

# Archiving and Disseminating Qualitative Data in Denmark

**Kick off for a New Archival Service** by Anne Sofie Fink Kjeldgaard<sup>1</sup>



## Abstract

The article describes the situation for archiving qualitative data in Denmark. Presently Denmark does not have infrastructure for preserving or sharing qualitative data. A pilot project aimed at developing documentation standards is being carried out at the moment. Based on this project and recommendations from fellow data archives with established services for qualitative data, a launch of a service for qualitative data will be made in the near future.

**Keywords:** Data archiving, qualitative vs. quantitative data, secondary use, barriers for re-use of qualitative data, research culture, data services, Denmark

## Introduction

The Danish Data Archive (DDA) was established in 1973 as a national data service for human centred quantitative research carried out primarily in the social sciences but also in medical science and in history. In 1993 the DDA became part of the Danish State Archives. The DDA acquires, preserves, and disseminates machine-readable research data. The issue of archiving qualitative data has been discussed in the DDA since 2000 (Fink, 2000a; Fink, 2000b). The reason for the long deliberation is to a large extent the distinctive nature of qualitative data as well as the researcher's relationship towards the data.

## Setting the Scene – Qualitative Data Archiving

Qualitative data is unstructured, without common format, personally sensitive and so on.

*“Qualitative data are normally relatively messy, unorganized data.”*  
(McCracken, 1988: 19)

These messy, unorganized data are the product of a personal encounter between research object/ respondent and researcher. Due to the personal involvement in data production the researcher feels responsible towards the data with significant consequences for data archiving and data dissemination (Mauthner et al, 1998; Gillies and Edwards, 2005). This is in contrast to the well-defined structure of quantitative survey-based, de-personalised data material (Kuula, 2000; Rasmussen, 2000).

---

## DDA hopes to take on the obligation as the national repository for data archiving of qualitative data

---

At the moment DDA holds only a few qualitative studies archived in original format. There is no existing infrastructure for qualitative data archiving in Denmark. However the DDA has for years taken part in cross national discussions, meetings and workshops concerning archiving of qualitative data often led by ESDS (Economic and Social Data Service) Qualidata, at the University of Essex (Corti, 2000).

The DDA hopes to take on the obligation as the national repository for data archiving of qualitative data by setting up a unit for qualitative data alongside the unit for quantitative data. At the moment activities concerning qualitative data are funded by the DDA. It will have to be considered as the DDA is moving in the direction of becoming a data archive for both quantitative and qualitative data if sufficient resources for this development are available.

In Denmark the Danish Council for Independent Research for the social and medical sciences requires data archiving in DDA as a prerequisite for funding research activities incorporating collection of survey data. These requirements on behalf of the independent research councils are core to DDA's activity. At the moment qualitative data is not mentioned in the policies of the research councils. It is our hope and expectation that an initiative concerning a service for qualitative data from the DDA will motivate the research council to expand their requirement to embrace qualitative data as well.

### Data Re-use in Academic Literature

Data sharing of major quantitative data materials such as the election studies or the world value studies is carried out informally among researchers as well as formally through the DDA. More and more often data can be retrieved freely available as web resource. However, data re-use is a research practise suffering from a complete lack of literature describing and discussing data re-use as part of the researcher's methodological palette in a Danish research context.

In the Danish research context literature promoting and describing data sharing and re-use as a scientific approach is lacking (Kjeldgaard et al, 2008). This alone is not an obstacle to sharing or re-using data. However, as long as data sharing and re-use remains an informal practice data re-use/secondary analysis will not gain the academic legitimacy that the approach deserves.

Obviously the DDA will have a pivotal role in the promotion of data re-use by adding supporting infrastructure, standards, tools, etc. Hopefully this effort will stimulate articles and textbook chapters presenting re-use analysis as a methodological approach to be positioned as a viable alternative to traditional approaches for empirically based research activities.

