

## **Qualitative Archives: Short Descriptions**

### ***ESRC Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre (Qualidata), University of Essex, UK***

*Team: Louise Corti, Deputy Director and Manager; Gill Backhouse, Researcher Support Officer*

#### **1. Field of Research**

- Acquisition, documentation and preservation of qualitative data from the social sciences
- Promotion of and training in the re-use of qualitative data

#### **2. Aims and Work of Archive**

Qualidata was initially set up within the [Department of Sociology](#) at the University of Essex in October 1994 to facilitate and document the archiving of qualitative data arising from research, whilst also drawing the research communities' attention to its existence and potential.

Funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)](#), Qualidata started off with a dual mission. The first was a rescue operation aiming to seek out the most significant material created by research from past years. The second was to work with the ESRC and the [Data Archive](#) to ensure that for current and future projects the unnecessary waste of the past does not continue. Qualidata is not an archive itself: it is both a clearing house and an action unit. Its role is to locate and evaluate research data, catalogue it, organise its transfer to suitable archives, and publicise its existence to researchers and encourage re-use of the collections.

The ball was set rolling when in 1996 the ESRC implemented a [Datasets Policy](#) aiming to ensure that qualitative social science data produced by ESRC were offered for future consultation by the research community. As a result research grant applicants have to contact the Archival Centres in the UK (the Data Archive and Qualidata) to discuss plans for preparing and archiving any data they produce in the course of their research. Other sponsors in the UK have now followed these steps, although have less formal archival policies.

##### **2.1 Definition of qualitative and format of data**

Qualidata is concerned with research data arising from the range of social science disciplines, including sociology, social policy, anthropology, social and economic history, political science, social and human geography and social psychology. Qualitative data is defined as data collected using a qualitative methodology - defined by openness and inclusiveness, aiming to capture participants' lived experiences of the world and the meanings they attach to these

experiences from their own perspectives. Moreover, a qualitative perspective encompasses a diversity of methods and tools rather than a single one. As a result data types extend to: in-depth or unstructured interviews, field and observation notes, unstructured diaries, personal documents, photographs and so on.

Qualidata deals with all formats of data, in paper format (typed and hand-written), audio, video and photographic, and in digital format. Much qualitative data nowadays is digital in the sense that the text is word-processed or hand-written material is scanned, or audio-visual material is in digitally recorded form. Generally materials are reduced to their simplest form, ASCII, TIFF4, but the Data Archive also accept Rich Text Format (rtf) and Adobe's Portable Document Format (pdf).

## **2.2 Criteria for archiving qualitative data**

Having established that the data is predominantly qualitative, each set of research material is considered according to the requirements set out below:

### *Priorities for Research Material:*

- research recognised to have had a major influence in its field and/or representing the working life of a significant researcher
- complementary to existing holdings in repositories designated to receive Qualidata deposits
- having a high level of perceived re-analysis/comparative use potential
- at imminent risk of destruction

### *Archival Suitability of Research Material:*

- has sufficient documentation of research proposal, aims, methods and outcome to enable informed re-use
- is in a reasonably accessible condition e.g. good tape sound quality; shorthand or other abbreviations explained
- copyright and confidentiality restrictions allow reasonable access for re-use
- the resources needed to make the material available do not outweigh its potential for re-use

## **2.3 Repositories for qualitative data**

For the qualitative material Qualidata acquires, the Centre undertakes to find an appropriate and established repository—be it an academic Special Collections archive within a University Library or a public repository (records office or museum). The Centre works with a [number of key repositories](#) nation-wide which are willing to receive material. Where a research project has been based within a university or other institution which maintains an archive department then first

consideration is often given to the host institution as the preferred place of deposit for the research material (if they want it).

### 3. Documentation Standards

In 1994, when Qualidata was established, there was little published on working practices of archiving qualitative data and even less published in the way of re-using qualitative data.

