Qualitative Secondary Analysis: an introduction

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Abstract

Qualitative Secondary Analysis (QSA) is a research method that utilises existing qualitative data to investigate new research questions or to approach topics from a different angle than was addressed by the original or 'primary' study. Secondary qualitative data may include oral histories, social media content or public documents. However, the main focus of recent methodological debate has been around the use of archived research data, predominantly qualitative interviews. In this introductory seminar, we will briefly describe some **key issues and controversies** around QSA, the **methodological benefits and challenges**, and some **ethical issues** particular to QSA methodology. We will draw on **our own experiences** of an ongoing QSA project which is using archived interview data to look at conceptualisation of mental health among people claiming welfare benefits in the UK during the mid-2010s.

Session outline

- What is Qualitative Secondary Analysis (QSA)?

- Why use the method of QSA?

- What can you do with QSA?

- Ethical and epistemological considerations

- **A worked example: Understanding mental health in the UK welfare system**

- Practicalities, skills, successes and challenges

- Resources and references

What is Qualitative Secondary Analysis?

"Secondary analysis of qualitative data entails **reusing data created from previous research projects for new purposes**." (UK Data Service)

Also referred to as data **re-use** or **reworking**

Less established than secondary analysis of quantitative data but a growing methodological field, "*sufficiently accepted that it must now be regarded as mainstream.*" (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017: 1)

May involve **primary** researchers, **secondary** researchers or **collaborations** of both

– To date, a majority have at least some involvement from primary team (Heaton, 2004; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019)
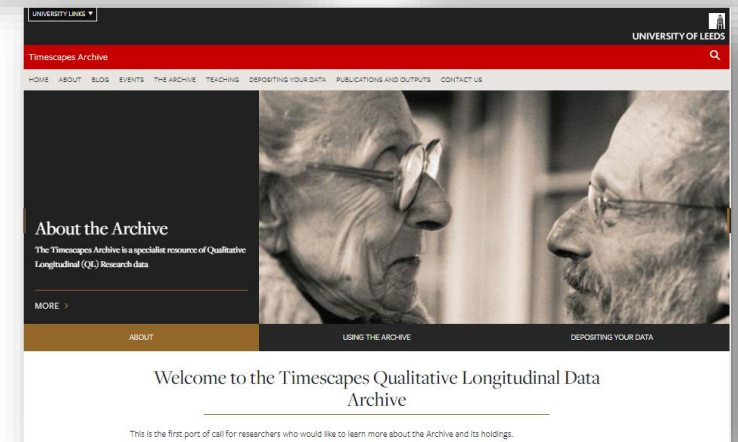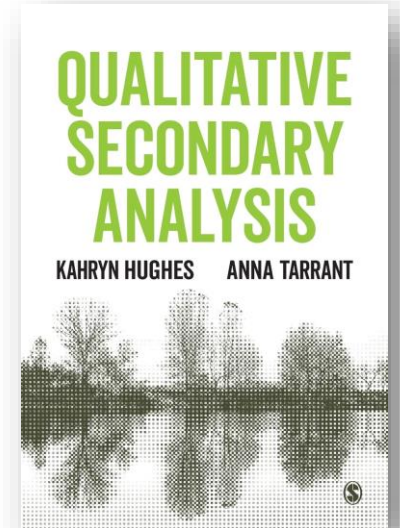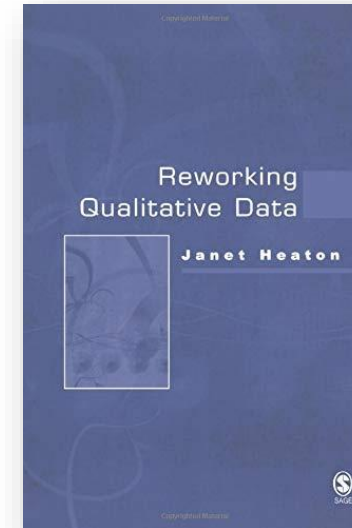
Why use the method of QSA?