### Preparatory Steps

A preparatory step in the direction of archiving qualitative data was made in an article by Fink (2000a) in which she points out how researchers' involvement in the data production process (as interviewer, as observer, etc.) is creating an obstacle to data archiving. As a consequence qualitative data is of a nature that does not comply with data archiving and re-use in the way structured quantitative data do. The issues raised in the article were further developed by six in-depth interviews with researchers collecting qualitative data. The interview material was reported by Fink (2000b)<sup>2</sup>. Findings in the interview data were in fact strikingly similar to findings reported by Broom et al (2009).

The article concludes with a list of suggestions about how to handle the relationship between researcher and data archive that complies with the special nature of qualitative data. The following suggestions for a service for qualitative data archiving were made:

**Handover of data just after data collection.** In this way the risk of losing data or mixing up different versions of the data set is minimised. Additionally, data is handed over at the stage in the research cycle

where the researcher is exclusively focused on data and data quality rather than on analysis or publication as will be the case when he has moved on in the cycle.

**Publications integrated in the archival unit of the qualitative data set.** Enlarging the archival unit for qualitative data sets encourages secondary users of the data to become informed about the interpretations of the primary researcher. In this way the secondary users are guided towards potential interpretation 'span', that is, taking into account the context of the original research as well as documenting the context of the re-use as well.

**Distinction between access and re-use.** Due to potential concerns about misuse of data among primary researchers a possibility of limiting access for secondary users can be offered. Access restrictions only allow users to view/browse data and restrict them from performing actual re-analysis of data.

**Privileged access.** To mirror informal data sharing among colleagues and research partners, primary researchers could be allowed to name persons who could be allowed free access to data.

**Personal acquaintance.** Part of the resistance towards qualitative data archiving is due to the feeling of personal insecurity of moving into unfamiliar territory. Being personally acquainted with the data archivist will to some extent compensate for this.

**Dialogue.** The personal contact between the researcher and the data archivist should be founded on an on-going dialogue between relevant research environments and the data archive.

**Supervision.** Both paper-based and web-based resources should be at hand for informing researchers about data archiving of qualitative data at DDA. In particular, it should be explained that data documentation be made an integrated part of the research process.

These suggestions will guide and inspire the service the DDA will set up for qualitative data.

### Future Development

At the moment the DDA has taken on a pilot project together with the Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI). The project objective is to develop a documentation standard for qualitative data sets that is in line with the needs of depositors, re-users and the data archive. Obviously the DDA will seek inspiration, recommendations and best practices from fellow data archives experienced in the field of qualitative data archiving, especially UK Data Archive and Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD).

As mentioned above archiving of qualitative data faces different kind of challenges. The most striking of these are described below.

### Research culture for sharing or re-using qualitative data

Neither qualitative data sharing nor re-use is practiced formally in Danish research environments. As mentioned, data sharing in general seems to be something that is carried out informally. Therefore the adoption of data sharing and re-use through a data archive can be expected to be slow. Promotion of data sharing and re-use of qualitative data is a responsibility the DDA has to take on.

### Resistance from researchers

Resistance from researchers is often due to ethical and methodological concerns, concern for respondents, handling of sensitive information, disclosure issues, the researcher's active role, etc. (e.g. Fink, 2000b). Furthermore, the data is viewed by some as the personal property of the researcher (Van den Berg, 2005).

Obviously consent for data archiving and data sharing by respondents is also an issue related to resistance. Often it seems that researchers take on a role as the respondents' protector against potential complementary research interest from other researchers. Sometimes it seems that researchers are more protective than the respondents actually expect them to be. It should be noted that Danish legislation does not prevent re-use of data originally collected for research purposes (Daasnes, 2000). An argument that is missing in this debate is the point that it may be a way of respecting to respondents' efforts to make sure that their data can be re-used for further research purposes (Hakim, 1982).

### Economic resources

At the moment initiatives concerning services for qualitative data archiving will be sponsored by the DDA. But additional funding is an important issue to be addressed as it is necessary to sustain the initiative with sufficient resources in the future.