As a consequence, the model and procedures for preparing and documenting data to create useful and visible resources were constructed by a cross-fertilised approach - by learning and adopting procedures from 3 communities:

1. The International Data Archive community (see IFDO [Broken link, FQS, January 2004] and [CESSDA](#)) who adopted a Standard Study Description for social science (numeric) datasets in the 1980s.
2. The traditional archives community in the UK (see [Society of Archivists](#)) holding mostly traditional paper based archives.
3. The [National Sound Archive](#) (NSA) at the British Library with expertise in documenting audio resources including oral history collections.

The Centre also made international contacts through meetings and correspondence with archivists and researchers in Europe, North America and Asia. However, only a single, the [Murray Research Centre](#) in the United States (US) appeared to have aims comparable to Qualidata, although it holds a far more focused collection of both quantitative and qualitative datasets. Visits were made in 1996 and 1997 to learn more about their strategies for promoting and encouraging the re-use of data.

Qualidata's methods of preparing and documenting data have had to further adapted to the types of data and requirements of both depositors and users. [Guidelines for depositing and documenting](#) can be found at Qualidata's website. Qualidata's on-line catalogue structure follows that of the [CESSDA Integrated catalogue](#) very closely, with some new and modified fields to suit the characteristics of qualitative data. Papers in this volume address emerging standards for documenting social science data (Data Documentation Initiative-DDI).

Much of the basic documentation and preparation of qualitative data can, and should in cases where datasets policies operate, be undertaken by the depositing team. This is most efficient and cost effective when considered from the early stages of a project. Qualidata offers guidance and support service through the life of an award. Detailed negotiations are required in the final stages of deposit, based on: a) ensuring that the raw have been fully contextualised and described; and b) that promises of confidentiality and copyright have been met.

#### **4. Protection of Confidentiality and Property Rights**

Qualidata has undertaken considerable consultation within the research community, as well as liaising with potential depositors of data, concerning the issues of confidentiality and informed consent. These have undoubtedly been the most frequent causes of concern in the archiving of data. Qualidata has a deep concern both for the rights of participants and the professional integrity and peace-of-mind of researchers, and therefore both the issues of confidentiality, informed consent and indeed, copyright, must be addressed in the context of archiving qualitative material.

The Centre undertakes processing work necessary both to ensure that data archived conform to legal and ethical guidelines. Each case presents a new and different issue for archiving. Procedures must strive between a) adopting a system which fully meets the commitments of confidentiality given to research participants, and b) achieving the greatest practicable accessibility and usability for the data. The Centre has produced documents relating to the issues of [Confidentiality and Informed Consent](#), [Confidentiality, Consent and Copyright in the Interviewing of Children](#) and [Guidelines on Copyright for Social Researchers](#). These documents aim to describe the current legal and ethical frameworks surrounding qualitative social research and suggest solutions and procedures for archiving which address respecting the rights of participants. Of course, Qualidata recognises that in some instances, datasets cannot be ethically archived.

#### **5. Database / Presentation of the Archive**

Qualidata does not physically hold or disseminate data. Once data are prepared and documented they are transferred to safe repositories, who then transfer the details of the collection to their own finding aids.

The main function of the Centre is to maintain an information database about the extent and availability of qualitative research material from a wide range of social science disciplines in general, whether deposited in public repositories or remaining with the researcher. The Centre has surveyed a huge range of qualitative social research projects dating back to 1970, is tracing the data arising from classic post-war studies and monitors current ESRC and other funded projects. The Qualidata catalogue ([Qualicat](#)) is available via the Web, from which researchers can search and obtain descriptions of qualitative research material, its location and accessibility.

The Home Page for the Centre has links to detailed guidelines for depositing qualitative data, data deposited, issues relating to confidentiality and copyright, information about the Centre, links and references to other qualitative resources and repositories and information about the International Network for Qualitative Data Archiving ([INQUADA](#)).

## 6. Examples of Data Deposited

Qualidata is in the process of evaluating many projects for their archival value as well as processing recent acquisitions. There are over 400 entries in the [Qualidata catalogue](#).

