

Answers: Reusing qualitative data: the value of context

Presented here is the related contextual information for the two interview extracts you examined. After reading these pieces of contextual information, consider these additional questions:

1. How does the information provided fit, or not, with what you thought would be useful?
2. Reflecting now on the beginning of this exercise, were you able, even without context, to generate a research question from the data?
3. What value might there be in working with 'just the data'? Is it similar to any other phases of a research project?

Extract 1: Contextual Information for Blaxter's Mothers and Daughters Study

Background: The aim of Blaxter and Patterson's (1982) research was to study inter-generational transmission of deprivation using a sample of women in 58 three-generation families and was part of a larger ESRC programme on Transmitted Deprivation. Sampling was purposive: families that remained working class across two generations, grandmother-daughter co-location in a Scottish city, and continuing contact. The study addressed diverse factors, exploring whether health and social histories, attitudes, and health behaviours would affect the health experiences of the children and were possibly transmitted across generations. Nutrition was one of several topics addressed; others were orientations toward medicine, antenatal care, preventive behaviour, use of lay remedies, etc. The study used several types of data: information from longitudinal visits with the mothers, health visitor reports, etc. Other data, including the archived material archived, were semi-structured interviews that focused on attitudes and perceptions. The original study was intended to inform social policy.

A year after publishing their book, Blaxter and Patterson re-analysed their data to study the historical and moral significance of food. They reported on what constituted 'good food': specific foods were less important than a 'proper' meal, as contrasted with processed foods, or 'snackery'. They also used their rich intergenerational data to compare the different attitudes and behaviours between grandmothers and their daughters.

Interviews were done by two educated, white women. Regular visits were made to the families by either Blaxter or Patterson. Patterson did the majority of the grandmother interviews; she was from the same area where the families lived. Blaxter praised her ability to gain rapport with the respondents. Mothers were interviewed at the end of the six-month study. The study was presented to respondents as being about child-rearing and child-rearing beliefs and practices across generations.

Biographical Information and Interviewer Notes for Interview with G19 (edited):

Date of interview: 1978; age of G19: 43.

Upstairs flat in drab block of 4. Untidy. Back garden overgrown grass. A daughter with baby living with parents. Doesn't appear to be married. Another daughter who is pregnant was also present. Not sure whether she is living there also. A teen aged daughter also lives at home. The two daughters present looked gaunt and ill. Son-in-law came in later and left granddaughter – seemed



to be about 4 or 5. G19 seemed quite forthcoming despite the presence of all these people. But when I was leaving she showed me to the door and confided that she and [someone of her daughter's generation] were very different: 'Although she's a nice person, she was brought up on the good things of life. She likes to get out and enjoy herself, while I only thought of my family.'

Extract 2: Contextual Information for Short's Domestic Cooking Study

Background: This research was conducted as part of Frances Short's work toward completing a PhD in Food Policy in 2002 (Short, 2003). She also has a diploma from a recognized cooking school and has worked as a professional chef.

The aim of the research was to further understanding and debate by providing a systematically researched and theoretically-based way of thinking about cooking and cooking skills. The research took the form of a two-stage study. This data extract is from the first stage. Both stages were based around semi-structured interviews but the first also included the keeping of 'cooking diaries'.

In the first stage of fieldwork, couples aged between 30 and 50 from different social, financial and occupational backgrounds and household; two couples had very young children living with them; another couple had no children; and another a teenage daughter who came to stay at the weekends and so on. The interview schedule was designed around current areas of concern surrounding domestic food, eating and cooking practices but with sufficient room to allow exploration and points of interest develop. Topics discussed with the participants included: childhood experiences of cooking and eating; current cooking practices; the role of ready-meals; and 'typically British' food.

In both stages, participants were selected opportunistically for reasons of accessibility, coming mostly from the Greater London area. The interviews took place in the participants' own homes or workplaces and were recorded. All interviewees were given a shopping voucher worth fifteen pounds as a thank-you.

Biographical Information and Interviewer Notes for the Interview with LA

Interviewee description: Woman in her 30s, married with two daughters, white British, with polytechnic or university degree. She is not currently employed. Husband is a self-employed journalist. She receives over £500 per week in child benefits. She has lived with her husband for 7 years in an owned home, with a mortgage. Interview was done around 2001.

Interviewer notes: 'LA had a neat house, trendy but both she and her partner viewed their trendiness quite ironically and knowingly. I interviewed LA and her partner LB in turn on the same evening whilst they swapped over putting their daughters to bed.'

Discussion

Context operates at different levels, so think broadly about it. For example, how might this extract fit into the complete interview? At a broader level, how might the project topic shape the interviewees' responses? Would a study on health elicit different food narratives from a study about cooking? How could people reusing these interviews take this into account when reusing these data?

The Blaxter interviews (extract 1) were transcribed as spoken. Does this contextual information influence your reading? Would a glossary help for the Scottish words that might not be so familiar?

In the Short study on domestic cooking (extract 2), would you need to know the employment status of the interviewee, and numbers and ages of any children living at home with her? If so, why? Is it



to help answer a particular hypothesis or interest you might have?

It is very easy to list points of contextual information that 'might' be helpful to inform the data. What you might see as relevant context will depend on the research question you are asking. What about also considering context from the perspective of a data creator, who is very close to the data? In this exercise, you undertook a more distanced, objective view of data in which you have no personal investment. Recognize that research requires skills both of close-up examination of data, but also of distancing, analysing and comparing.

Finally, consider how historians might make use of archival materials that may have quite limited contextual information available to them. They often rely on gathering context creatively from independent formal records, such as published documents and reports or news items.

