Qualitative Researchers' Understandings of Their Practice and the Implications for Data Archiving and Sharing

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With the systematic archiving of qualitative data emerging as a distinct possibility in Australia, both the practices of qualitative research and how subsequent outputs are 'used' are coming under increased scrutiny and reflection. Drawing on a series of focus groups with qualitative researchers, this article critically explores the meanings ascribed to qualitative research practice and the perceived challenges posed by contemporary innovations in data management, access, and analysis through electronic archiving. The accounts presented provide much needed insight into key debates (and divergences) within the qualitative community regarding the values and meanings of qualitative practice, but also how contemporary innovations may come to challenge these core values

Introduction

The archiving of qualitative research data has become a well-established practice in the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe (Corti, 2000; Cribier, 2005; Fink, 2000). The recent development of the Australian Qualitative Archive (AQuA) to complement existing quantitative datasets already held in the Australian Social Science Data Archive (ASSDA) is an important and challenging progression in promoting enhanced data preservation, access, and secondary analysis for the international qualitative research community. If successful, AQuA will have important implications for the way qualitative research is practised in Australia and the 'uses' of qualitative research output. Furthermore, it will complement other archives overseas, enhancing the sharing of data internationally, and potentially facilitating comparative analysis.

The deposition of social science data into an archive is not novel, and indeed, quantitative researchers have

long archived their data to maximize the dissemination of research findings. However, some have argued that research data derived from interpretive approaches in the social sciences typically involve subjectivities and epistemologies that do not lend themselves to data archiving (Hammersley, 1997; Parry and Mauthner, 2004). While highly differentiated between researchers and disciplinary backgrounds, the practice of qualitative research is generally seen as one of 'generating' rather than 'collecting' data, with data being co-produced by the researcher and the research participants (Moore, 2007). In this sense, the role of the researcher is foregrounded rather than eliminated, and the idea that data can be neutralized and deposited into an archive, ready to be 'picked up' by others, sits uncomfortably for many.

Bearing this in mind, as a precursor to the development of AQuA, and as qualitative researchers ourselves, we embarked on a project to examine Australian researchers' perspectives on qualitative archiving. Six focus groups have been conducted with 37 qualitative researchers with the aim of exploring the potential challenges and benefits presented for those working in the area. What emerged from these discussions, however, were not simply the views of researchers on the barriers to, or opportunities for, qualitative data archiving, much of which has been rehearsed before. What is more significant perhaps is that our invitation to researchers to engage with the possibility of a qualitative data archive stimulated a far deeper and somewhat controversial debate about the very practice and meaning of qualitative research among those who undertake this kind of work. These meanings pose challenges for, but are also challenged by, emerging technological innovations, which are likely to reshape the way qualitative research practice is viewed. In this article, we reflect on the (multiple) meanings of qualitative inquiry, and the implications for the future of data sharing and archiving in the social sciences, arguing that successful archive development must take into account the historicity and subjectivities of interpretive qualitative practice. Although perhaps overly divisive, we observe an epistemological split in the way researchers view qualitative research practice when compared to quantitative, which they articulate in terms of research as 'art' versus 'science' and qualitative research more specifically as personal, intuitive and relational. This, we argue, shapes the ways in which researchers view their data and the concerns they have over placing it in a national archive.

Qualitative Data Archiving: Current Debates

Debates around data archiving and the re-use of qualitative data have been gathering momentum over the last decade following the development of Qualidata – a specialist service of the Economic and Social Data Service — in the early 1990s (Bishop, 2005; Hammersley, 1997; Mauthner et al., 1998; Moore, 2007; Parry and Mauthner, 2004). Since then, there has been significant interest in the issues surrounding the archiving of qualitative data. Much like the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, the Australian Research Council (ARC) has a vested interest in the trajectory toward archiving given that it funds a large proportion of qualitative research undertaken in Australia. Indeed, while current contractual requirements that data generated through ARC-funded research are deposited into an archive are presently not mandated, it remains possible that publicly funded research will be subject to greater accountability clauses in the future. As such, there is a need to consider the epistemological, political, economic, and professional issues that

such developments may produce.