Formal organisations like IASSIST and CESSDA as well as informal groups like the Bremen group might be of assistance by providing information, materials and web resources, e.g. presentations of success stories for qualitative data archiving. Additional examples could be from the established world of data archives e.g. from the UK Data Archive or Finland (FSD) or it could from theme centred organisations such Timescapes (See [www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/)) or the Archive for Life Course Research in Bremen (See [www.lebenslaufarchiv.uni-bremen.de/](http://www.lebenslaufarchiv.uni-bremen.de/)). Additionally journal articles making discussing data archiving and re-use of qualitative data sets as well as presentations of actual research projects and theoretical discussions of the issue will be helpful.

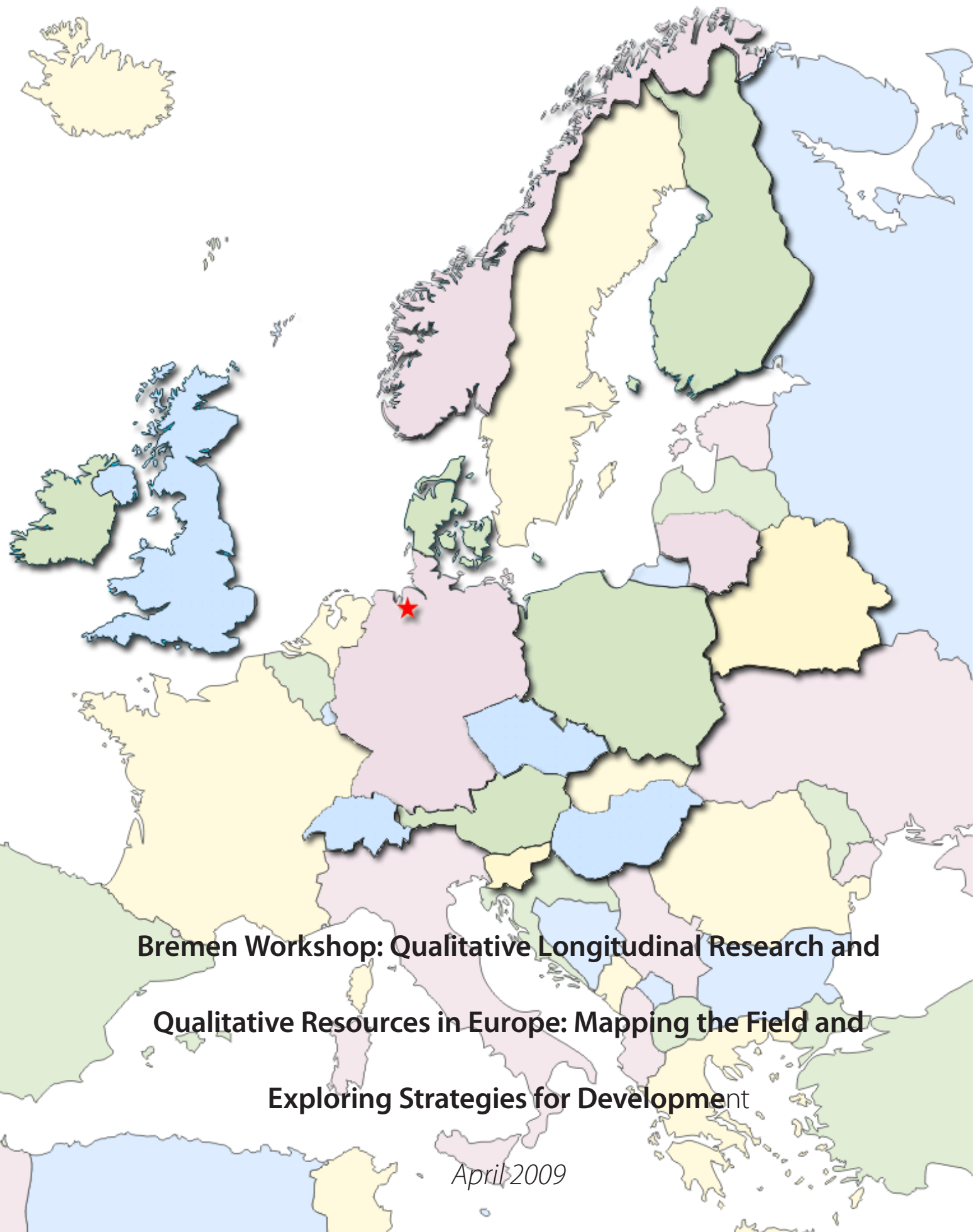
To conclude, data archiving of qualitative data is still in an early phase in Denmark. These challenges mentioned above – research culture for sharing or re-using qualitative data, resistance from researchers and economic resources – will be taken up by the DDA. But it is critical to remember that DDA is part of important organisational network that will be able to support its efforts. Thanks to international, European-based cooperation and the preparatory steps the DDA has taken already we feel well prepared to take up the challenge of archiving and disseminating qualitative data alongside with quantitative data in the near future.

