Themed collections of articles

The following published special issues are recommended, listed in chronological order:


Methodology, Theory and Practice, 7(1). This contains an edited collection of papers given at the 2001 conference organised by Qualidata - Celebrating Classic Sociology: Pioneers of Contemporary British Qualitative Research.


The papers provide retrospective accounts of some of the most innovative and groundbreaking qualitative research carried out since the 1950s. They offer insight into the dynamics, politics and realities of social research.

Many of the research datasets under discussion in these papers are archived at the UK Data Service and the University of Essex's National Social Policy and Social Change Archive.

Selected articles on the re-use of qualitative data


Bishop, L. and Neale, B. (2011) 'Sharing Qualitative and Qualitative Longitudinal Data in the UK: Archiving Strategies and Development', IASSIST Quarterly 34(3-4) and 35(1-2) pp.23-29.


Corti, L. (2012) 'Recent developments in archiving social research', International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 15(4) [Special Issue: Perspectives on working with archived textual and visual material in social research], pp.281-290. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2012.688310


Corti, L. (2005) Qualitative Archiving and Data Sharing: Extending the reach and impact of qualitative data, IASSIST Quarterly, 29(3).


General Medical Council (2010) 'The development of treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making'


Heaton, J. (2014) 'Use of social comparisons in interviews about young adults' experiences of chronic illness'. Qualitative Health Research. Published online 3 October 2014. DOI: 10.1177/1049732314553122


Locock, L. and Brown, J. B. (2010) ‘All in the same boat’? Patient and carer attitudes to peer support and social comparison in Motor Neurone Disease (MND). Social science & medicine, 71(8), 1498-1505.


Mauthner, N., Parry, O. and Backett-Milburn, K. (1998) 'The data are out there, or are they? Implications for archiving and revisiting qualitative data', Sociology, 32(4), pp. 733-745.


Nairn, K. et al. (2005) 'A counter-narrative of a 'failed' interview', Qualitative Research, 5(2), pp. 221-244.

Neale, B. and Bishop, L. (2012) 'The Timescapes Archive: a stakeholder approach to archiving qualitative longitudinal data'. Qualitative Research, 12(1) pp.53-65

Neale, B. and Bishop, L. (2011) 'Qualitative and Qualitative Longitudinal Resources in Europe'. IASSIST Quarterly 34(3-4) and 35(1-2) pp. 6-11


Teaching secondary analysis

Secondary analysis of qualitative data is rapidly becoming a standard skill for research methods. This is demonstrated by the growing frequency of highly ranked journals publishing articles using the approach and in the support demonstrated by funders in promoting a dedicated initiative for secondary analysis.

However, in qualitative research methods training the approach is not taught routinely. For example, in sociology, economics and history, the emphasis is still placed on primary data analysis skills rather than on techniques of reusing data, or of integrating primary and secondary data.

We have piloted, designed and successfully run courses on how to do secondary analysis aimed at researchers and also aimed at teachers who want to incorporate ideas in to their classes.

Using our data resources in teaching in the social sciences adds interest and relevance to methodological courses, and can free up precious time in the methods curriculum to focus on the vital skills that sit either side of the data collection process: formulating research questions and analysing data.

Browse our teaching resources and training courses.