Initial concern in other national contexts where archiving has been implemented has tended to centre on the epistemological issues around sharing data and the notion of qualitative research as an 'insider activity' (Mauthner et al., 1998) that involves interpretation and subjectivities not concrete (or transportable) enough to deposit in an archive. For example, the idea of data as embedded in, or unable to be separated from, the theoretical positioning of the individual researcher is a pertinent critique that has emerged within the social science literature. From this perspective, the way qualitative research is conducted is grounded in underlying theoretical assumptions which are not always explicit. While this has long been acknowledged by qualitative researchers, Hammersley (1997) argues that the idea of a databank reverts back to foundationalist assumptions that knowledge and facts are simply lying around as 'common currency' ready to be collected, rather than being co-created and value-driven. More recently, Moore (2007) makes a similar criticism of archived data being available for 'secondary analysis', arguing that it assumes data are pre-existing in a way that is widely rejected when it comes to 'primary analysis' by the original researcher. On the other hand, such criticisms have been rejected by Van den Berg (2005) for overestimating the constructed nature of qualitative research as derivatives of the specific aims and assumptions of the original researcher. Instead, the empirical, he argues, is undoubtedly connected to the theoretical, but it also has a momentum of its own.

While issues of epistemology have been important components of the debate around data sharing and archiving, so too have the more concrete but interconnected concerns around intellectual property and research ethics, including informed consent and participant confidentiality (Mauthner et al., 1998; Parry and Mauthner, 2004). Interviews, for example, are the intellectual property of both the interviewer and the interviewee, creating complex issues around allowing wider access to the data. Data are thus an emotional contract of trust and concurrently a contract offering a contribution of intellectual property for pre-specified use by pre-specified users (i.e. publication by the individual researcher or research team). This co-ownership has important implications for the posting of data, not least in terms of obtaining the informed consent of research participants. While there has been movement away from the idea of consent as a 'one-off' event, there has been little guidance on the implications of archiving for consent, and, in particular, the governance of researchers using secondary data (Parry and Mauthner, 2004). For example, what processes will ensure the anonymity of research participants? Given the removal of identifiable information, how will researchers retrospectively contact participants for consent or feedback? Steps taken to ensure participant confidentiality extend well beyond changing or deleting names, and may require removing contextual material that is vital to understanding the research setting in its entirety. While, as qualitative researchers, we are used to anonymity in the end result, we generally analyse with full appreciation of the life-world. Removing background and biography would present numerous issues in terms of the validity of the secondary analysis. The mere suggestion to 'anonymize' at transcription does little to engage in the range of issues faced in archiving qualitative data.

While the key concerns regarding data sharing have been examined within social science literature, there has also been work that seeks to *promote* the idea of data sharing among qualitative researchers and to

deconstruct overly binary conceptions of primary/secondary analysis or insider/outsider status. For example, Bishop (2007) suggests that although differences exist regarding the researcher-respondent relationship, primary and secondary analyses are more alike than not, and any suggestion otherwise creates an unnecessary rift in access to context and ability to engage in the data. Furthermore, she argues for the appropriateness of secondary analysis to be mediated in light of a particular research question, rather than merely as 'qualitative data' (Bishop, 2007). From this perspective, certain types of studies and empirical questions may lend themselves to secondary analysis whereas others may not, thereby inserting more nuance into current debates around the sharing of data. Bishop (2006) and others have also suggested frameworks for reducing the effects of decontextualized data through archiving 'meta-data' in order to embed secondary researchers in the broader context in which it was generated. However, this too has been met with some criticism by those sceptical of the notion that 'background data' is a quick fix to the epistemological contingencies of qualitative research (Mauthner et al., 1998).

Although much commentary exists regarding different academic positions on the re-use of qualitative data, there is little work on actual researchers' perspectives from a range of disciplines and methodological angles. Even less is known regarding the broader claims by qualitative researchers about the nature of their practice and how it interplays with innovations in data deposition and sharing, such as an electronic archive that may be distributed over a number of institutional platforms. This article aims to reveal how the practice of qualitative research is seen to challenge, and be challenged by, the notion of a national qualitative data archive. Our results illustrate significant reticence among qualitative researchers to the establishment of AQuA, as well as some degree of support. Key issues of debate in the focus groups revolve around qualitative research as art and relationship; the solitary character of qualitative research and sense of ownership; and the dialectical tension between individual ownership of data and the ethics of protectionism. We explore these key debates in terms of the barriers to the implementation of AQuA and reflect on the potential of such a facility to reshape qualitative research in Australia.

