Qualitative researchers' understandings of their practice and the implications for data archiving and sharing

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Session E3: Qualitative Data: Understandings, Tools and Strategies for Sharing
The Australian Qualitative Archive (AQuA)

- Good reasons to archive

- Qualitative archives already operating in UK and Europe (e.g. UKDA Qualidata)

- Australian Social Science Data Archive (ASSDA) already archiving quantitative data
Qualitative research often seen to be unsuitable for archiving due to its interpretivist roots

Our knowledge of the world is partial and situationally constrained. If we are to understand how people make sense of their lives, we need to understand the specific contexts in which they do so.

- archiving disembeds data from this context

Qualitative data is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and the research participants.

- this creates relations of trust between them, which may be breached if data are made available to others

- data generated through qualitative research frequently contain the personal thoughts and reflections of the researcher that are private and not to be shared.
The Consultation Process

Aim
To canvass views of the qualitative research community about the opportunities and challenges of the proposed qualitative archive

Methods
Six focus groups, 3 Universities, broadly characteristic of the range of Australian tertiary institutions

Respondents drawn mainly from disciplines of Sociology, Education, Social Work, Anthropology, Public Health; some from Psychology, Journalism and Political Science
Results

1. Practices of distinction: Exploring the quantitative - qualitative divide

- Qualitative data are ‘special’

- Qualitative research as ‘art’ and ‘relationship’

See extracts 1-5
**Extract 1:** ‘a different kind of fish’

‘I must say that I’m familiar with the quantitative data archives, and I think in my mind – and this may be because I’m just used to the idea – I found that they’re uncontroversial. When my mind first started to focus on qualitative data, I decided that this is a completely different kind of fish. Now, you could ask why.’ (Professor, Sociology)

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**Extract 2:** ‘relationships, ethics, respect’

‘... I think that that notion that we should organise our thinking to fit a bureaucratic process is part of the problem that I guess qualitative research has always had. With quantitative research it fits the bureaucratic model perfectly. That’s why the Mandarins [i.e. bureaucrats] in Canberra love it but with qualitative research it’s got so many furry edges. It’s got all of these things that are intangible. It’s about relationships, it’s about ethics, it’s about respect ...’ (Senior Lecturer, Anthropology)
Extract 3: ‘attachment, ownership and affection’

‘I feel quite attached to my work and I can’t imagine anyone else having that same attachment and because I do a lot of my own interviewing, except if I’m part of a big research team and most of us are out doing interviewing, they’re my people. So there is a sense of ownership and a sense of affection for your interviewees that I have.’ (Associate Professor, Education)

Extract 4: ‘contextual clues’

‘Now, you draw a picture for yourself and if someone comes over and says well that’s a nice frog, well it wasn’t a frog at all. How upset can you be that they’ve got that reading, because they’ve misread all of the contextual clues and cues and so forth? Well the same thing happens, you know, when other people look at your data set, it’s trying to de-contextualize something that’s so contextualized that what are they going to find there? Well they might find something that actually is wrong, fundamentally wrong because they’ve misread contextual clues.’ (Senior Lecturer, Education)
Extract 5: ‘you have to be there’

‘I remember as I was doing it and watching this thing unfolding before me, I remember thinking no Australian researcher would actually understand what’s going on here right now because I could just intuitively read what they were saying with their body language but if you weren’t there, it wouldn’t be there. So when I was listening back to the tapes later on I was necessarily using what I had seen just because I had seen what was going on but if I put that in the archive no one would have understood what was happening.’ (Senior Lecturer, Journalism)
2. *The solitary researcher: Going it alone as the qualitative ideal*

- Analytical insights available only to those who were there

- ‘No one else can understand my data’

- Implications not just for archiving but for team research and delegation of activities to RAs etc.

See extracts 6-7
Extract 6: ‘solitary researcher’

‘I’m sure it’s possible for there to be teams working to obtain qualitative data and for analysis to happen collaboratively. I actually think this is one of the problems for the humanities and the social sciences that we do need to be more open to team-type research for various reasons and yet the grand tradition of the humanities and the social sciences is that we’re solitary researchers and we always do our analysis on the material we’ve actually got ourselves.’ (Professor, Anthropology)

Extract 7: ‘a sacred mission which cannot be shared’

‘I think the danger of what I’m saying I guess – let’s try to be objective – is that we’re trying to mystify somehow the qualitative research experience. That we go into that kind of esoteric mode of talking about a solitary researcher who kind of captures the reality and spirit of a situation in a way that only he or she can. You know, that’s the other extreme, but we kind of present ourselves as little gurus, who have almost a sacred kind of mission to tell a story, that of course is forbidden and invisible to everybody else, but we have somehow that magic power that extracts those juices of life….I don’t want to fall into that trap, because I think what’s the point? You know, if you do such esoteric science, this world probably isn’t good for you. I am exaggerating again, but that is the danger I think that we need to remind ourselves of when we talk about doing qualitative research – this kind of ultimate inability for us to share anything with anyone, because it will then no longer make sense; it’s only for you and me.’ (Professor, Sociology)
3. **What’s mine is mine. The protection of rights and intellectual property**

- Archiving poses particular ethical challenges concerning confidentiality and data ownership