- **Maximise what can be learned** from existing research data sets
  - Primary qualitative studies rarely 'exhaust' their data
  - Not collecting new data when usable relevant data exists

- **Avoid participant or community research burden** (esp. vulnerable groups)

- **Inform policy** where new research is not feasible or rapid information is required

- Making **temporal/historic comparisons**; social and cultural change over time

- **Cost and time savings**

QSA is becoming more feasible:
  - Encouraged by research funders (maximising value from publicly funded research)
    - …in connection with 'open data' movement
  - Advances in digitisation, archiving and data sharing infrastructures

What can you do with QSA?

Ask a **new question** of existing data

> *"QSA research may involve prioritising a concept or issue that **was present** in the original data but was not the analytical focus at that time"* (Irwin & Winterton, 2011a: 4)

Make a **comparison** - historic, geographical or cultural

Explore **change over time** by bringing together **archived and new** data

Derive **substantive** and/or **methodological** insights

Inform the **design** of future research - gain preliminary insights, identify concepts, test out a question or hunch

> *"...support and potentially enhance the development of a **conceptual framework** for a new empirical study"* (Tarrant, 2017: 599)

What kinds of data are available?

Historic archives to **contemporary** or '**living**' archives

- Curation will vary according to age and data form
- Scope and potential will vary
- Improving with the move to open data and sophistication of archiving practices

Interview transcripts (individual, group)

Fieldnotes

Essays

Diaries

Photographs, maps, drawings

Oral histories

Audiovisual

Metadata

Research design and methodology

Research instruments

What kinds of analysis can you do?

Anything that makes sense – within reason!

- Narrative
- Thematic
- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
- Content
- Discourse
- Comparative
- Conversation Analysis?

Bear in mind – likely to have access to transcripts only

- Cannot check, correct or clarify
- May have redacted sensitive information

Ethical and epistemological considerations

- Informed consent and its limits

- Confidentiality and anonymity

- Ethics of ownership, habits of care (Irvine, 2023; Weller, 2022)

- Implications of not 'being there' (Hammersley, 2010; Irwin & Winterton, 2011a)

- Need for fit between data and research questions

- Need for orientation to study context and data structure

- Scoping feasibility- uncertainty of 'success'

- Collaboration with primary researcher(s) where possible

"Secondary analysts [will] often need to refine their questions in line with the available data, which may not be exactly as they predict or desire it"
(Irwin & Winterton, 2011b: 11)

Encouragement and caution!

"Distance and partial knowledge of proximate contexts may constrain secondary analysis [but] its success is contingent on its objectives. **So long as data analysis is fit for purpose then secondary analysis is no poor relation to primary analysis**."
(Irwin & Winterton, 2012: 1)

"It may be a risky course to follow in so far as **outcomes are uncertain yet time commitments can be extensive**"
(Irwin & Winterton, 2011b: 14)

Key principles

- A new substantive reason for conducting QSA (Lewis et al., 2021)

- Not questioning or undermining the original analysis (Bishop, 2021)

- Need a *reasonable* fit between data and your research question

- Understand the context and structure of the data

- Ethical treatment of the data

"Reanalysis asks **new questions** of the data and makes **different interpretations** from the original researcher. It approaches the data in ways that were not originally addressed, such as using data for investigating **different themes or topics of study** … This **does not involve attempts to undermine** researchers' previous analysis."
(Bishop, 2021: 431 – emphasis added)

Understanding presentations of mental health and illness in the UK welfare system – a QSA project

- Our project aims:
    - Investigate lived experience/narrative accounts of distress – what, why, and what consequences for gaining/maintaining work

- Awareness of WelCond primary study – Dwyer et al., 2020

- We were able to secure funding from UKRI dedicated funding initiative for secondary analysis projects
    - https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/esrc-responsive-mode-secondary-data-analysis-round-two/

What is the 'Welcond' data archive?

- 481 participants (working age adults)
  - Three waves of qualitative interview data (2014-17)

- 1081 transcripts archived
  - Note that this is an unusually large qualitative data set (made more so because of the longitudinal nature)

- Primary study focused on people's experiences of 'sanctions' and support in the UK welfare system

- 200+ participants mentioned experience of mental health problems
 - We are focusing on the experiences of a subsample of this mental health group

What's been involved in our QSA?

