

The re-use of qualitative data is an under-appreciated field for innovation and the creation of new knowledge in the social sciences

The value and potential of data re-use and the associated methodology of qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) is often overlooked. Dr Anna Tarrant and Dr Kahryn Hughes propose, that as COVID-19 limits opportunities for qualitative research for the foreseeable future, now, more than ever the social sciences need to address the under-use of existing qualitative data.

Qualitative data reuse has been made increasingly possible both through a proliferation of accessible data sources, and innovation in research methods. Over the last two decades there have been large scale investments in archives and repositories capturing a 'tsunami' of new data. Furthermore, there has been tremendous innovation in [wide-ranging methods of qualitative data re-use](#) (e.g. Irwin and Winterton, [2011](#); Davidson et al. [2018](#); Hughes et al. [2020](#); Jamieson and Lewthwaite, [2019](#); Tarrant and Hughes, [2019](#); Hughes and Tarrant, [2020](#)). Not only are qualitative data important documents of human life, they are an endlessly creative resource that connect us to the much longer social histories of which we are part. As the lockdown makes traditional approaches to qualitative research challenging, now is an appropriate time for us to reconsider the tendency for primary data generation to be the 'go to' form of fieldwork and new research.

Data re-use and modes of apprehension

While repositories, resources and data, alongside new methods of data reuse, present huge potential for the generation of new knowledge, they also confront the researcher with familiar challenges addressed in more traditional approaches to fieldwork. These include questions about how we access samples, manage the data available to us, and how we determine whether and how data generated can be used as [evidence to inform on the social world](#). The analytic opportunities engendered through qualitative secondary analysis (QSA) requires us to engage with such questions, albeit these are often reframed around those concerning 'context' for researchers repurposing data via new empirical endeavours. The contextualised character of qualitative data production, for example, requires considerable theoretical work, or 'recontextualisation', by researchers who reuse data, as well as a careful and precise examination of the complex dimensions of their relationship with the data. Relatedly, QSA also requires us to revisit [methods of co-production](#), such as how far the generation of data 'insights' depends upon co-present, proximate and synchronous forms of face-to-face engagement. QSA therefore involves [careful and critical engagement](#) with the 'embedded contexts' both of previous studies and the subsequent contexts of researchers seeking to make sense of existing data and the extent of their usefulness.



These questions are often linked to another set of concerns about how far new research may be limited by working with existing qualitative datasets. Such datasets are often considered 'fixed' in terms of their connection to, or even expression of, the 'original' study contexts. There may also appear to be a lack of formative opportunity in generating new data by using datasets that have been produced by other, often unconnected, research teams. However, our work conceptualises qualitative secondary analysis as a process wherein researchers seek to *apprehend* data of different orders. This endeavour requires engagement with questions concerning how datasets are repurposed and recast, both as theoretical objects and as 'evidence'. From this position, temporal and epistemic 'distance' are not inevitable analytic deficits. Indeed, such 'distance' can offer opportunities for new insights in ways not always available to those researchers proximal to the formative contexts of research. Awareness of the affordances of these kinds of temporal distance, as well as the development of a new vocabulary to explain QSA research, is shifting debate from questions of *whether* we should re-use data towards questions of *how* data might speak beyond the contexts of their original generation and what methods of QSA can be developed to do this.

Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care: an exemplar of fieldwork re-using data

Using datasets in the [Timescapes Archive](#), Anna's [work](#) provides an example of possible methods of QSA, challenging ideas of 'fixity of context' and meaning, and is an exemplar of how rich, in-depth insights can be achieved by re-using ostensibly 'small' datasets and samples. Her QSA involved developing and using a new research design where analyses of two existing datasets were undertaken concurrently with literature reviewing. Other developments include:

1. Testing new methodological techniques for engaging with existing data (e.g. Tarrant and Hughes, [2019](#); [2020](#));
2. Familiarisation with existing datasets, bringing them together and theoretically sampling from them;
3. Bringing new questions to new samples, and generating new insights from her analyses;
4. Developing new empirically-driven research questions, and
5. Sustaining and extending existing study samples, as well as key stakeholder groups and networks ([Men, Poverty and Lifetimes of Care](#)).

Through these various activities, new directions are opened up for thinking through questions concerning researchers' *formative* engagement with existing data, as well as methodological innovations for addressing these. Additionally, the work demonstrates the creative potential of re-apprehending data in new and novel ways, both in how existing datasets may be reused for the purposes of new thinking, but also effective ways of taking existing *relationships* from previous research forward.

Teaching and Research

The fieldwork plans of taught postgraduate researchers may feel especially impacted by the global pandemic. The anticipated longer-term effects on the Higher Education sector have already caused concern, particularly in terms of teaching delivery, which by necessity has moved online. There are also clear implications for students who have been planning to undertake face-to-face fieldwork. For social sciences students, dissertations form a major component of their courses, facilitating the bringing together of new learning, about method and the substantive, with real world research engagement. Using the analytical opportunities of their 'temporal remove', students who re-use data have the potential to broaden the methods they use, to generate new and relevant insights about the social world, and in this way become embedded in much longer research histories.

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There are also valuable resources to support a step change in attitudes towards re-using qualitative data for fieldwork for teaching purposes. For example, 'free to access' repositories such as the [Timescapes Archive](#), and the [UK Data Archive](#), contain bespoke datasets and resources to support course design and delivery.

Asserting the value of QSA

The aim of this blog, inspired in part by our new edited collection [Qualitative Secondary Analysis](#), is to illustrate the huge, almost untapped potential afforded by resources and methods of qualitative re-use and QSA. In demonstrating their value for researchers at all career stages, we argue for the increased uptake of these methods as discrete and important forms of fieldwork. We propose that qualitative data re-use and QSA is feasible at any scale, suitable for long years of analysis (as our work has involved), or for the much shorter time frames of postgraduate research students. However, as we indicate above, the process whereby researchers engage with how existing data can be used to '[speak of the social world](#)' and subsequent data analysis and immersion will always be a lengthy undertaking, requiring careful and reflexive work. Nevertheless, although the COVID-19 crisis may constrain face-to-face researching, archived data support researchers' connections to much longer histories of research and provide the opportunity for new and exciting research innovation.

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