### References

- Broom, A, Lynda C and Michael, E. (2009). 'Qualitative Researchers' Understandings of Their Practice and the Implication for Data Archiving and Sharing'. *Sociology*. 43.
- Corti, L. (2000). 'Progress and Problems of Preserving and Providing Access to Qualitative Data for Social Research—The International Picture of an Emerging Culture'. *FQS - Forum Qualitative Social Research*. 1 (3)
- Daasnes, C. (2008). 'Persondataloven – regler og praksis for god data-behandlingskik'. *Metode & Data*. (94).
- Fink, A. (2000a). 'The Role of the Researcher in the Qualitative Research Process - a potential barrier to archiving qualitative data'. *FQS - Forum Qualitative Social Research*. (1) 3.
- Fink, A. (2000b). 'Kvalitative data i Dansk Data Arkiv'. *Metode & Data*. 83 (2).
- Gillies, V and Edwards, R. (2005). 'Secondary Analysis in Exploring Family and Social Change: Addressing the Issue of Context'. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*. 6 (1)
- Hakim, C. (1982). *Secondary Analysis in Social Research*. London: George Allen & Unwin
- Kjeldgaard Fink, A, Bredahl, L and Stenvig, B. (2008). 'Genbrug af forskningsdata - Overset tilbud eller anvendt mulighed'. *Konferenceudgivelse: Symposium i anvendt statistik (2008)* p. 291-298.
- Kuula, A. (2000, December). 'Making Qualitative Data Fit the 'Data Documentation Initiative' or Vice Versa?' *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* .1(3). [Online] Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqstexte/3-00/3-00kuula-e.htm>.
- Mauthner, N, Parry, O and Backett-Milburn, K. (1998). 'The Data are Out There, or are They? Implications for Archiving and Revisiting Qualitative Data'. *Sociology*. (32)
- McCracken, D. G. (1988). *The Long Interview: Qualitative Research Methods* vol. 13. Newbury Park, CA: Sage
- Rasmussen, K., B. (2000). *Datadokumentation – Metadata for samfundsvidenskabelige undersøgelser*. Gylling, DK: Odense Universitetsforlag
- Van den Berg, H. (2005). 'Reanalyzing Qualitative Interviews From Different Angles: The Risk of Decontextualization and Other Problems of Sharing Qualitative Data'. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 6 (1)

### Notes

- Contributor details: Anne Sofie Fink Kjeldgaard [asf@dda.dk](mailto:asf@dda.dk), Data Archivist and Senior Researcher, Ph.D., Danish Data Archive
- A short summary of the article in English is available by request to the author.



**Bremen Workshop: Qualitative Longitudinal Research and  
Qualitative Resources in Europe: Mapping the Field and  
Exploring Strategies for Development**

*April 2009*