Methods

The data for this article were generated through a series of focus groups with qualitative researchers at three Australian universities, which are broadly characteristic of the range of higher education institutions in Australia. In total, 37 researchers participated in six focus groups between September 2007 and September 2008. The researchers were sampled using a combined theoretical and volunteer sampling framework, with the aim of recruiting researchers from a broad social science background who are, or have been, actively involved in qualitative research of some kind. To provide rigour and comparability to the study, the sample was confined to academic staff members working in a social science or related faculty, which we identified using university websites and individual staff profiles.

After receiving ethics approval, initial contact was established through an email to all researchers in these areas, inviting those who self-identified as qualitative researchers, or as using qualitative research methods,

to participate in a focus group. Approximately one-half of all those contacted declined to participate, predominantly because they were not available on the specified dates, or because they did not define themselves as 'qualitative researchers' even if they had used qualitative research methods in the past. Those who did volunteer to participate appeared to do so because they were interested in qualitative research rather than because they had any strong feelings about the merits or otherwise of data archiving. Indeed, most had very little prior experience of the concept of data archiving.

Our final sample primarily comprised researchers from schools or disciplines in the fields of education (12), sociology (5), anthropology (5), social work (5), and public health (5), although a limited number of participants had backgrounds in psychology (2), journalism (1) and politics (2). Each focus group also contained a spread of ages, academic seniority, and gender diversity, as well as exponents of the various methodological approaches commonly used in qualitative research projects. Interviewing and focus group techniques were the most popular, although one-quarter regularly used ethnographic methods involving extensive participant observation and the creation of field notes and photographs. Others used audio recordings of naturally occurring interaction or more textually oriented forms of content and discourse analysis.

Each focus group ran for approximately one and a half hours and was loosely structured around four themes: 1) the character of contemporary qualitative practice; 2) the perceived advantages and disadvantages of qualitative data archiving and sharing; 3) barriers to, and appropriate conditions for, depositing qualitative data on an archive; 4) attitudes towards using qualitative data from secondary sources. The advantages of working within a focus group context were that the questions stimulated considerable debate, with participants reflecting on, and responding to, one another's comments, rather than directly answering the questions posed by the facilitator. Consistent with an interpretive qualitative approach, our role in the focus groups was to facilitate an open, respectful discussion among participants and to let participants determine the direction of the conversation, rather than to 'press' them on topics that were of interest to us. Nor did we challenge participants, even if we did not agree with their views. Instead, while the interactive exchange of the focus group created consensus, usually with respect to the challenges of archiving qualitative data, it also produced considerable disagreement among participants as they debated the 'nature' of qualitative research and the ethics and utility of depositing their data in an archive for sharing with others. In analysing the data, our aim was to gain access to participants' subjective understandings of archiving qualitative data, even if those understandings were not necessarily viewed as true or valid by others. Moreover, the data generated did not reflect some deeply held view about the rights and wrongs of data archiving, but a series of reflections that were generated interactively and in situ about issues that, for some participants, had previously not been considered (Hollander, 2004). As we outline below, these reflections had less to do with the practicalities of qualitative data archiving, and far more about the unique nature of qualitative research that, in many cases, rendered it unsuitable for archiving.

Results

Practices of Distinction: Exploring the Quantitative-Qualitative Divide

In general, few researchers had any prior experience of qualitative data archiving, although some had deposited quantitative datasets into the ASSDA collection and were able to explain to others what was involved. This prompted participants to reflect on the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, and to suggest that quantitative data archiving was relatively unproblematic because of the depersonalized, abstracted, and ultimately 'transportable' character of the data:

> 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)

> … I think that that notion that we should organize 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)

As the above quotes illustrate, qualitative data were viewed entirely differently. Whereas quantitative research produced 'mere data' that could be abstracted from all context and generalized via statistical modelling, qualitative research involved reciprocity and interactivity that did not easily fit with the idea of the data being taken 'out of the researcher's hands'. Moreover, researchers' accounts reflected a tendency to view qualitative data as part researcher/part participant. Any attempt to disentangle the two (i.e. the participant data from the researcher's contribution) and thus present data in an abstract fashion was viewed as disingenuous to the character of qualitative research practice. The key distinguishing factor permeating each of the focus group discussions was qualitative research as 'art' and 'relationship' – a topic worthy of more in-depth discussion.