- Sampling from the huge archive
  - Content mapping using keywords of interest (mental health terms)
  - 100 ↘ 50 ↗ 68
- Data processing
  - Narrative case summaries using a template
    - Note the additional quirk of our dataset – that it was **longitudinal** (this adds another dimension and volume of work)
  - Constructing a descriptive sample overview as we went along

What's been involved in our QSA: Analysis

- Multifaceted, exploratory, iterative
- A combination of narrative and thematic analysis
  - Narrative: How do **individual** participants tell/frame/reframe their lived experience?
  - Thematic: What are the themes across the sample **as a whole**?
- IRM as a theoretical framework
- Tables and spreadsheets for data display (as per 'standard' thematic or framework analysis)
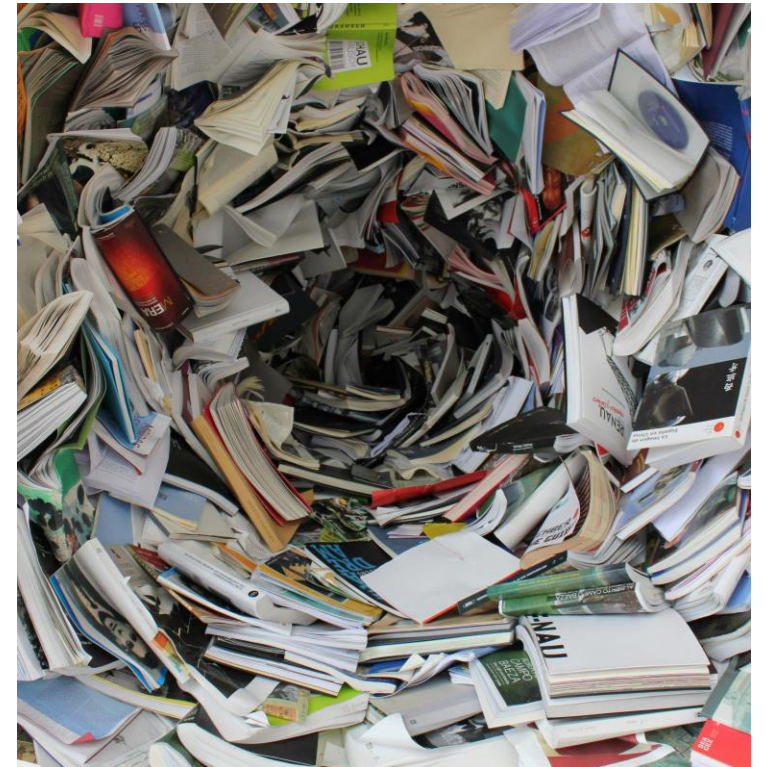
The practicalities of doing our QSA

- Data!
- Understanding of the primary study aims, design and context
- Time to explore and get to know the data
  - What is this material that you're working with?
  - What's there and what are you going to be able to do with it?
- A clear research focus – but a flexible/adaptable approach
- A sampling strategy – if not using the whole dataset

The skills we needed for doing our QSA

- Solid grounding in qualitative analytic principles and techniques – not for us to judge
    - It's not an easy way out, just because you don't have to do the data collection; it's more work than you think; you will feel insecure about your analysis
- Personal Protections
- Boundaries and Parameters
- There will always be gaps – QSA isn't for perfectionists
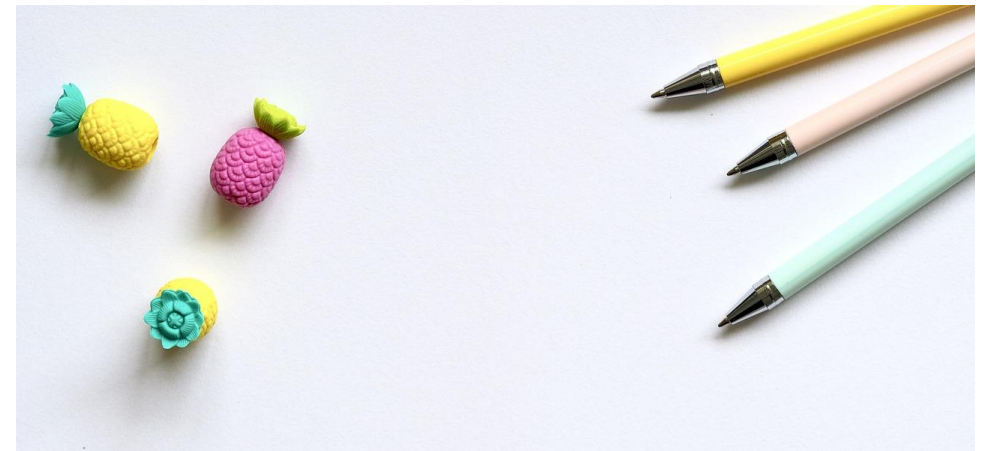
Successes and challenges along the way

