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Timescapes Secondary Analysis Workshop (Edinburgh, March 2011)

The Timescapes Workshops were offered as three, one day events held around the UK for researchers and practitioners to learn about and interact with the Timescapes Archive. This archive forms an integral part of a five year ESRC qualitative longitudinal study which explores and documents the changing nature of personal and family relationships. The workshop provided a forum from which to explore the purpose and value of archiving qualitative data sets for future (secondary use). Issues of ownership and consent were central to many of the discussion which took place throughout the day. In addition, the practical 'hands-on' session with the archive raised issues about the skill of archiving for future use as well as the optimal functionality and usability of an archive for secondary analysis. This workshop provided a useful addition to the training needs increasingly required by qualitative researchers where archiving for secondary use is now an important consideration within the design and dissemination phases of research.

The Timescapes Study

Timescapes is the first major ESRC funded qualitative longitudinal study to be funded in the UK. The project spans a five year timeline and is funded until February 2012. The study is currently in its dissemination phase. Timescapes comprises seven complimentary research projects all which situate themselves at a point on the life course of individuals. Young lives, mid lives and older lives projects are represented within the wider Timescapes study. The projects track and document individuals and families over time, looking specifically at the changing nature of relationships and identities. The wider remit of the individual projects are to consider how these relationships and life transitions are 'worked out' in the context of different socio-economic, psychological, historical and cultural contexts. There are 400 participants accounts evidenced in some form within the study. These accounts can be in the form of qualitative in-depth interviews (with available audio and transcription), oral narratives and photographs.

The study showcases how qualitative research can be designed and executed on a large scale while still retaining the idiographic level details specific to the individual projects. This may placate the skeptics who argue that qualitative 'can't do' big without losing the very essence of in-depth enquiry. The combining of allied projects which compliment each other's aims and methods injects a new form of rigor where standardized approaches to data collection and data management (archiving) across studies allow for more robust and unified datasets. It is interesting to ponder how many complimentary but discrete data sets exist and never get the chance to 'talk' to one another and inform a robust analysis.

The possibility of recovering qualitative data from numerous datasets archived in one place and working collaboratively across research teams is an innovative step forward in this field.

The Timescapes Archive

The Timescapes Archive has been designed as an integral feature of the Timescapes Study. The archive is managed from the University of Leeds where it benefits from designated technical support and is embedded into the library-managed repository system. The archive can receive qualitative data in varied formats, thereby offering researchers the opportunity to record many aspects of psychological and sociological enquiry that have been under-evidenced in qualitative studies such as drawings, photographs, music as well as audio and written documents. Access to the archive is regulated and only those with approved credentials are able to access the full archive. There is a public, open access option with more limited functionality.

The practical aspects to the workshop allowed delegates the opportunity to search and browse the multi-media files contained within the archive. The functionality and user interface of the archive does not offer the same degree of sophistication within its search and retrieve function as computer aided analysis packages such as NVivo. However simple searches for key terms/words/participants names were possible. This is a step forward from the Qualidata Archive (Economic and Social Data Service), which only supported searches across project titles and not within datasets.

The workshop activities offered a snap shot of what the archive can offer to the browsing researcher looking for access to secondary data. For example, one activity allowed us to search for a young boy named Tim who had been involved in the Siblings and Friends project. Tim is evidenced by named files which document a number of different but interconnected aspects to his life. These included an in-depth interview with a researcher about his relationship with siblings and friends, a video-diary, photographs and drawings. Some of the tasks were more thematically driven and delegates were able to search the database for evidence linked to key search terms such as 'death', and 'fatherhood'. Many qualitative researchers would argue that this 'top down' approach to analysis is not in the spirit of true inductive enquiry. However it is hard to doubt the potential power of the simple search engine in helping the analyst understand the possible breadth and depth of the phenomenon under study.