Qualitative Research as 'Art' and 'Relationship'

The idea of qualitative research as art, as indeterminate or difficult to pin down, was a common theme among the focus groups. This tended to be connected to the idea of relationship, suitably indeterminate in itself, and the inter-subjective character of interview contexts or ethnographic approaches to data collection. How indeed could silent exchanges, body language, or mutual understanding be communicated through a data archive? Qualitative 'work', it was posited, is about special relationships, subjective encounters, and the co-production of situated narratives around a particular topic. As such, these special relationships – between the researcher and his or her data, research participants, industry partners and research collaborators – could not easily (or for some, not at all), be transferred into an archive for someone else to pursue a meaningful secondary analysis of the data:

> When I'm gathering data, when I'm interviewing someone or interviewing a focus group, there is a

relationship there. It's something that you don't get in quantitative stuff. I mean anybody can be in quantitative stuff but there's something else about qualitative data, there really is. I mean there is an attachment there. (Senior Lecturer, Journalism)

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)

The special relationship with data was often couched epistemologically in terms of the importance of context in analysing data, which only the original researcher had access to. All other interpretations were subsequently seen as potentially wrong, counter to the interests of research participants, or, at best, misguided.

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)

… very often when we do qualitative research we establish this almost organic, intimate relationship between the material we work on and our own thoughts and reflections, and that's really what then makes sense, what helps us make sense of the data. You picking that up from me – you just can't pick it up; you can pick up the material itself, but not the kind of live world that you create when you interact through the data. (Professor, Sociology)

As seen in the excerpts above, the researchers' relationship with the data was perceived as 'intuitive', 'organic', 'intimate', and 'personal'. Ultimately, it was an encoded account only decipherable to the individual who collected it. An archive was seen to exclude the kinds of intuitive and interactional elements that are key to understanding the nature of the data. For example, one researcher explained the problems presented by an archive as the lack of presence and cultural consciousness that subsequent researchers would encounter if they tried to analyse data from another country and lacked the necessary 'insider knowledge':

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)

In other words, data become disembodied and dis-embedded when archived, thereby increasing the

likelihood that subsequent researchers would 'misinterpret' those data as a result. For the researchers in our focus groups, this dis-embeddedness of secondary data also disconnected it from its relational properties, particularly notions of reciprocity and trust, which were seen as critical to the researcher-participant relationship in qualitative projects. Indeed, while there was a perception of quantitative researchers as largely disengaged from their research, the ideal qualitative researcher was seen to be engaged (cognitively and emotionally), not only in the subject matter under study but also with the research participants. The climate of trust produced through this relationship was seen as potentially lost in the context of an archive, particularly when research topics were rather sensitive and required the establishment of rapport before participants were prepared to discuss them in an interview. Making this data available to other, potentially unknown, researchers via an archive was seen to undermine this relationship, as illustrated by the following statements:

> Well, I think it really goes to the question of the very core of trust that you establish in an interview relationship, between yourself as a researcher, and the respondent. It seems like, if you make that conversation available to somebody else, it is very much like a breach of trust in many ways. (Professor, Sociology)

> I guess it's about that thing about trust between you and these other people and that's what it comes down to. In this kind of research if it's going to work there is a trust factor. (Senior Lecturer, Journalism)

These issues of qualitative research as special, relational, and embedded are intimately tied to the notion of qualitative analysis as 'art'. Specifically, there seemed to emerge a certain discomfort regarding critique in debates around public availability of data although, as shown above, this tended to be articulated in terms of the potential for 'misrepresentation' by others, rather than a fear of one's own interpretations being found invalid. While two participants in separate focus groups raised this matter openly, they did so from the minority view that researchers should, indeed, make their knowledge claims publicly available for external scrutiny. What this suggests is that the indeterminacy of many forms of qualitative analysis not only offers researchers a certain degree of protection from critique via claims that research is unquestionable, subjective, and intuitive, but also creates certain vulnerabilities when it is laid open to external validation: would others have presented such an argument? (See Fink, 2000). The archive, it is very clear, enhances this vulnerability by problematizing the notion of data analysis as iterative, engaged, and intuitive, through allowing those relatively disconnected from it to engage with the data. The idea of the archive may thus contest the need for certain aspects of the research process which some view as vital, but may also reshape the actual practice of qualitative research as the potential for 'disengaged' secondary research emerges. This has the potential to create practices of distinction in qualitative research to sort 'authentic' forms of practice (i.e. engaged, relational and artistic) from secondary, detached or pseudo-research (see Moore, 2007, for a rejection of this distinction).

