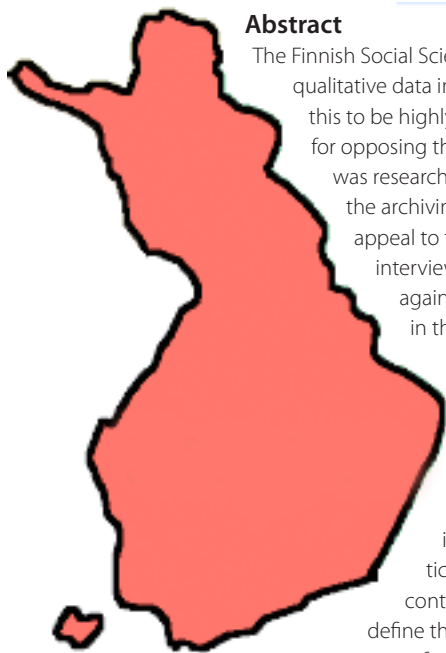


Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas of Archiving Qualitative Data

by Arja Kuula ¹



Abstract

The Finnish Social Science Data archive started archiving qualitative data in 2003. Many researchers found this to be highly problematic. Their main reason for opposing the archiving of qualitative data was research ethics. Researchers who oppose the archiving of qualitative interviews mainly appeal to the confidential nature of the interview situation. This kind of argument against archiving is put under scrutiny in this article. It covers issues such as the presentation of research subjects and the understanding of research relationship. Researchers tend to define the interview relationship as unpredictable and private, and interviewees as helpless participants in need of protection. In contrast, the interviewees themselves define the relationship as an institutional one aiming to foster science.

Keywords: research ethics, qualitative research, data archiving, interviews

Methodological and Ethical Dilemmas of Archiving Qualitative Data

The focus of my article is to study ethical and methodological assumptions related to archiving qualitative data in order to question some researchers' presumptions that archiving infringes on the idea or nature of qualitative research. Before discussing the main topic I will characterize a few differences in research culture between the humanities and the social sciences concerning research data archiving. After that I will describe briefly the actual measures that the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) has taken in establishing the archiving of social

science qualitative data. The different phases and difficulties FSD has had to go through reflect also the general research culture in the social sciences.

Qualitative data can consist of memoirs, letters, pictures, movies, webpages and audio-visual recordings of different kinds of situations. Due to the identifying nature of images and audio recording, they are probably the most challenging material to archive. I will however, concentrate on interviews. Researchers often define them as difficult type of data to archive for re-use. Those opposing archiving on ethical and methodological grounds perceive a qualitative interview as very intimate, sensitive, un-predictable, emotional and thus infeasible to be archived for re-use by a researcher who has not been in the field doing the interviews. In this article I try to challenge this argument.

In addition to reviewing the literature on this issue, I will examine the results I have obtained when contacting a great number of research participants. Contacting the participants was done in order to ask their permission for archiving data about them which the researcher had promised to keep totally confidential and restricted to his or her use only. According to the views of research participants, the researchers' argument against archiving starts to be revealed as a methodological myth: research participants believe they have control over the interview and they do not interpret qualitative interviews as secret engagements that would hinder the archiving of the data for further use. Instead, they see open access to research data for further uses as self-evident and a way for them to engage in the advancement of science.

Differences between humanities and social sciences

The research culture in Finland has been much more favorable towards qualitative than quantitative research especially since the 1980's. This trend has been more common in Europe compared to Northern America where survey methods retained their place within mainstream

methodology (Alastalo 2008). One reason for setting up the FSD a decade ago was to foster quantitative and comparative research in Finland in a situation where new researchers seemed to have less ability and willingness to use statistical methods than previous generations. FSD has succeeded in its task of fostering quantitative research. At the same time FSD has maintained the idea of fostering the re-use of qualitative data as well. That has not been an easy task. In spite of a wide-ranging collection of Finnish qualitative method books and internationally famous methodologists – such as Pertti Alasuutari or Anssi Peräkylä – we do not have traditions of sharing, reusing or archiving qualitative data in social sciences. The situation is somewhat different in the humanities.

In humanities much research data, like sound records or different kinds of folklore and interview datasets, are archived in small department-based university archives, such as The Archives of the Turku University School of Cultural Research (see Mahlamäki, 2001). In addition to department archives there are larger archives in humanities that have material not only in paper but also an increasing volume of electronic data. For instance, The Folklore Archives – a “Finnish cousin” of the British Mass Observation Archive – and the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland both have a respectable tradition of archiving qualitative research data and strategies in order to follow the developments in the digital era.

