Editorial for Special Edition, Digital Representations: Re-Using and Publishing Digital Qualitative Data

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Abstract

This collection of papers comprises five contributions with a social science or social historical perspective that present the current state of the art in the field of re-using and publishing digital qualitative data. The articles address the use of digital sources in qualitative research in both research and teaching, charting types of use over the past 10 years, and looking forward to emerging practices and methods, such as the promise and potential that technological innovations can bring to enable new ways of presenting and publishing qualitative research. Some of the papers make use of direct linking allowing the reader to explore "live" data sources, offering an opportunity to see how research transparency might be operationalized in the presentation of qualitative findings and reporting. The papers reference major contributions to the literature and present stimulating debates on the topic and build on previously well-cited publications in which the editors have presented state-of-the-art articles on secondary analysis of qualitative data.

Keywords

secondary analysis, qualitative data, qualitative research, publishing data, social history

Introduction

The collection of papers in this *SAGE Open* Special Issue on *Digital Representations: Opportunities for Re-Using and Publishing Digital Qualitative Data* comprise five contributions with a social science or social historical perspective that present the current state of the art in the field of re-using and publishing digital qualitative data. They reference major contributions to the literature and present stimulating debates on the topics. The themed collection builds on previously well-cited publications in which the editors have presented state-of-the-art articles on secondary analysis of qualitative data, for example, the 2004 Special Issue of the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* on "Celebrating Classic Sociology: Pioneers of Contemporary British Qualitative Research," edited by Paul Thompson and Louise Corti, and the subsequent 2012 Special Issue of the same journal on "Perspectives on Working With Archived Textual and Visual Material in Social Research" (Crow & Edwards, 2012; Thompson & Corti, 2004).

The articles address the use of digital sources in qualitative research in both research and teaching, charting types of use over the past couple of decades and looking forward to emerging practices and methods. Critical perspectives on the secondary analysis of qualitative data are discussed where relevant across the set of articles, including returning to the ongoing debate over whether or not the "contextualization" of secondary data is essential to enable rich analysis.

The papers further address the promise and potential that technological innovations can bring to enable new ways of presenting and publishing qualitative research. Some of the papers make use of direct linking allowing the reader to explore "live" data sources, thus offering an insight into how research transparency might be operationalized in the presentation of qualitative findings and reporting.

The Papers

All the authors reflect the contemporary interest in digital representations and qualitative secondary analysis. Two of the authors/editors (Corti and Bishop) have been central to the international initiatives, both institutional and emergent from within the research community, that mark the present state of the art. The issue benefits from this experience, and from the collaboration of all three editors in "Digital Futures,"

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a funded project engaging with the cutting edge affordances of Web 2.0 technologies and beyond in application to qualitative research, culminating in the U.K. Data Service's online data browsing system, QualiBank (UK Data Service, 2014).

Corti and Fielding in their paper, titled "Opportunities From the Digital Revolution: Implications for Researching, Publishing and Consuming Qualitative Research," examine the existence of knowledge and data in digital form and how these offer opportunities for research and study (Corti & Fielding, 2016). They examine the role of "born digital" materials and trust in, and persistence of, these sources. The paper addresses the significant research opportunities brought by Big Data by applying computational technologies to digital textual sources. They offer exemplars of the contemporary use of qualitative data within academia and citizen (social) science. The Internet and other online media are re-shaping the discovery process with crowdsourcing generating much new data and knowledge. The authors note the need to understand new and emergent modes of doing and reporting informal social science research arising from these trends. What are the implications for research data services in supporting access to these information sources? The authors examine current practices in generating new kinds of knowledge outputs, and in more formal academic publishing, they note the role of the "enhanced publication," a peer-reviewed digital output where readers can interact with primary raw data sources. The paper addresses the need for the publishing interface to enable easy authoring, and is mindful of the effort involved by author and reader and the potential returns.

Finally Corti and Fielding's paper addresses the recent debate about research transparency, drawing on value of replication of data and methods to enable openness, yet questioning how some traditional and specific research practices might be eroded by inflexible journal publisher policies. The authors highlight the intellectual and methodological challenges of demonstrating transparency of qualitative research by showing various practical solutions for adding context to data, and through transparency of *production*. Finally the authors conclude on the strengths and weaknesses of the *analytic* transparency, a policy recently proposed by the political science community in the United States to evidence claims made with data in academic publications.

Bishop and Kuula-Lummi's contribution, titled "Revisiting Qualitative Data Reuse: A Decade On," provides a journey through two decades of re-using digital qualitative data created from previous research projects (Bishop & Kuula-Lummi, 2016). Re-use provides a unique opportunity to study the raw materials of past research projects to gain insights for both methodological and substantive purposes. In the past decade, use of the approach has grown rapidly to become widely accepted and practiced. This growth is explained by several factors such as the open data movement, research funders' policies supporting research transparency and data sharing, and researchers seeing benefits from sharing all manner of resources. A further factor enabling data re-use has been improved services and infrastructure, such as the U.K. Data Service and the Finnish Social Science Data Archive, which provide access to hundreds of data collections for social scientists.