Classic social science datasets already deposited include: Peter Townsend's studies on care of older people in institutions, *Family Life of Old People* (1955) and *The Last Refuge* (1959); Paul Thompson's life-history interview studies comprising approximately 750 interviews from various projects including *The Edwardians* (1975); Ray Pahl's *Isle of Sheppey Studies* (1980s) and earlier investigations; Dennis Marsden and Brian Jackson's whole life's research papers including their studies for *Education and the Working Class* (1962); Jacqueline Burgoyne and David Clark's projects on *Marriage, Re-marriage and Stepfamilies* (1977) and *Co-habitation* (1985) Annette Lawson's 1980's study of *Adultery: An Analysis of Love and Betrayal*; John H. Goldthorpe et al's *The Affluent Worker* (1962) undertaken to test the thesis of working class embourgeoisement; Stan Cohens' *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1967) focusing on the genesis and development of the 'moral panic' and social typing associated with the 1960s phenomenon of Mods and Rockers. Details of datasets these can be found in Qualicat.

## 7. Promotion and Re-use of Archived Qualitative Data

Qualidata actively promotes and encourages the secondary use of archived qualitative data and monitors their use by researchers.

The Centre has found that re-use of data is a direct result of the amount of effort put into promoting the existence of archived data. Being proactive in outreach activities pays off. The Centre tries to publish in a variety of outlets including traditional academic journals and newsletters, the media and the Web. Staff attend key meetings where potential depositors and users are likely to be, and have established a programme of workshops to provide social science researchers with a forum for advice and exchange of experience on issues relating to archiving and re-analysis of qualitative research data. These workshops are intended to encourage the re-use of existing data and to address questions associated with archiving and preserving qualitative data. Centre staff also give talks to researchers and post-graduate students and offer advice on the use of archives in research and training.

More recently the Centre has been working to forge relationships with individuals, organisations and communities interested in producing teaching and learning materials based around qualitative research.

## 8. Staffing

Over the 7 years of Qualidata's lifetime staff numbers have risen and fallen. At its peak, Qualidata had 10 members of staff. At its lowest point, when funding was reduced in 2000, there were 5 mostly part-time staff.

	1994	1996	1998	2000
Director	.4 FTE	.4 FTE	.4 FTE	.1 FTE
Deputy Director and Manager			1 FTE	1 FTE
Manager		1FTE		
Administrator	1 FTE			
Acquisitions Officer	.8 FTE	1.6 FTE	1 FTE	.1 FTE
Researcher Support Officer			.5 FTE	.5 FTE
Processing Officers	.5 FTE	1 FTE	2 FTE	.5
Secretarial/Clerical Staff		.3 FTE	.5 FTE	.5
Scanning Staff				1.1 FTE

What has become clear in the staffing of the Centre is a) the pivotal role of the Deputy Director and Manager in establishing and promoting the Centre both nationally and internationally and b) the need for a dedicated Researcher Support Officer who provides advice and support to researchers on collecting and preparing data for archiving and on issues of confidentiality and copyright.

The major task ahead for 2001 is the securing of funding (hopefully longer-term) for the future of the Centre's work. We are currently working on a strategic plan for integrating Qualidata into the UK Data Archive also based at Essex. A closer integration is equally welcomed by both Centres and points to both efficiency gains and the opportunity for greater peer support for Qualidata staff.

What has become clear in assessing the staffing needs of the Centre is a) the pivotal role of the Deputy Director and Manager in establishing and promoting the Centre both nationally and internationally and b) a dedicated Researcher Support Officer to provide advice and support to researchers on collecting and preparing data for archiving and on issues of confidentiality and copyright; and c) the need for a user support officer to field enquiries and help obtain archived data for re-use.

Contact:

Louise Corti

University of Essex  
Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ, UK

Tel.: +44 / (0)1206 / 873 058

Fax: +44 / (0)1206 / 873410

E-mail: [quali@essex.ac.uk](mailto:quali@essex.ac.uk)

Mailbase group: [archive-qualitative-data@mailbase.ac.uk](mailto:archive-qualitative-data@mailbase.ac.uk)

URL: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/qualidata/>

Revised 8/2008