See extracts 8-10
Extract 8: ‘intellectual property’

‘But it’s also the notion of intellectual property, isn’t it? Whose intellectual property is that stuff there? We say it’s – we put our stamp on it, it’s our intellectual property. How are we going to know if other people are picking it up and using it elsewhere, unless they’re being absolutely honest and saying it’s archived under, whatever it is? I don’t want to be dog in the manger and just own my own data, and saying no one else can use it – I’m happy to share – but I still like to know who’s using it, for what purpose.’ (Senior Lecturer, Social Work)

Extract 9: ‘the sanctity of field notes’

‘Inevitably, my field notes are full of personal data as well as observations of everything around me and there’s a concern for that. Like it’s funny because, as a researcher, I rely on that data and if anyone said to me ‘how can you possibly say that’s true?’, I actually quote from the field notes and I could show them my field notes and say this is actually what happened on this day... But at the same time I don’t know how public I would like those field notes to actually be in the wider context. I don’t really want people going back and reading – and you also have to bitch about your informants; it’s the only way to stay sane when you’re in the field sometimes.’ (Associate Professor, Sociology)
Extract 10: ‘field notes as personal or public’

A: I’d see those field notes in particular as something that belonged to the researcher’s personal papers which may or may not be publicly available after they die because it’s actually the researcher’s personal being that’s actually incorporated there and that’s something that shouldn’t be publicly available, at least in their lifetime.

B: But anthropologists often rely primarily on that. They don’t – I mean I’m not an anthropologist so I’m always doing surveys and focus groups and interviews as well as that – but anthropologists tend to rely entirely on those field notes and they are highly personal... So in other words you can’t sort of cut, you couldn’t go through a set of field notes and cut out all your personal observations and how you were feeling that day

(A= Associate Professor, Sociology;  B= Associate Professor Politics).
4. Not my property: Data sharing as an ethical imperative

- A counter view: we have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure participants’ voices are heard and to share the results of publicly funded research

See extract 11
Extract 11: ‘an obligation to get the story out’

A: I’m sorry [laughs] I don’t agree with that. I think there’s – I mean I see research as being a public benefit. It’s publicly funded; it’s for public benefit. I also see research as being intrusive and demanding of the participants and so therefore what the participants record … I’m obviously sounding very extreme on the other side but it’s not that I’m completely blind to the problems but what the participants record is of value and I think archiving it, even if it had a 30 year embargo on it, is actually paying respect to what people have said and building up a stock of the world’s knowledge. That’s me being Pollyannaish.

B: I’d probably push that a bit harder as well insofar as anybody who makes a public statement based on research has an obligation to allow that to be publicly tested so that at some point, abstracting from all the other problems, I think at some point the data or the material that was used to validate shall we say the claims should be open to some future researcher to go back and rework it….So I think that there is – once someone makes public claims they have a moral obligation themselves to ensure that the basis for those claims can be scrutinized at some point

(A= Lecturer, Sociology; B= Senior Lecturer, Politics)
Although AQuA is a novel development in Australia the archiving of research data – quantitative and qualitative - has a long pedigree and there are ‘counter traditions’ where the practice is welcomed and encouraged even regarded as essential:

‘Discipline-based differences in the utility of archival data tend to be glossed over. The discipline of history appears to provide the guiding premises in respect of some archival centres. For historians, the necessity of archiving is particularly acute: without it there would be no prospect of new insight or analysis which went beyond the existing literature’ (Nigel Fielding, ‘Getting the most from archived qualitative data’ Int J of Soc Res Methodology,2004).

• The Mass Observation Project: recording everyday life in Britain
• PARADISEC (Pacific And Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures)
The Mass Observation Project: recording everyday life in Britain

The project began in 1937 and the first wave lasted until 1950. It was relaunched in 1980 but archiving commenced in the 1970s and the project records are in a special collection at the University of Sussex although some is available online
PARADISEC (Pacific And Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures) offers a facility for digital conservation and access for endangered materials from the Pacific region, defined broadly to include Oceania and East and Southeast Asia. Our research group has developed models to ensure that the archive can provide access to interested communities, and conforms with emerging international standards for digital archiving.
It’s [CA] a form of sociology that studies everyday interactions between people. One of the starting assumptions is that we really don’t know much about how humans interact; we don’t know what the basic units of interaction are. It’s largely uncharted terrain. We’re sort of like explorers who want to study the plant life in a new land. We collect specimens of interaction that exist out there, then systematically examine and compare them” (Steven Clayman)

Since its inception in the 1970s CA has actively promoted the collaborative sharing and re-use of transcripts. As a consequence significant advances in our knowledge of interaction in medical, legal, educational etc, settings have been made.
The reservations expressed in our focus groups about privacy and confidentiality in relation to archived material are strangely at odds as we contemplate an emerging public culture in which the volume and accessibility of information about individuals – all voluntarily provided - has reached unprecedented proportions:

- MySpace, Facebook, Twitter etc,

‘In the face of what we might see as a cultural shift towards a popularised research culture and to the public display and sharing of personal data and information, it is particularly important that qualitative social researchers are leaders not laggards in helping to think through what are the methodological possibilities, and the challenges, of using and ‘re-using’ new forms of data and new modes of data creation.’ (Mason, 2007)