Comparing the research culture in humanities with social sciences is illuminating in the context of data archiving. In humanities, research data are considered to be testimonies that ought to be available in case someone wants to check the interpretation and results of a published research. In humanities the research data are also seen as valuable common resources that ought to be preserved if we are to understand and study our culture and history. By contrast, in the social sciences data are seen more often as private property.

The legal aspects of research data are also assessed differently. Social scientists more often emphasize privacy issues, while in the humanities it is more common to stress the significance of research participants’ copyright instead of data protection. Recently the emphasis on privacy and identification as a risk has been challenged in social sciences as well. There is a growing number of examples where research participants have expressed a wish to be referred to by their real names in research publications. This sign of the cultural change in defining the boundaries between privacy and publicity is not peculiar to Finland. The same phenomenon has been reported elsewhere (Grinyer 2002; Wiles et al. 2004; Kobayashi 2001; Kelder 2005).

First steps towards promoting re-use

The Finnish Social Science Data Archive first started to promote the re-use of qualitative data by developing and maintaining a database of available qualitative data without archiving the data itself. It proved to be a difficult task. The data collected in social sciences were mainly in the hands – or at homes, in attics or summer cottages – of the original researchers. It was very difficult to get the basic documentation of datasets and even more difficult to persuade researchers to give information about their data to a public database. Researchers realized it would have meant extra work for them if someone had been interested in their data. Humanities archives proved to be the most cooperative in collecting information about available datasets.

Starting to co-operate with traditional archives in humanities was a reasonable solution. Resources in those archives were very interesting, including large collections of ordinary peoples’ accounts, writings

and memories. The archives were also happy to extract and give basic information about those collections that we identified as potentially valuable to social scientists.

The documentation in traditional archives had been based on data-units – for instance documenting and key-wording each life story of an immigrant instead of documenting the whole collection including the writing instructions that were given to immigrants. The archives saw the extraction of basic information of certain data collections according to the DDI documentation² as an interesting way of promoting the use of their resources to broader audiences. The database consisting of 30 documented collections of traditional archives was for FSD a way to give social scientists a concrete idea of documenting qualitative data and promoting its re-use.

The archiving of qualitative data commenced in FSD in 2003. After that decision the even more demanding work began of trying to get qualitative social science datasets archived. Researchers we contacted were concerned about several issues: the actual usability of their old datasets (either depending on subject matter or IT-problems) and the inadvertent misuse of data or unclear agreements on ownership. The most common reasons were concerning ethics, confidentiality and data protection. Researchers considered those the foremost reasons not to be able to archive their old qualitative datasets. In addition researchers often appealed to a basic premise or philosophy of qualitative research: that data from such research would not be suitable to be archived for use by the broader scientific community.

Since it was difficult to persuade researchers to archive their data, we contacted Finland’s widely distributed daily newspaper’s weekly supplement editor. The weekly supplement NYT had conducted several Internet surveys which included many open-ended questions. The first qualitative data catalogue of archived datasets was made from those surveys. The data catalogue was not very large, 15 datasets, but it included various subjects, such as experiences of domestic violence, alcohol and drug use, sexual identity, living with depression, being a mother for grown-ups etc. Those datasets were our qualitative seed corn with which we were able little by little to show that qualitative data can be re-used since, in fact, they were in demand for methods courses and research purposes.

Another – and still a continuing – problem has been to smooth out the methodological prejudices of researchers doing qualitative research. In order to resolve this, FSD has gained knowledge about data protection and research ethics. By now FSD is considered one of the main information services when it comes to data protection and ethics concerning collecting, processing and re-using data in social sciences. We have extensive web-resources for researchers in Finnish and a few also in English. The most often used are guidelines for informing research participants³ and guidelines for anonymization of data⁴.

The administrative and technical infrastructure for archiving and re-using qualitative data is excellent since in Finland qualitative data archiving was embedded into the systems built for quantitative data archiving in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive. At the moment FSD has 115 archived qualitative datasets and yearly around 50-60 datasets are ordered for re-use. But the culture of archiving and re-using of qualitative research data is still only slowly emerging. Researchers need to be further assured about the advantages of archiving and especially not to over-exaggerate the ethical concerns related to archiving.

The most important opportunities to promote and discuss in depth the ethical and methodological dilemmas related to data archiving have been provided through ethics courses and national seminars targeted at Finnish researchers. During the last few years representatives of FSD have been in many of those events – and we are invited as speakers and lecturers with increasing frequency. A later part of this article will concentrate on methodological and ethical issues that have been most often discussed with researchers in those events. Instead of referring to these informal conversations, I draw upon the published articles from Britain where discussion of the issue has been active since ESDS Qualidata was founded and especially after the Economic and Social Research Council set up its data policy in 1995.

