

The Future of Qualitative Data Archiving*

Background and Description

In the Social Sciences the term ‘Qualitative Data’ encompasses all non-numeric data (such as interview transcripts, images and video materials) created to address specific research questions. Qualitative data share many of the challenges that occur across all SSH domains, but they do present some *additional* challenges that should be addressed at an early stage to ensure full integration to the developing community-based infrastructures. In order to review these challenges and to make recommendations, experts from ten European countries attended the DASISH Qualitative Data workshop at NUI Maynooth, Ireland, on 21st November, 2012.

Challenges

Historically, qualitative data sharing has encountered mistrust by some researchers who adopt an interpretive epistemological stance in contrast to the positivist approach often associated with quantitative data. Preparing qualitative data for *archiving*, including anonymisation to preserve confidentiality, is often more time-consuming. Because the culture surrounding data sharing is less well developed in the qualitative community, more support may be required to improve *access* and re-use. Access has also been limited by the absence of web-based systems for browsing qualitative data. While *the legal and ethical* challenges associated with data sharing are not exclusive to qualitative data, researchers in this domain often express greater fears about the ethical risks involved.

Findings and recommendation

Recent developments in the field of qualitative research have begun to create a momentum towards *data management for sharing and preservation*. These include greater scale in qualitative research projects, growing diversity of epistemological approaches and funder requirements for data management plans that include archiving. Given the complexity of qualitative data, researchers require early intervention and greater support on the part of data services to manage their data for deposit and dissemination.

Improving *access* to qualitative data requires the development of technologies for exploring, citing and linking data. Just as importantly it requires us to expand our understanding of access to include services and support for *re-use*. A number of projects aimed at providing enhanced delivery of qualitative data are currently underway. However, concerns remain about the appropriateness of structured data delivery systems for qualitative data. Supports for re-use through education, training and other resources will continue to be central to successful dissemination.

The *legal and ethical* landscape for qualitative data archiving is evolving. It may be necessary to implement licensing solutions that provide privileged access to ‘expert’ users. Trust in some data services may be challenged by doubts about their capacity to defend licensing arrangements and by the absence of secure funding.

Table 1: Summary of topics, challenges and solutions for qualitative data

	Challenges	Solutions
1. Data Archiving	<p>Epistemological traditions contributing to researcher mistrust</p> <p>Growing demand associated with increased scale and funder requirements</p> <p>Complex and time-consuming data preparation processes</p>	<p>Provide early intervention and additional support to assist researchers.</p>
2. Shared Data Access and Enrichment	<p>Underdeveloped culture and norms surrounding re-use</p> <p>Absence until very recently of platforms for web-browsing and dissemination</p> <p>Continuing concerns about appropriateness of enhanced delivery for qualitative data</p>	<p>Expand understanding of <i>access</i> beyond technological solutions to include support for <i>re-use</i></p> <p>Develop web-based systems for exploring qualitative data where appropriate</p>
3. Ethical and Legal Issues	<p>High level of concern about respondent protection within qualitative research community</p> <p>Limitations of anonymization to protect confidentiality</p> <p>Threats to trust posed by insecure funding and risk that licensing agreements might not be vindicated</p>	<p>Promote greater awareness of rights management agreements and data protection procedures adopted by data services</p> <p>Develop system of 'expert' users with privileged access for some data</p> <p>Advocate to improve legal standing and sustainability of data services</p>