The Solitary Researcher: 'Going it Alone' as a Qualitative Ideal

While team-based research is increasingly popular among qualitative researchers, the ideal of research as a solitary, personal endeavour still has relevance to contemporary qualitative work. Interplaying with the idea of the *uniqueness* of the researcher-subject relationship and the insights afforded only to those who were present when data were generated, the idea that 'no-one else can understand my data' invariably permeated much talk around data sharing. Several group interactions reflected this value, but some also suggested a need for change, not only because it ran counter to the current experience of many researchers working in teams, but also because it undermined the reputation of qualitative research as methodologically rigorous. Each of these points is reflected below:

> 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)

> 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)

In some ways, sharing data enhances challenges of interpretation already evident in current research practices as researchers employ assistants to collect and sometimes analyse data on their behalf, or share the task of field-work with colleagues. As shown below, the removal of the researcher from the data collection process was already seen as problematic for data analysis, although this did not mean that team or delegated research was necessarily undesirable or avoidable:

> As you were saying before, you have translators who work in other languages, the people who actually do the interviewing too can add a different flavour and perception to some things as well. So to just pick up information and re-use it, it seems as though that would be confounded in some way, to me. (Lecturer, Social Work)

> But what I'm thinking of here, I guess, is that something I've experimented with over the last years, is that as I've had less time to do my sorting and my analysing of my qualitative-textual material, of course I've employed research assistants. I've even employed research assistants to

do ethnography and I've kind of tried to work with those people with the frame of, well okay, this is where you're going to go and this is kind of what we're looking for and I have to say I'm still deciding how mixed the results are because it's definitely a different type of outcome from when I've been there myself as a field-worker of course. But I wouldn't want to say it's without value and I think we have to be a bit practical about this. (Professor, Anthropology)

The struggle to reconcile the 'solitary ideal' with the reality of increases in teamwork, the practice of delegation to research assistants or transcribers, and the use of translators in cross-cultural and multi-lingual contexts, was in turn linked to the problematic of archiving. However, the existing relationship implicit in a research team was viewed as reducing the disconnect between fieldwork and meaning-making, whereas in the context of archiving this was entirely absent, creating an even greater dislocation between sense-maker and data producer. These comments tend to reflect a wider dilemma in the qualitative research community; the tensions between the value of co-constructed meaning via group analysis and the individual researcher as analyst. Indeed, one participant alluded to this tension when describing how she and two colleagues had co-analysed their data using different interpretive frames (see also Mauthner et al., 1998 for a similar point). Concerns that the archive would produce multiple interpretations – even 'better' than those of the original researcher – was a significant and understandable concern, even if others (such as Fielding, 2004) see such possibilities as enhancing the legitimacy of one's claims.

'What's Mine is … Mine': The Protection of Rights and Intellectual Property

In proposing a national qualitative archive, two issues that frequently came up in the focus groups were concerns over research ethics and data ownership. In each case, researchers spoke of the need to ensure the protection of rights, in terms of both the rights of their research participants to have their confidentiality and prior informed consent maintained, and of their own rights as co-producers of the knowledge generated. Concerns over the additional challenges posed by archiving to the maintenance of ethical standards and the protection of participants' rights in qualitative research have been raised by others and these challenges are significant (Bishop, 2005; Corti et al., 2000; Parry and Mauthner, 2004). At the same time, however, the notion of the protection of rights for focus group participants extended beyond those of research respondents to include the protection of their own rights as researchers and, hence, as owners of those data. Specifically, some felt that intellectual property issues would be compounded with the development of AQuA, whereas others tended to contextualize notions of violation of intellectual property with a tendency (for many of the reasons already addressed above) to not want to share their data:

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)

It raises other issues of course when people come as in when is it my data and when is it your data but if someone comes and asks a terrifically interesting question and you think gosh I wish I'd thought of that, I think I'll answer that myself. (Professor, Social Work)