Methodological prejudices towards archiving

Methodological obstacles connected to archiving have been discussed extensively in Britain (Mauthner and Doucet 1998; Mauthner, Parry and Backett-Milburn 1998; Parry and Mauthner 2004; Richardson and Godfrey 2003; Bishop 2005). Such an energetic discussion has not occurred in journals in Finland, but informal discussions with researchers are reminiscent of the debate in Britain.

Researchers seem to be concerned about whether potential re-users of datasets will be able to follow the basic ethical norms which advise researchers not to compromise anonymity, privacy or confidentiality of research participants. This ethical concern is complemented by the assumption that qualitative research – or at least the qualitative interview relationship – is very open, confessional, truth-telling, intimate and sometimes emotional. Thus opponents of archiving cite the power of the method as unpredictably revealing and positions research participants as vulnerable and lacking power or at least lacking competence to control their speech in research situations.

Richardson and Godfrey (2002) assume that the well-being of research participants might be compromised if transcribed interviews are archived. They claim that one ethical risk of archiving is the possibility of identification. The other presupposition is that the integrity of research participants is violated when a researcher they do not know beforehand analyses confidential data.

Another type of risk is raised by Mauthner, Parry and Backett-Milburn (1998) and Parry and Mauthner (2004), who discuss the methodological obstacles to rigorous and truly self-reflective research with archived qualitative data. In both articles, archiving is placed in the realm of positivism and realism. The risk they talk about is the possibility of forcing qualitative data into rational, logical and partial datasets which do not represent the personal, in-depth, messy, haphazard, intuitive and creative real nature of that data (Mauthner et al. 1998; Mauthner and Doucet 1998). The archiving of data may compromise the quality of future interviews since researchers know that the interviews will be subject to scrutiny by other researchers. That may lessen the rapport in interviews, as well (Parry and Mauthner 2004). The risk formulated in these articles is the possibility of revealing researchers' professional performance, with the implication that it will be found wanting.

Although the expressed worry is articulated as a need to protect research participants, it may be that the unspoken real risk researchers attach to archiving is the unforeseen or unpredictable criticism by competitors or malicious researchers. Despite the problems caused by a competitive research culture, transparency of research process is acknowledged as an essential part of science. For example, social scientists researching health care think that public matters, including public documents and professional performance of doctors, should be accessible to debate and scrutiny (Hoeyer et al. 2005). According

to this logic, it is questionable that a researcher doing qualitative interviews acts in his/her own right in a private and individual role while doing publicly funded research.

Mauthner, Parry and Backett-Milburn (1998) claim that qualitative data are not suitable to be archived because using archived data is incompatible with the interpretative and reflexive nature of the research paradigm. Discussions of the difficulties of getting enough context information for re-use support that opinion. Bishop (2006 and 2009) and Moore (2007) have written responsive articles about this subject, but many researchers still think only they themselves are capable of using their data correctly.

It is true that an interviewer can perceive and partly interpret the emotions, expressions and exclamations of the interviewee. Social interaction may contain elements that are difficult to express verbally. However, researchers often employ field or research staff to collect and process the data. At the analysis stage, even those researchers who have personally collected the raw data mainly work with material derived from it. According to the conventions of science, researchers must be able to verbally express and validate all interpretations of data – including those formed in authentic situations – in their research reports. The idea of "pure" or "original" data is simply not feasible. Research data are always a construction, as Bishop (2006) says.

The perception behind the idea that the original researcher is the only one capable of analyzing the data correctly means that the original methodology is the orthodox way to understand research data. What this implies is that the original researcher has an exclusive right to define the characteristics and nature of the empirical world under investigation. That is an odd presupposition for a research paradigm that often accuses quantitative research of naïve realist epistemology. There are few empirical methods in social sciences that can be defined as neutral or unbiased. Even the ethnographic gaze is always partial, not all-embracing.

It is good to keep in mind that re-use of qualitative data is never a replication of qualitative research. Researchers re-using ethnographic field notes and interview transcriptions cannot claim to be doing ethnography him- or herself. Re-use is always partial and most of all, it usually asks quite different questions from the original research. Even in the case of quantitative data, pure replication of research is very rare. Independent of method or data, researchers may have theoretical or ideological standpoints that affect the analyses process so that it is impossible to replicate the original research.

