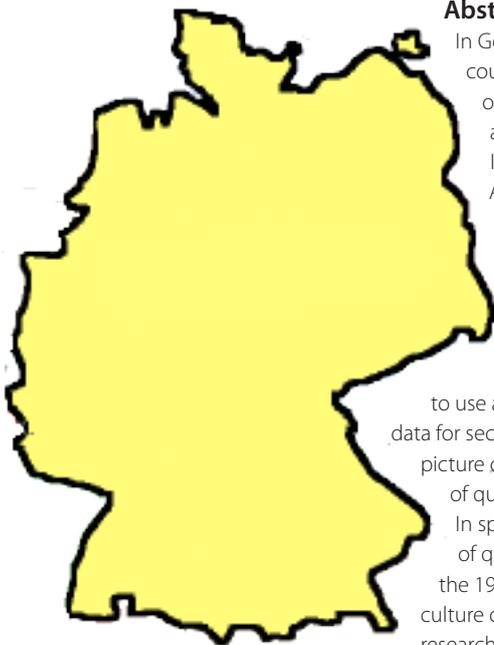


Sharing and Archiving Qualitative and Longitudinal Research Data in Germany

by Irena Medjedović & Andreas Witzel¹



Abstract

In Germany as in many other countries there is an abundance of experience with secondary analysis of quantitative data. In particular, the GESIS 'Data Archive and Data Analysis' in Cologne has for more than 50 years supported and promoted this tradition of social science and multidisciplinary research by providing the opportunity to use a wide range of social science data for secondary analysis. A similar picture cannot be drawn for the area of qualitative research in Germany. In spite of the growing relevance of qualitative methods since the 1970s, there is no widespread culture of data sharing in qualitative research nor can one find an institution providing a user-oriented data service for qualitative material on a nationwide scale. In view of this situation the Archive for Life Course Research (ALLF) at the University of Bremen addresses itself to the task of improving the unsatisfactory methodological and

data-related conditions through planning for national archival development. As a first step, a nationwide feasibility study on archiving and secondary use of qualitative interview data has been conducted. Drawing on the results of the feasibility study, this contribution reports on the culture of sharing and archiving qualitative research data in Germany, the support for such a service infrastructure, already existing archiving infrastructure, and last but not least, the development planning for the next two years. Due to the ALLF's holdings and the particular value of this kind of data, this overview of the German situation includes a special attention to longitudinal data.

Keywords: data sharing, archiving, qualitative data, longitudinal data, Germany

1. Introduction

In Germany as in many other countries there is an abundance of experience with re- or secondary analysis of quantitative data, which includes cross-cultural or longitudinal analysis of large comparative datasets (e.g. Eurobarometer, European and World Values Surveys, European Social Survey, ALLBUS). In particular, the GESIS Data Archive for the Social Sciences (formerly the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research,) in Cologne has for more than 50 years supported and promoted this tradition of social science and multidisciplinary research by

providing the opportunity to use a wide range of social science data for secondary analysis.

A similar picture cannot be drawn for the area of qualitative research in Germany. There is no widespread culture of secondary use of the existing unique and rich data of qualitative research – especially for transcripts of qualitative interviews – nor can one find an institution providing a user-oriented data service for qualitative material on a nationwide scale. Moreover there is no systematic scientific research on the possibilities and limitations of the reuse and revisiting of existing qualitative information.

These shortcomings are surprising in view of the growing relevance of qualitative social science methods since the 1970s. This is reflected in the increasing amount of qualitative data material being collected and the rapid spread of computing in the sciences, as well as advancements in the development of qualitative data analysis software. These developments, along with appropriate data services, facilitate secondary use in teaching and research.

In view of this situation the *Archive for Life Course Research (ALLF)* at the University of Bremen addresses itself to the task of improving the unsatisfactory methodological and data-related conditions through planning for national archival development. As a first step towards establishing a qualitative data-sharing culture and infrastructure, in a collaborative research project with the *GESIS Data Archive for the Social Sciences*, ALLF conducted a nationwide feasibility study on archiving and secondary use of qualitative interview data.

2. Culture of data sharing and archiving – results from the feasibility study

The *German Research Foundation (DFG)* financed a cooperation project for ALLF and the *GESIS Data Archive* to explore the feasibility of a service infrastructure for qualitative research and to examine the desirability of such infrastructure among the scientific community.

The feasibility study, carried out in 2003-5, aimed to explore whether and to what extent social science researchers can be considered as potential data depositors, on the one hand, and future reusers of qualitative data for research and academic teachings, on the other. For this purpose, it combined a nationwide quantitative (n=430) and a qualitative (n=36) survey of qualitative researchers, using the results to inform the criteria and concepts for archiving qualitative data.

The importance of establishing an archive became immediately apparent from the fact that much research data is in danger of becoming lost. The feasibility study sought to identify the whereabouts of research data from about 1,100 German projects with a total of 80,000 qualitative interviews. The results were re-assuring at first glance: data had been lost from only 13% of all reported projects. But taking into consideration that 60% of the reviewed projects had just finished in 2003-2004 or were still ongoing and that the period under review comprised only the last ten years, the amount of unrecoverable data is already substantial.