Matching Data to Methods of Analysis

Providing varied formats from which to record, preserve and re-use different types of qualitative 'evidence' is a key strength of the Timescapes archive. However the issue of the researchers 'situatedness' and familiarity with this secondary data was a prominent concern for some of the delegates. Discussions about the maintaining close proximity to the data, from collection through to analysis was considered to be a key aspect of gaining access to the all important 'insider perspective'. Reflective notes/diaries made by the primary researcher/interviewer about the context of the interview and interviewee were not always evidenced in the archive. For those involved in interviewing participants face-to-face it is hard to imagine that the same degree of insight and interpretative

narrative can be achieved during secondary analysis by a researcher who may only dip in and out of the archive. It may mean that some types of qualitative enquiry which consider the role of the analyst to be central in analysis process e.g., Interpretative Phenomenological Enquiry may not align either in method or epistemology when using secondary research data. It is also unlikely that the preparation and notation of the transcribed interviews required by discourse analysts will be fulfilled within the remit of the archive. The browsing researcher needs to be mindful of this potential limitation when considering whether the data provides a suitable opportunity to engage in their chosen method of analysis.

Consent, ownership and the balance of open-access

One of the most interesting discussions centered on ethical issues of consent and ownership when re-using qualitative data for secondary analysis. The delegates were supportive of the movement away from the destruction of raw data upon completion of the research study, as per the requirement of many University and NHS ethics clearance forms. There was acceptance that qualitative data in its 'raw' state whether in the form of case notes, transcribed interviews, associated documents should be retained in some secure form for future use. The length of time that this data should be retained for was debated. Some delegates reported that in order to promote informed consent, participants should be able to know how long their accounts would continue to contribute to research. In addition, concerns were raised about the loss of control over how the data would be used by others involved in secondary analysis. Again, this was linked back into discussions about the role of informed consent where the participant is given clear information about what the purpose of the research is and exactly what the data will be used for.

Researchers familiar with the use of secondary data and members of the team involved in the Timescapes study were robust in their counter arguments about the protection of the participant and the role of informed consent. There was a common sense argument put forward which illustrated that participants may prefer that the contribution that they make to research can 'live-on' and inform future research as and when it is appropriate. Most of us are familiar with the notion of non identifiable, personal information being retained for the greater good of society, particularly in the context of policy and planning such as Census data. In addition, participants may be more confident to be involved in research if they are assured that their accounts are valued and as such will be securely stored in central sites for future use. This is in contrast to their accounts being kept for years languishing in a lonely filing cabinet or hard disc drive with no opportunity to contribute again into the research process.

The workshop trainers raised the issue of whether this data is ever ours to keep? Who has ownership at the end of the day and it is possible that researchers become too emotionally attached to this data? Whatever the outcome of this debate, the dissemination requirements set by research councils where qualitative methods are used is changing. The ESRC Research Data Policy requires that all research grant holders offer data collected during the course of their research for 'preservation and sharing' through archives such as Qualidata. Whether we are emotionally attached to our data or not, we need to accept that this data need not just inform our own research but may contribute to the research cycle of future studies. Like so many aspects of society, research needs to become leaner, more efficient and place less burden on those in society who are the focus for research. By making more use of secondary

qualitative data, researchers may be able to research at a faster pace, leading to more research activity and publications. Interestingly, the issue of output was raised within the context of the REF and whether the preparation of data for archiving and the resultant data set should be considered 'REF-able'. An interesting issue to finish the workshop on..!

Concluding Remarks

The Timescapes Archive is an interesting starting point for researchers who have yet to access secondary data. The data is broad in thematic content and format. The longitudinal and intergenerational features of the data mean that researchers from many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, history, education may find data to stimulate new ideas, grant proposals and hopefully, theory generation. The archive also offers a coherent way for researchers from different disciplines to work collaboratively on shared datasets in order to extend the reach and rigor of their research. The preparation of data for archiving has been embedded within the design stage of the projects contained in the Timescapes archive. This raises issues about how future research studies may design and plan their projects. Informed consent and ethical awareness were at the forefront of many of the discussion that took place during the workshop. It is possible that researchers may be underestimating the acceptance and trust that participants place on being involved in research that they believe is worthwhile. The value of this data does not diminish at the conclusion of one research project but can be retained for future use, securing its value for generations to come.

Website for Timescapes Archive

<http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/>