Documenting your data

Dr Sharon Bolton
Data Curation Manager

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Documenting your data

• Why document?
  • Research sustainability and long-term data usability

• Study-level documentation
  • Research context and design, data collection methods, data preparation and results or findings

• Data-level documentation
  • Labelling and documenting individual data items - numerical, textual or audio-visual - embedded in data or recorded elsewhere

• Catalogue metadata
  • Describes purpose, origin, time, geographic location, creator, terms of use - UK Data Service deposit form. Helps user decide whether this is the right dataset for their research
Good documentation

- context of data collection: history, aims, objectives
- data collection methods: protocols, sampling design, instruments, data scale and resolution, temporal and geographic coverage
- structure of data files, cases, records, variables and relationships between files
- data sources and provenance of materials - transcribed or derived data
- data validation, checking, cleaning, other QA procedures
- modifications made over time since original data creation
- changes over time to methodology, content, labelling, measurements, sampling
- information on confidentiality, access and use conditions
Documentation & metadata formats

- Often deposited as PDF – technical reports, questionnaires, findings reports
  - Popular, free readers, well-supported
  - Not ideal for archiving, too software-dependent

- Word and RTF – same as above.

- XML, with schema - Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) metadata can be shared across systems easily.
  - CLOSER project questionnaires can be read direct into Nesstar
Documentation rights

• Think about structure and contents of your documentation

• Does an academic paper or a published monograph form part of your documentation?
  • Publisher may have copyright – no redistribution
  • Be careful how much you quote

• Make sure the essential information on how to use and analyse the data is available outside copyrighted articles
Documenting big data?

- Data may not have been produced for sharing – may be limited information available
- Data formats/access method might be different, but users still need information
- Copyright may still need consideration
- Weblink/API - what kind of ‘catalogue record’ information will users need to see?
- How user might reasonably subset data – what would they need to know?