

Archiving qualitative datasets: social research and the politics of control

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All researchers who apply to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through their research grant scheme must complete a lengthy form, of which one page is devoted to questions on "Data Collection and provision for the preparation and archiving of datasets". What this means is that applicants must specify whether their proposed project would involve the "production of new datasets" (ie. whether 'new' information would be obtained), and whether such data would be "quantitative", qualitative" or "both". "Quantitative data" in this context refers to information that has been collected and recorded in a numerical way, say via a social survey or an opinion poll, and probably analysed using statistical tests. "Qualitative data" would refer to information collected in the course of research projects which has not been recorded or analysed in such a numerical form. This might involve transcripts of interviews with participants or perhaps research notes based on observations of people in particular contexts.

The ESRC is the main source of funding for academic research in the social sciences in Britain, excluding charitable trusts like Rowntree and Leverhulme. It is a Quango, funded by the government, but (supposedly) independent of political control. The latter has to be treated with caution, since the ESRC has come under heavy pressure since the early 1980s, when the Thatcher government cut its funding dramatically, and changed its name from the Social Science Research Council to the ESRC. Thatcherite logic dictated that most social scientists were seen (like most of those working at the BBC) as Marxists, communists and dangerous left-wing agitators, so the ESRC gained a strong(er) emphasis on economics rather than sociology in order to purge itself of such unacceptable influences. More recent developments have seen the ESRC present a 'corporate plan', and a 'mission statement' (developed in consultation with the government) that makes it all too clear for whom British social scientists should be working. The ESRC's mission statement includes the aim of supporting research in the social sciences which will contribute

towards "the economic competitiveness of the UK, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and the quality of life" (ESRC, 1996).

The ESRC has recently coined the term 'users' to refer to those chairmen (+ token women) of British industry, public figures and (another token?) ex-trade union leaders who sit on ESRC committees alongside academics and make decisions about where the money for social research should go. The term 'users' also appears throughout the various ESRC application forms. Applicants must be able to argue that their proposed research has a relevance outside the academy to 'users'. At the first glance, this might seem a laudable aim, except for that stress on the importance of enhancing competitiveness. If I want to do some research about the lives of men who are long-term unemployed, do I argue that the study will help 'users' who are also long-term unemployed, or 'users' who are (un) likely to be their employers?

It is in this context that I want to look at the ESRC's proposed use of 'qualitative datasets'. Their expectation, as far as I can gather, is that most social researchers involved in qualitative studies should be able and willing to send transcripts (with the participants' identities concealed) to the ESRC Data Archive or the Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre, both at the University of Essex. Like other qualitative and quantitative datasets, this material could then be 'accessed' by 'external users' through the Data Archive system for use in 'secondary research'. These 'external users' might include academics and non-academics.

My sense is that this development represents a well-meaning attempt by the ESRC to take qualitative research seriously - by treating it like traditional quantitative research. The assumption is that since everyone accepts the use of data archives for social surveys and other quantitative material, then the expansion of this system to include 'qualitative data' can only be welcomed. After all, Britain is the location of a large and ambitious qualitative data archive: the Mass Observation studies of the 1930s and '40s. In fact, the Qualitative Data Archive was instigated by a group of oral historians, including Paul Thompson, who requested funding from the ESRC. Those working at 'Qualidata' have considerable experience of using qualitative research material as source information, and a commitment

to protecting the confidentiality of research participants and respecting the latter's legal copyright of their own words. The future funding of 'Qualidata' is by no means certain, and I would certainly support their work to date. What I want to do here is raise some questions about the implications of treating research material in this way. My main aim is generate debate, because few social researchers in Britain (especially psychologists) appear to know about this development, still less to have thought through, or discussed, the possible implications.

Some of the issues raised by the 'archiving of qualitative datasets' are outlined below:

- 1) 'Archiving' interview transcripts and research notes in this way implies that information from qualitative research can be treated in the same distanced objective manner as 'quantitative data' within a positivist approach. This is likely to enhance the tendency to treat information from qualitative research as sections of text that can be analysed out of social context. The whole process is likely to play towards an empiricist view of research and to reinforce the passivity of respondents.
- 2) 'Secondary analysis', whether by academics or non-academics, may prove to be a risky business. Many areas of social research involve politically important and sensitive issues, and it is possible for those with racist or homophobic motives for example, to use particular data to further their own political agendas. For some researchers, however, multiple readings of any piece of text are possible, so secondary analysis would pose no problems.
- 3) When researchers recruit participants for studies, do we tell them that their interview transcripts (albeit in anonymous form) will end up in a data archive? Maintaining confidentiality is not the same as being accountable to research participants. Of course, most social researchers do not allow respondents access to (still less veto over) their analysis prior to publication, so why should secondary analysis pose a particular problem?
- 4) It is possible to see this development as a relatively democratic move that might serve to demythologise the whole process of collecting and analysing 'qualitative data'. The archiving process could undermine the notion that individual people's accounts are

somehow secret or private property. Alternatively, the process could be seen as converting people's words (via word processing technology) into commodities available in a research marketplace, thereby shifting the notion (and practice) of research into disembodied cyberspace. Others might counter the 'new democracy' argument by pointing out that not all of those involved are of equivalent status or power. The 'users' who might avail themselves of the data archive include major private sector corporations and various public sector institutions, whilst the accounts of respondents contained therein are likely to come from individuals from less privileged sections of society.

I have summarised a number of points above without making my own position all that clear. This is partly because I sense that these issues have scarcely been debated, and also because the debate concerns the political nature of the research process as well as the very diverse ways in which those involved in 'qualitative research' might treat 'their' data. I have some profound reservations about 'archiving qualitative data' in this particular context, but the issues involved are by no means straightforward. My main concern is that these issues get to be discussed as widely as possible, and 'Radical Statistics' is an ideal forum to initiate that debate. How might the notion of social research as an agent of social/political change (however indirect) fit with 'archiving qualitative datasets'?

Reference

ESRC (1996) Postgraduate research studentships in the social sciences: Guidance notes for applicants. Swindon: ESRC pamphlet.

Author: *Christine Griffin*, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham. I am grateful to participants in a session on this topic at the Discourse Analysis Workshop at Bolton Institute in June 1996 for insights into the issues raised here. An earlier version appeared in Psychology Politics Resistance newsletter issue 4.