

Workshop review: You mean the data has already been collected? Using secondary data in psychology

Abstract

This article reviews the PsyPAG-funded workshop introducing participants to secondary data research in psychology, which was held on the 2nd of December, 2015 at Birkbeck, University of London.

One could argue that data collection is an integral part of research. However, this is changing within the landscape of British psychology, where increasingly we find researchers using datasets collected, compiled, or created by other parties.

Postgraduate students from across London and beyond came together at Birkbeck, University of London, for the day to explore this approach to research in more detail. The morning began with a brief introduction to PsyPAG as an organisation representing the interests of all psychology postgraduates in the UK, and acknowledging their support in funding the workshop (thank you!).

In the first session, Dr Juliet Hassard from Birkbeck, University of London, delivered a lecture introducing participants to the topic. Secondary data here refers to existing data that are freely available to researchers who were not involved in the original study, and while it is often perceived to be of a quantitative nature, it can actually encompass a variety of material including websites, interviews, newspaper articles, and social media posts amongst others. Juliet explained that secondary data has the potential to address a lot of the limitations in traditional psychological research, as it typically is less resource intensive to collect, contain much larger sample sizes, encompass longitudinal designs, and allow for comparisons across comparative research samples. However, because it is less established (particularly in the field of UK psychology) and it can easily be misused, researchers need to invest more time in demonstrating rigour and responsible use.

After lunch, Simone Croft (University of Sheffield) introduced participants to cohort sets. These longitudinal data collections provide important and rich data relevant to researchers from many disciplines. The role of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in funding these data sets was also reviewed and Simone described the four "jewels" of the ESRC crown: the National Survey of Health and Development, the National Child Development Study, the 1970 British Cohort Study, and the Millennium Cohort Study. While data is again often assumed to be of a quantitative nature, these data sets also collect biomedical and qualitative data. Increasingly, as research councils become more economical there are more funding calls on research relating to ESRC datasets and secondary data research in general. Participants were also given an opportunity to work in groups to review different cohort studies and plan their own research questions.

The final session of the day was a panel discussion comprised of four panellists sharing their experiences of working with secondary data. The first was Juliet who presented the first lecture in the morning, who was joined by three current PhD students at various stages of their PhD journey. More specifically, Candy Whittome shared her experience using a dataset looking at teacher wellbeing, Jamie Priestly on using public documents including newspaper articles, while I reflected on my use of the NHS Staff Survey. The panellists shared their reasons for using secondary data, what worked well and what their challenges they faced. The feedback for this session was extremely positive, as most participants felt that it gave context and real examples to some of the issues that were highlighted in the first two sessions.

The key underlying message throughout was that using secondary data is becoming more popular and important in psychology research. At the same time, while some may view secondary data as an easy approach, the reality is that the need to establish rigour while processing (often) large amounts of data means this is no easy task.

Some Personal Reflection

When I came across the invitation to apply for PsyPAG funding for a workshop, I thought this would be a great opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. First, having just started my first year as a PhD student, I knew that secondary data was going to be an important part of my analysis of working conditions in the NHS. Organising a workshop on this topic allowed me to engage with this approach in a different manner by considering what someone new to this would want to know. It also helped expand my own network of academics and PhD students who have also worked with secondary data, as I discussed ideas and sourced speakers with them. Second, the process of writing up a funding proposal was a beneficial introduction to the funding process.

The organisation of the workshop was fairly straightforward, and with all 30 places booked up within 24 hours of advertising highlights the interest in the field of secondary data usage. However, a few weeks before the workshop things unravelled as both speakers and participants started to drop out. To deal with this, I sent out emails asking participants to confirm their place, as it afforded me the chance to re-advertise places. In the end, while there still were 30 people registered for the workshop, I had about 40 people who had at one point registered and then withdrew. My advice to organisers, particularly of free events, is to be prepared for high dropout rates. It is essential to follow up on participants, as it would be disappointing if a large proportion of participants did not show up on the day. Similarly, as students ourselves we may be guilty of signing up for free events and not attending. From a student perspective, organisers would appreciate if you inform them that you are not able to attend, because non-attendance can cost organisers who allocate resources (e.g., packs, catering) to the number of registered participants.

More Resources

If you are interested in this workshop but were not present, some of the materials have been made public on the Centre for Sustainable Working Life website (<http://goo.gl/QyvMML>). Here you will find a short recap of the workshop, as well as the slides used in the first two sessions. Also available is a video recording of Dr Juliet Hassard's introductory lecture.

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