Most re-use of archived data focuses on different kinds of research questions and methods of analyses than the original research did. For instance, original research may have concentrated on memoirs of women living in the countryside, using long in-depth interviews to study the impact of the environment on the identities of the women. A re-user of that dataset may use parts of the interviews as additional comparative data for a study that collects primary data as well, and focuses on the definitions of mother-daughter relationships. If the dataset is well-transcribed (or preferably with audio- or audiovisual recordings as well) there are many possibilities for analyzing emotions between the researcher and participant, or to carry out interaction analyses (Southall, 2009). According to this view re-using qualitative data is more of a practical issue than an epistemological one. To ensure that data are reusable for further research, there must be sufficient documentation on the context of the research and on how the data were collected (Fielding 2000 and Corti 2006).

Interviewees' perceptions of research interaction

Those opposing archiving on methodological grounds seem to imply that some kind of deception occurs in these methods of reusing data. If research participants talk in an emotionally uncontrolled way, researchers seem to feel the need to protect research participants, and one way to protect them is to prevent the archiving of data. But do research participants lose their ability of control their speech in a research context and will they be hurt by the analysing gaze of a researcher unknown to them?

Very little empirical research has been done on this kind of research experience, but luckily there is one study. It is a British report called "Ethics in Social Research: studying the views of research participants", published by the National Centre for Social Research (Graham, Grewal and Lewis 2007). The study sought to look at research ethics from the perspective of research participants and to identify their ethical requirements. It consisted of 50 in-depth interviews with adults who had recently participated in research. Ten participants in each of five studies were interviewed. They had participated in either qualitative or quantitative studies.

The results showed that the interviewees had ways of withholding information if they so wished even though they had not said explicitly "I do not want to answer or discuss this topic". Participants told how they had given misinformation and how they sometimes had held back or gave an outline of a reply but no details. In addition, they explained how behaving in certain ways, for instance, showing discomfort, affected the interaction and pushed the interviewer to move on so they did not need to reveal personal information concerning the issue at hand (Graham, Grewal and Lewis 2007). These results show that research participants are not vulnerable persons who can be exploited by qualitative interviewing. On the contrary, participants seem to be quite capable of using different strategies to control their privacy.

The report also enquired if people thought that asking upsetting questions could be justified. The general view was that it is justified to ask upsetting questions provided certain conditions are met: the research is important and worthwhile; people know the topics beforehand; interviewers are skilled and alert to how participants might be feeling and able to respond sensitively (Graham, Grewal and Lewis 2007).

The results above remind me of several conversations that I have had with researchers on ethics courses about the problems they have faced in their fieldwork. It seems that researchers tend to think there are ethical problems with their research every time an interview rouses emotions and especially when they themselves are emotionally and feel unable to help participants who have experienced difficulties in their lives. Suffering can sometimes be transmitted, or at the very least make the researcher empathetic and sad. Still, emotions are normal in research interaction in the same way as they are normal in everyday interaction when dealing with different aspects of human life.

Corbin and Morse (2003) have reviewed several research publications which have been based on qualitative interview data of sensitive issues – such as recalling traumatic experiences in life. They found no evidence of interviews having caused long-term harm or that participants required referral for follow up counseling: "In fact, even though participants experienced some degree of emotional distress during and immediately afterward, the anecdotal evidence suggests that interviews are more beneficial than harmful" (Corbin and Morse 2003: 346). Thus the seeing and feeling of emotions does not pose an imminent threat of ethical problems or risks in the research.

Interviewees' perceptions about archiving

Researchers collecting qualitative data often assume that research participants would not accept the idea of archiving. To check this assumption, we in FSD have asked a few researchers to let us re-contact their research participants. The researcher and I wrote a letter together to participants reminding them of the research project and telling them about the possibility that their data would be archived if they consent. In our telephone calls to selected research participants, we have been able to talk about the research, archiving and the terms of the future use of the data.

We have re-contacted participants of four datasets. Three datasets were interview studies and one consisted of university students' written life stories. One interview dataset consisted of discussions of equality and gender issues in working life, another concentrated on environmental conflicts, and the third focused on the life and experiences of women living in the Finnish countryside.

It is almost never possible to locate all research participants after a study has been completed. We were able to find the addresses and re-contact 169 research participants, 165 (98%) agreed to archive their data and only four did not accept the idea of archiving. One can always ask whether these particular datasets were for some reason regarded as non-sensitive by the research participants. However, all the datasets included unique and personal stories, and occasionally sensitive experiences about the issues at hand. The interviews of rural women had taken two to four hours and were very candid. The participants had spoken widely about the joys and miseries of their personal lives. Despite initial concern that consent would not be granted for this dataset, every one of those women agreed to the idea of archiving the interviews for future research purposes.