The conflation of actual data and intellectual property is an interesting outcome of this project in terms of researchers' sense-making practices. Understandably, researchers viewed the data as their own production, rather than simply the outputs (articles or books) as their 'work'. Such feelings were often articulated, in the context of the archive, as a sense of broad insecurity about making one's personal recollections public – particularly with reference to field notes from observational or ethnographic fieldwork. This reticence was illustrated in the following ways:

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)

Taking a similar viewpoint, two researchers discussed the issue as follows:

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)

As the last excerpt reveals, the view that personal recollections are private and unsuitable for sharing runs counter to the epistemological positioning of the researcher as intricately embedded in the data collection process. Hence, while certainly personal, the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the researcher comprise a core part of the data, and cannot be extracted from the dataset without undermining its utility entirely.

Not My Property: Data Sharing as an Ethical Imperative

It was interesting, nevertheless, to note that views were not consistent between the focus groups regarding data ownership. Specifically, in two focus groups there was a dominant theme of the responsibility of researchers to share data. This was partly because participants saw the integrity of research as embedded in the practice of ensuring broader access to, and validation of, the data produced, and partly because they felt researchers had an obligation to respondents to 'get their story out there'. The exchange below, for example, occurred in response to one suggestion in a focus group that the researcher who collected the data should receive some financial remuneration for sharing it with others:

> 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 Pollyanna-ish.

> 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)

Those working from an anthropological tradition were particularly insistent about the need to preserve data as a way of safeguarding it on behalf of their rightful owners:

> It's interesting as anthropological ethics that you keep your field notes for posterity. That's actually a point in ethics that you need to safeguard your material because it's a reciprocal process with people's families that you may have worked with, the younger generations may want to access it. So it's an ethical thing to keep. (Lecturer, Anthropology)

As evident above, there was a strong theme in these two focus groups around 'public knowledge' and the imperative of data as a community resource, not for the researcher's own professional or research interests. An argument commonly used in relation to quantitative data, this position espouses the concepts of accountability, transparency, and public ownership of data. This seems particularly pertinent to government-funded projects, but was also ascribed to qualitative research in general as maximizing exposure to material as an ethical imperative. However, it seems likely that this imperative remains subject to addressing the kinds

of issues raised in the previous section.

Discussion

In this article we have identified a range of perspectives among Australian qualitative researchers regarding the establishment of a national qualitative data archive. The issues examined here do not simply reflect the more common 'dilemmas' relating to archiving, but go to the heart of what it means to 'do' qualitative research and how this could undermine, or be undermined by, new imperatives for data deposition and sharing. These include the presentation of qualitative research as art and as situated, and as containing indeterminacies that would be difficult (if not impossible) to capture when archiving data. Qualitative research, for those involved in our focus groups, is iterative, embodied and intuitive, and thus data are decipherable to the 'expert eye' only (in other words, the original researcher). Moreover, the interactive features of qualitative research were viewed as producing data that were situated within a set of relationships established between the researcher and participants. The ethics of trust and rapport thus drove the idea of data as owned by, and as interpretable only to, the researcher. Yet there was also significant differentiation in perspectives across the focus groups. While discourses around ownership and interactivity were prominent, so too were notions of researcher responsibility and the ethics of transparency, accountability, and public data, although this was, to some extent, mediated by disciplinary background and the particular methods under discussion.

Clearly, there is much work to be done in addressing the many significant challenges facing AQuA with regard to access protocols, ethical guidelines, intellectual property, metadata standards, and preparing data for deposition. Yet the results of our focus groups also raise broader questions about the future practice of qualitative research in a changing research environment, where there are growing expectations for research to be team based and publicly accountable, and where complex intellectual property issues force us to return to fundamental questions of whose data they are anyway (Parry and Mauthner, 2004). In concluding our discussion, we outline several key themes for debate that are pertinent to qualitative data archiving but which may become central to the very practice of our art.

The first is that although AQuA is a novel development in Australia, and one that is likely to encounter a considerable degree of interest – although not necessarily support – from qualitative researchers, it is important to place its development in an historical and cross-disciplinary context. The archiving of research data has a long pedigree and there are 'counter traditions' where this practice is welcomed and encouraged. Our sample is drawn from various social science disciplines. It is possible that had we included researchers from arts and humanities then a different orientation towards the re-usability of data and the usefulness of an archive would have been obtained. As Fielding (2004: 104) has observed:

> 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.