- Methodological
  - "Missing data"
  - Volume of data
  - 'Noise'
  - Being ok with what we can accomplish and what we cannot (recognising the limitations of QSA)
- Ethical considerations
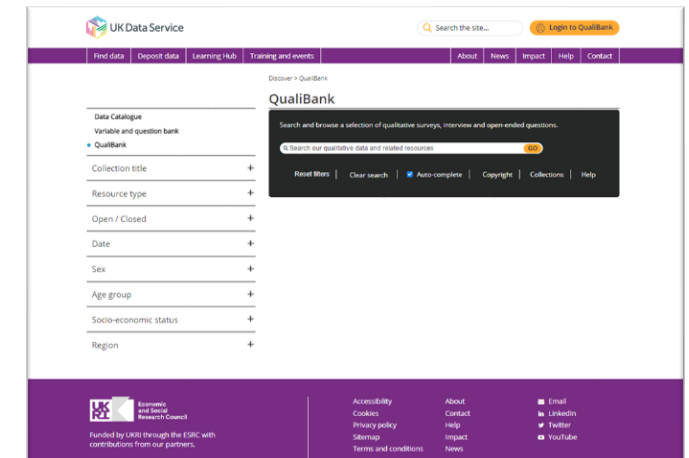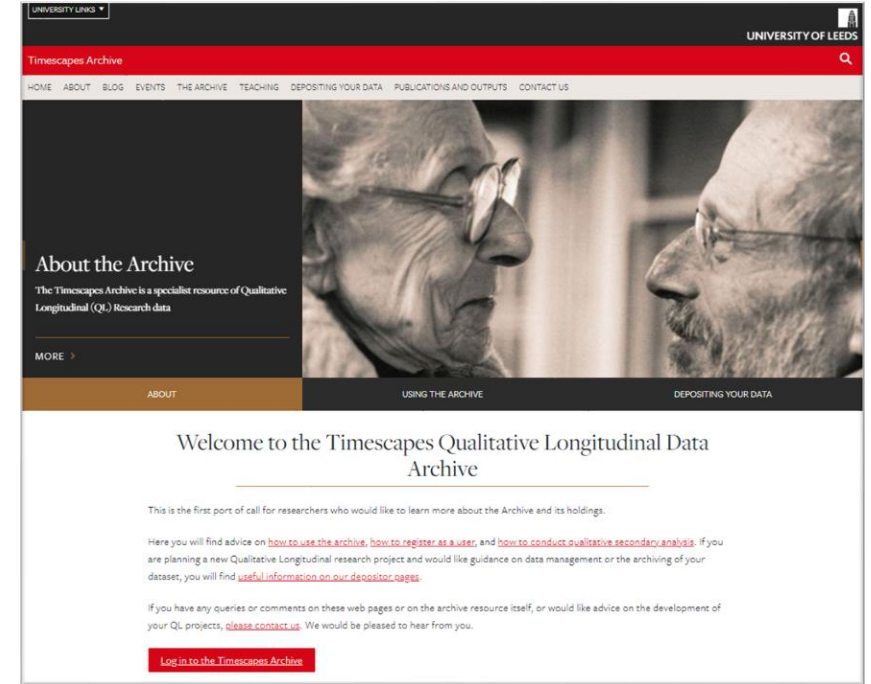- Interpersonal Skills: Surprises/unexpected feelings

Some data sources

Qualibank (UK Data Service)

- https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk//qualibank.aspx

Timescapes and the Timescapes Archive

- https://timescapes-archive.leeds.ac.uk/
- https://timescapes.researchdata.leeds.ac.uk/

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