During my phone conversations with the research participants I learned that for them the main reason to give consent for archiving seems to be a wish to advance science. People had participated in the research because they had thought the subjects of the interviews were worth studying. Giving consent to archiving meant continuing to fulfil this wish. One research participant also said that the original research results did not convince him, and he warmly welcomed re-analysis by different researchers representing different disciplines. In fact, a few were a bit irritated by my contact since they had already made the decision to advance research and did not think that archiving and re-use by other, as yet unknown, researchers would conflict in any way with the original participation decision, no matter that the original researcher had said that she or he would be the only one to use the data.

One person interviewed about gender issues and discrimination in working life, laughingly asked "what kind of a risk or harm could a university researcher possibly pose by studying my ten-year-old words, thoughts and experiences?" The idea that the wellbeing of the participant could be compromised by allowing a third person to study and analyse the interview material was not a consideration. Through this exchange I started to realize how differently researchers and research participants define the research relationship.

It is worthwhile to note that research participants perceive open access to research data for other researchers as self-evident. That kind of perception of research data implies a certain kind of understanding of the relationship between researcher and the interviewees. We can naturally speculate about the extent of the research participant's knowledge of the imaginable risks and harms that archiving may lead to. Another possibility is that they do not regard the interview relationship as

private or secret. For them, the interview relationship is an institutional interaction.

The perception of research interview as institutional interaction supports the idea of participants as conscious subjects, not as ignorant or vulnerable people in need of protection. Corbin and Morse (2003) also point out in their article that research participants are given control over the course of interview and participants know that they are telling their experiences to an audience, even if during the interview there is only an audience of one interviewer.

Towards a reasonable perception of confidentiality

Most qualitative researchers have told their research participants that the people who collect the data will be the only ones using it. One reason for doing so is the presupposition that this way they will get more authentic and candid data. The other reason is the implied nature of qualitative interviews: they are perceived as being sensitive, intimate and thus fully confidential. As the previous results of research participants' attitudes show, the participants can control their communication and they do not perceive the research data as secret and limited to the use of the original researcher.

Defining the research interview as an institutional interaction does not mean that qualitative interviews could not be confidential and include personally sensitive information. Neither does it rule out unpredictable emotional investments by interviewees. It only means that the interaction is predefined as a research encounter whereby a researcher represents the institution of science. The interview is not to be taken as a casual conversation between two or more individuals in a private situation. Unless it is a research design involving deception, both parties define the interaction as belonging to the domain of research. Participants are fully aware that they are talking to a researcher for research purposes.

As Natasha Mauthner and Odette Parry (2004,) say, the joint construction of qualitative data between researcher and respondent has important implications for the ownership and control of research data. Because of that we should also respect the perceptions of research participants. Disrupting peoples' ordinary life by doing a qualitative interview can be tiresome and exhausting, especially if the interview proves to be long and emotionally stressful. After having invested their time and emotions in order to promote scientific research, people rarely appreciate the view that the data can be used for one research project only and at worst, only partially even for that project.

If the views of research participants referred to in this article reflect the attitudes of people participating in research in general, we have to define in a more exact manner what confidentiality actually means. Instead of secrecy, confidentiality should consist of agreements between the researcher and participants on the future use and preservation of the data. Confidentiality would then mean that when data are collected for research purposes the data could be archived and used for further research unless otherwise agreed with research participants. Confidentiality does not mean an all-inclusive secrecy that would hinder the archiving and future research use of interviews. But confidentiality certainly does mean that identifiable personal information gathered during an interview cannot be delivered or presented as such to the media or, for example, or to administrative officials for decisions concerning individual interviewees.

It is usually the researcher who defines what confidentiality means in each case. Researchers who perceive qualitative interviewing as private and secret tell this in the beginning of the research to the interviewees

as well. I recommend that the starting point in defining confidentiality ought to be the archiving of data for broader research use by setting reasonable conditions for the secondary use of data. That would be practical and useful. Respecting the research participants' self-determination in defining the value and usability of data would be ethical as well.

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Notes

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2. The Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) is an effort to create an international standard for describing social science data. Expressed in XML, the DDI metadata specification supports the entire life cycle of social science datasets. Even though it is most suitable for quantitative data, the standard can be used in describing qualitative datasets. (For more information see <http://www.ddialliance.org/>)
3. For further information see, http://www.fsd.uta.fi/english/informing_guidelines/index.html
4. For further information see, <http://www.fsd.uta.fi/english/anonymisation/index.html>