ESDS Qualidata is dedicated to supporting quality research and education by documenting, disseminating and providing advice on using qualitative research data for secondary analysis. ESDS Qualidata is committed to ensuring that access to qualitative data is as free, open, and easy as possible, while conforming to ethical and legal standards.

In the UK, and indeed in many countries still, one of the barriers to re-using data, has been the lack of an infrastructure to enable access to the rich research data collected in the academic community. Until recently in the UK, potential users have had a limited choice of qualitative data that has been made available compared to the 5000 plus quantitative datasets held by the Economic and Social Data Service. However, the choice has grown over the past ten years: in 1995 Qualidata had located 100 data sources and by the year 2004 some 460 resources were catalogued, with some 50 available in digital format via the ESDS.

Since 2000, ESDS has conducted two national surveys of academics and researchers to ascertain their views on access to qualitative data including: what kind of data and in which format. Many users want to be able to access datasets across a wide range of disciplines primarily in electronic format for both research and teaching purposes. Social class and social change, health and criminology come out as the most popular topics, whilst the ability to browse qualitative data online is viewed as a very useful resource. The ESDS Qualidata web site (www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata) offers some examples of data in these areas, and ESDS Qualidata Online allows browsing of some of the classic interviews online (at present Paul Thompson’s life story studies - the Edwardians and 100 Families, and Mildred Blaxter’s study of Mothers and Daughters).

Whilst the practices of re-use of qualitative data are not well documented in the literature at present, re-use provides a unique opportunity to study the raw materials of the recent or more distant past to gain insights for both methodological and substantive purposes. The ways in which qualitative data can be re-used have much in common with those applicable to the secondary analysis of survey data.

**Re-uses of data**

**Description** - describing the contemporary and historical attributes, attitudes and behaviour of individuals, societies, groups or organisations. Data created now, will in time become a unique historical resource.

**Comparative research, replication or restudy** of original research - to compare with other data sources or to provide comparison over time or between social groups or regions etc. Data may also be used for substantiating results, although there is little evidence so far of re-use for this purpose.

**Re-analysis** - asking new questions of the data and making different interpretations to the original researcher. Approaching the data in ways that were not originally addressed, such as using data for investigating different themes or topics of study. The more in-depth the material, and the more contextualised the raw data, the more possible this becomes.

**Research design and methodological advancement** - designing a new study or developing a methodology or research tool by studying sampling methods, data collection and fieldwork strategies and topic guides. Although researchers often publish a section on methods used, researchers’ own fieldwork diaries or analytic notes can offer much insight into the history and development of the research.

**Teaching and learning** - both older ‘classic’ studies and more contemporary focused sets of transcripts can provide unique case material for teaching and learning in both research methods and substantive areas across a range of social science disciplines. ESDS Qualidata provide a number of teaching data sets and materials on the web site and on request.

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The series of ESDS Guides are available online at www.esds.ac.uk

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Examples of re-using qualitative data

Early classic restudies include: Seebohm Rowntree’s (1901) three surveys of poverty in York; Llewellyn Smith’s (1930-5) repeat of Charles Booth’s (1891-1902) famous poverty survey in London; the Lynds’ studies of Middletown (1929, 1937); or, to take an anthropological instance, the controversial restudy and reinterpretation by Oscar Lewis (1963) of Redfield’s (1930) research on the village of Tepotzlan in Mexico. Similarly, the material from Paul Thompson’s national study of ‘The Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience before 1918’ (1975), has provided a unique and unrepeatable set of 444 interviews with men and women born before 1918. These data have been kept in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex since the 1970s, and over 100 researchers and students have re-used the materials, providing the basis of a series of books and articles. They are now available in digital format via ESDS Qualidata.

Articles and case studies of re-use of qualitative data

The literature on the re-use of qualitative data is growing. There are now a number of articles that address a range of perspectives, either based on actual experiences of re-use or about more theoretical issues.

The first recommendation is the chapter on ‘Secondary Data Analysis’ by Louise Corti and Paul Thompson, published in a new methods reader:


Second is the special issue of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology, Theory and Practice that contains an edited collection of papers given at the 2001 conference organised by ESDS Qualidata on ‘Celebrating Classic Sociology: Pioneers of Contemporary British Qualitative Research’. Contributors include: Martyn Hammersley; Colin Bell; Michael Young; Frank Bechofer; Mildred Blaxter; Janet Finch; Dennis Marsden; George Brown; Paul Thompson; Peter Townsend and Nigel Fielding. The papers are a great read, and provide retrospective accounts of some of the most innovative and ground-breaking qualitative research carried out since the 1950s. They offer fascinating insight into the dynamics, politics and realities of doing social research.


Many of the research datasets under discussion in these papers are archived at the University of Essex at the National Social Policy and Social Change Archive and at the UK Data Archive.

A list of published articles relating to secondary analysis of qualitative data can be found at:

www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/support/reuseexamples.asp

Finally a special edition of the free online journal, Forum Qualitative Research (FQS), on Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data will be published in early 2005: www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm