Qualitative secondary analysis in practice: introduction

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This Open Space section presents exemplars of qualitative secondary analysis in practice along with discussion of the challenges of, and strategies for, conducting such analysis. The articles share an historical as well as sociological dimension in their focus. Two of them centre on aspects of change in familial and intergenerational relationships, and the wider societal contexts in which these are shaped. Throughout, the articles examine questions of secondary analytic method alongside substantive and conceptual puzzles.

In undertaking qualitative secondary analysis, researchers explore already existing data, typically generated by others for differing purposes. Qualitative data re-use and secondary analysis have been accompanied by some concerns, if not controversy, over the scope for effectively addressing epistemological and ethical challenges (e.g., Mauthner and Parry, 2012; for reviews, see also Bishop, 2009; Irwin and Winterton, 2012). Since immersion in data, meaning and context are such core aspects of qualitative research, analysis and linked knowledge claims, the concern articulated by Mauthner and Parry (2012) is that secondary analysis occurs on thin ground. In this view, because data are shaped within the relational and contextual conditions of their production, ‘distant’ secondary analysis by those without meaningful access to such contextual knowledge, may slide into empiricism. Such distance is an important risk, and getting to grips with the contextual embeddedness of data is certainly an important challenge. Indeed, often, it is building this understanding that is very revealing and productive for secondary analysts.

There has been a significant investment in, and commitment to, building infrastructure and resources for archiving and sharing qualitative data, and facilitating effective data re-use, and secondary data analysis. Such resources are not only electronic, and practical, but also conceptual, and informed by robust ethical protocols and practices (Neale and Bishop, 2012). Archive resources include ESDS Qualidata, the Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) Timescapes Archive of qualitative longitudinal data and the Mass Observation archive. The interest in data sharing is growing internationally (Neale and Bishop, 2010). There is a growing body of work that stands testimony to the research potential of secondary analysis (just a tiny handful of examples might include: Savage, 2005; Duncan, 2012; Haynes and Jones, 2012; and, we hope, the secondary analysis work undertaken as part of ESRC Timescapes¹). The papers in this Open Space collection are a new and powerful further addition to a growing body of work, and exemplify secondary analysis in practice. Two of the articles explore familial relationships and social historical change. The third is more personal, an intellectual autobiographical account by Joanna Bornat who reflects on her evolving encounters with secondary analysis as an oral historian. These papers highlight some important themes in the secondary analysis of qualitative data.
Throughout the discussions, furthermore, we see how secondary analysis of historical data helps to re-illuminate the relationship between the present and the past.

Jane Gray, Ruth Geraghty and David Ralph interrogate changing relationships across generations from the perspectives of those who grew up in Ireland across the 20th and into the 21st centuries. The analysis exemplifies opportunities for archived data re-use, here through the Irish Qualitative Data Archive. The authors work across data from differently constituted studies, illuminate how they did so, and seek to understand how qualitative evidence links to, and offers a lens on, historical contexts and processes. Familial economic interdependencies across generations meant that at least some grandparenting care and input was a widespread experience for many children, with extensive reliance on grandparents’ support in contexts of severe economic constraint. The latter part of the 20th century saw a change in the nature of exchange across generations. As living standards improved so the middle, parenting, generation accrued greater economic and cultural authority in their ability to manage the relationship between their own parents and their own children, a trend manifested alongside the expansion of female paid employment. By situating data within their historical context, and through their secondary analysis across two distinct datasets, the authors offer some fascinating insights into changing relationships across generations, and changing norms and experiences of grandparents and grandchildren in Ireland.

Henrietta O’Connor and John Goodwin develop a secondary analysis of data generated by Elias’ research team for the study ‘Adjustment of young workers to work situations and adult roles’, conducted in the early 1960s. Their secondary analysis provides insights into both the ordering of family arrangements in Leicester in this period, and how the conduct of the research itself reflected contemporary assumptions about, and evaluations of, ‘normal’ family types. Project interviewers’ further notes allowed the analysts to reach beyond the more formal data. O’Connor and Goodwin ask: ‘to what extent were atypical family formations apparent in the 1960s?’ and ‘how were atypical family structures represented, documented and understood by the research teams?’. Showing evidence that atypical family arrangements were more common than might be supposed in that ‘golden age of the nuclear family’, the authors advance an argument about the value of exploring and understanding extant patterns of diversity in past family forms. The normative positioning of such arrangements as, at best, less than ideal appeared to underpin a reluctance by interviewers to overstep boundaries of what could and could not be asked. In some respects this might lead to a ‘hushing’ of atypicality, part of an historical context in which the upholding of particular sets of norms shaped both perceptions and experiences of diversity; and perhaps influenced later readings of family history in which the contrast with the present is overstated. Through their analysis the authors show some of the ways in which empirical data are produced, bearing the hallmarks of their contextual and methodological creation. Additionally, they illustrate the importance of detail in secondary analysis, particularly in accessing sufficient contextual information, and in building knowledge of the dataset. Aspects of this may be implicit for primary researchers, but require tenacity on the part of data re-users. So, for example, only by reading interviewers’ notes did simple ‘facts’ recorded in interview turn out to be potentially misleading steers on people’s family circumstances. All this helps
to underline the importance of understanding the limits to data, of seeing data as partial and as (sometimes disguised) traces of complexity, and of building an adequate understanding of the proximate, methodological, social and historical contexts in which data are embedded.

Through her personal intellectual account, Joanna Bornat raises a series of important and interesting insights into the conduct of ethical, inclusive and effective secondary analysis. Reflecting on her experiences of working at the intersection of historical and sociological analysis, she traces a journey from ‘unwitting’ secondary analysis as an historian researcher to immersion in questions about the methodological, ethical and conceptual dilemmas that are deemed to arise. She does so through an illuminating discussion of two examples of her work on secondary analysis. She explores the contextual and ‘made’ nature of data and some of the challenges this presents for re-users. Exemplified by the case of how interviews are embedded in social relationships, and echoing a point made by O’Connor and Goodwin, Bornat shows that the shaping of data may be invisible to varying degrees. She also explores ethical issues in re-use, especially the question as to whether informed consent carries across secondary analytic research questions which are at a remove from the original purposes of primary research. Here, as elsewhere, secondary analysis may manifest a difference in degree to primary research, rather than being a wholly distinctive kind of undertaking, since arriving at different questions and analytic themes is itself part of the process of discovery at the heart of exploratory research. Bornat goes on to explore her own realisation of new analytic possibilities within primary datasets through engaging in data-sharing practices, and the linked value of serendipity. Finally, she explores issues in the practice of qualitative data archiving, and the importance of safeguarding the integrity of extant data for effective future re-use. Grounding these points in a brief personal intellectual biography of her secondary analysis experiences, Bornat exemplifies points that will have a wide resonance among current and prospective secondary analysts. All three articles illustrate very well the ways in which the conceptualisation of context is necessarily an integral part of effective secondary analysis, which in turn can help to enrich our sociological and historical understanding.

Note

1 This work is documented on the Timescapes website: www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk

References


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