Social scientists might argue that much historical archive material is of little relevance to them but there are some valuable records which could be utilized in studies of social change. For example, the ongoing Mass-Observation project which commenced in the UK in 1937, much of which is now archived at the University of Sussex, documents the everyday lives of British people during the middle decades of the 20th century in a level of detail that is unmatched in any other form or location. The impetus for the original studies and the decision to begin archiving the material in the 1970s are both exemplars of foresight with important lessons for contemporary qualitative researchers. A similar concern for the preservation of everyday cultural life, in a very different context, is provided by PARADISEC (the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures, a joint initiative of a number of Australian universities), which is charged with the task of preserving languages, songs, and other anthropological material, particularly records obtained in field trips from the 1950s and 1960s which would otherwise be in danger of being lost.

The generally more positive disposition which social historians and cultural anthropologists display to the archiving of their research materials may well have some epistemological foundations. Typically, the records obtained or generated by researchers in these disciplines do not involve the interviewing of research subjects and consequently do not give rise to the same kinds of problems of 'context', or 'insider knowledge': in short, the inability of other researchers to make sense of the narratives that have been elicited. To the extent that qualitative social researchers continue to rely upon the interview — and the 'special relationship' between researcher and research participant which is characteristically associated with this method – then this epistemological caution relating to the re-use of data may well endure. However, not all qualitative researchers who rely upon 'talk' as their medium of accessing the social world are reluctant to engage in data sharing. Within the conversation analysis and oral history traditions, a far more receptive approach to collaboration and the public sharing of data is generally evident. A great deal of conversation analytical work is undertaken in 'data sessions', in which a group of researchers examines a transcript which has been generated by one member, and offers suggestions about the interactional practices that are evident in the data (see e.g. Antaki et al., 2008). This more collegial approach is also underpinned by epistemological considerations. Conversation analysts have compared their research practice to the activities of naturalists in that their basic concern is with the collection and description of 'specimens' of naturally occurring social behaviour. The phenomena – interactional practices — which conversation analysts investigate do not depend on the presence of the researcher and would have taken place in her absence. Consequently, the role of the researcher in generating material for analysis is not invested with the special significance which 'mainstream' interview studies appear to attract.

Second, as we have illustrated, a major theme in debates about the archiving of qualitative data hinges upon privacy and the confidentiality of information provided by respondents in the research setting. This concern was raised by many of our focus group respondents. It is intriguing, however, to contemplate an emerging 'public culture' where the volume and accessibility of information about individuals have reached unprecedented proportions. One of the most conspicuous aspects of the digital revolution has been the development of social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace, together with practices such as blogging, where individuals willingly display and share vast quantities of personal information. Given such

developments, the concerns expressed by qualitative researchers about the need for respondent privacy look a little out of place. While it is foolish to suggest that respondent confidentiality and anonymity are no longer relevant to qualitative research, Jennifer Mason offers a salutary reminder of what is at stake here:

> In the face of what we might see as a cultural shift towards a popularized 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: 3)

A third point is that while it is necessary and important for researchers to debate the challenges of archiving qualitative data, we should not overstate the epistemological distinction between primary analysis (undertaken by the original researcher) and secondary analysis (undertaken by others) (Fielding, 2004; Moore, 2007). In many ways, qualitative archiving accentuates many of the existing dilemmas facing researchers – even those who generate their own data – and any claims to epistemic transcendence by researchers as one who 'knows best' should be treated with caution. Similar claims have been made by Fielding (2004) who argues that even primary data are contingent, partial and incomplete, thereby creating contextual problems even for the original researcher. Finally, while it has not been our intention to critique the accounts presented here, it is worth considering the degree to which resistance to innovative practices serves the purposes of the researcher or the researched; certainly, part of our agenda in this project was to promote debate and discussion around good practice and how it interplays with the idea of data sharing and archiving. The very consultative processes we have undertaken may also be shaping people's perspectives and we are aware of the need to explore divergent and minority views, rather than merely establish consensus or majority opinion around the strengths or limitations of qualitative archiving.

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