Nevertheless, challenges remain when re-using qualitative data and Bishop and Kuula-Lummi's paper engages with the roles of context, ethical issues, and sampling from digital data archives. Recent case studies of data re-use for studies of health, food, family, and more are presented that illustrate innovative approaches used in both research and teaching. Diverse forms of collaboration among primary and secondary researchers work to fill in gaps of contextual information, and to generate deep insights into data. The case from Finland suggests that their most popular qualitative data set is one generated for a writing competition: a collection of 800 autobiographical narratives, including some fiction and poetry, on the conditions and experiences of poverty. The writings' popularity for research lends new insight to the academic debate over recovery of context in secondary analysis, in particular negating the, sometimes militant, view held by some social researchers about the absolute necessity of rich context to support re-use of raw data. Responses from users who have confronted the data say that they did so with very little context and documentation available, and further, did not express any need for it. This provides evidence that the depth and richness of a large data set can ameliorate lack of context, and that it can stand on its own as a resource to interrogate.

The two papers written by Lawrence and Elliott and Sutcliffe-Brown are based on social historical reinterpretation of existing data from a well-known scholar who published widely in the area of social class, Ray Pahl. They present insight into the re-use of much older data sources, digitized for the purpose of re-use and offer a methodological focus that addresses methods of data sampling and selection in qualitative analysis. At a broad level, all three authors are confronting a central debate in social theory—the relative roles played by agency and structure.

Lawrence and Elliott in their contribution, titled "The Emotional Economy of Unemployment: A Re-Analysis of Testimony From a Sheppey Family, 1978-1983," re-use six interviews from one couple, Linda and Jim, who had been central voices in Pahl's book, *Divisions of Labour* (Lawrence & Elliott, 2016). In their paper, the authors return to these interviews to explore themes that had not been a focus for Pahl's research, focusing on emotions and identity. In doing so, they uncover new dimensions of agency in the stories from Linda and Jim. Pahl was explicitly situating his work in Thatcher's Britain and criticizing its policies, but Lawrence and Elliott take a longer, more historical view on these materials. In their revisiting of the data, Lawrence and Elliott develop a nuanced interpretation, one that acknowledges a longer view by looking not only at how Linda and Jim responded to critical periods of high unemployment but also their changing relationships with benefits, home ownership, and employment. These insights from seeing lives as a trajectory portray a deeper understanding of the emotional economy of unemployment.

Sutcliffe-Brown's (2016) paper, titled "New Perspectives From Unstructured Interviews: Young Women, Gender and Sexuality on the Isle of Sheppey in 1980," focuses on the narrative of one person, a young working-class woman living on Sheppey and her experiences in the early 1980s. She re-explores this interview, asking questions of this narrative that were not addressed by any of the original researchers. In doing so, challenges of both missing context and ethically sensitive material needed to be addressed.

Drawing on recent work on emotional history, Sutcliffe-Brown analyzes this text using tools from oral history and from feminist psychology. As the paper by Bishop and Kuula-Lummi demonstrates, the presence of limited contextual information does not preclude finding new insights from data. Methodologically, this paper also demonstrates the rich potential of drawing from multiple disciplines, such as history and psychology.

Haaker and Morgan Brett in their paper on "Developing Research-Led Teaching: Two Cases of Practical Data Re-Use in the Classroom" examine the value of using real data to bring to life teaching undergraduate sociology (Haaker & Morgan Brett, 2016). They introduce two case studies. The first is drawn from sociologist Annette Lawson who undertook research in the early 1980s to explore the taboo topic of adultery (Lawson, 1988). This data set, through its topic of interest to younger people, presents opportunities for teaching aids and accompanying guidance for classroom discussions, particularly around relationship values and attitudes, sexual orientation, and the role of gender and socioeconomic status. The second case study is based on Stan Cohen's 1972 publication *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, a core text for criminology in A-level and university classrooms (Cohen, 1987). With its focus on criminality, youth culture, and its depiction by the mass media, it has captured the imagination of students for the past 40 years. The authors show how they developed an innovative teaching resource with substantive learning exercises based on extracts of real data as well as other online resources. The authors conclude by setting out how students can develop a range of transferrable skills by confronting real data with substantive and relevant topics for research methods teaching.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Author Biographies

Louise Corti is associate director of the U.K. Data Archive and head of the Producer Relations and Collections Development teams. She also leads qualitative data activities at the Archive and directed the United Kingdom's national qualitative archive Qualidata from 1998. She has 25 years of expertise in archiving, sharing, and using social science data, and has particular expertise in the challenges of managing, sharing, and archiving research data, and teaching with data. She has held numerous research awards in these areas focusing on best practice, training, and tools, including coauthoring the first handbook on *Managing and Sharing Research Data* for SAGE in 2014.

Nigel Fielding, BA (Sussex), MA (Kent), PhD (LSE), is professor of sociology at the University of Surrey. His research interests in methodology include qualitative methods, research technologies, and mixed methods. He has published widely and has cited contributions on the rationale and logic of secondary analysis of qualitative data, and on technologies facilitating such analysis. He is the author/editor of 24 books, including the *SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* and both of the SAGE multi-volume sets on classic articles on interviewing, more than 65 peer-reviewed journal articles, and more than 47 chapters, around half the articles and chapters being on aspects of social research methods.

Libby Bishop is a manager in the research data management team at the U.K. Data Archive where she provides guidance, support, and training on data management; data management planning; and data sharing to researchers and data producers. She has particular expertise in ethics and data sharing, including informed consent for archiving data and the ethics of re-using data. She worked with the "Timescapes" archive, the United Kingdom's first major longitudinal qualitative study. She develops and delivers training for the User Support and Training section of the U.K. Data Service, with a focus on secondary analysis of qualitative data, and contributed to the 2014 SAGE *Managing and Sharing Research Data* handbook.