Given the situation described above, it seemed surprising that data from roughly one quarter of the projects was described as already archived. However, further inquiries through expert interviews carried out as part of the feasibility study revealed that material described as archived had simply been stored in a room in their institution, which does not fulfil the basic standards of a professional archive. That often means that only original audio tapes or partly transcribed interview texts exist, the material is often not anonymised, it is kept with

inadequate physical security, and that there is no public access to data, or accompanying documentation or cataloguing.

Besides the feared loss of important empirical data, the lack of an archive hinders the development of a culture of secondary analysis in qualitative social research. It is not surprising that reuse, especially of other researchers' data, happens rather infrequently. For instance, results of the feasibility study show that more than one third of the respondents have experience reusing qualitative data, but that in the majority of cases (56 %) this is reusing their own data. A further 20% of secondary use involved data from other sources, e.g. collected by colleagues. Most respondents argued there was no reason or special cause to carry out secondary analysis, indicating that there is little actual experience with the reuse of qualitative data and thus, there is very likely to be a misconception of the advantages of secondary analysis.

The findings concerning the under-utilisation of secondary analysis and lack of insight into its potential as a research method were re-inforced through the expert interviews where a widespread tentativeness or lack of knowledge of the method or the preconditions for its use was expressed. This revealed the need for clarification on the value and purpose of reuse in the context of archival work.

A second group of 18% of the respondents referred to an existing demand for data for secondary analyses and the lack of an archive. This group had not had experiences with reusing qualitative data, either because adequate material was not available or accessible, or because they did not know where to find it. They had at least implicitly considered such an approach, but failed due to the absence of archive or lack of information about reusable data.

Despite existing uncertainty, lack of knowledge and scepticism concerning the opportunities and advantages of reusing qualitative data material, 80% of the respondents were in favour of the idea of building up an infrastructure for archiving their research as a source of qualitative data in Germany. Part of the feasibility study was also to take stock of qualitative material in Germany. Analysis showed a large number of projects based on qualitative interviews, with 60% of the project leaders willing in principle to pass on their data to others for re- or secondary analysis. Moreover, 65 % of the respondents could imagine conducting secondary analysis in the future.

"Just taking the number of project managers interviewed in the feasibility study who signalled a willingness to give their data to an archive, this already adds up to more than 400 data sets which in principle could be archived and thus potentially could be made available for secondary use to the scientific community. Over 60 % of these datasets derive thematically from sociology, political science and educational research and, according to the primary investigators, they are to a high extent usable for further research projects (90 %), and for teaching and dissertations (in each case 75 %)." (Opitz & Mauer, 2005, chapter 12, Translated from the German)

3. Culture of data sharing and archiving – the (new) scientific debate

Compared to the situation some years ago, there is a new emerging debate in the German scientific community about data sharing and secondary analysis of qualitative research data. More methodological work and advice on secondary analysis has been sought (Lüders 2005), archiving and re-analysis as means for 'verification' is being discussed (Reichert 2007a, b; Flick, 2007; Eberle, 2007), and a handbook on

qualitative methodology deals with secondary analysis for the first time (Medjedović, 2010).

This development is mainly a result of (1) the feasibility study which increased awareness, and (2) of our own contributions by publications in scientific journals and books, presentations at national and international symposia, and last but not least an annual workshop on secondary analysis of qualitative data at the 'Berlin Meeting on Qualitative Methods', the main annual event on qualitative research methods in the German-speaking area.

4. Qualitative longitudinal data

As the feasibility study has shown, there is a well established qualitative research culture in Germany. However, tracking individuals over time via longitudinal research designs is not a widespread practice among qualitative researchers, although Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research is not new (Witzel, 2010).

The *Collaborative Research Centre 186 (Sfb 186)*⁷ "Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course" (e.g. Heinz 2001) at the University of Bremen (1988-2001) was a landmark in the history of German research. The Sfb 186 was a research programme with longitudinal projects on different transitions and status passages in the life course. It is remarkable that most of the Sfb 186 projects carried out mixed method research, combining quantitative and qualitative methods during the research process. In a time frame of more than 12 years some projects interviewed their respondents up to five times.

In the course of the Sfb 186, ALLF was founded upon the recommendation of the German Research Foundation (DFG) to secure and make available the extensive qualitative and predominantly longitudinal data material to prospective users. As of now, ALLF holds approximately 700 qualitative interview transcripts (digitised, anonymised, and documented) from the Sfb 186. Data from a further six longitudinal studies are not processed yet and remain in paper and audio format.

A rough overview of QL studies in Germany shows a relatively large number of existing longitudinal and even panel studies in the social sciences using qualitative interviews, often in a mixed methods approach. Taking our studies in the archive together with those from a retrieval in the databank of the GESIS (http://193.175.239.23/ows-bin/owa/r.gen_form), we found 36 studies (n>10) in the last ten years. Some of these studies have a rather long duration. For instance, the *Hamburg Biographical and Life-Course-Panel* (Friebel et al. 2000) started in 1980 with the first wave (n=252) and finished with the seventeenth wave (n=138) in 2006.

5. Existing qualitative archiving infrastructure

Currently in Germany there are only a few decentralised archives for qualitative materials which partly concentrate on specific topics like psychotherapy, biographies in transition, political culture, social movements, documentations and party manifestos, memoirs of war and post-war time, or natural and environment-protection history, as well as archives for different types of qualitative material like oral-history data, letters, photographs, diaries, biographies, essays, correspondences as well as audio and video recordings. Though in most German archives it is possible to search electronic catalogues, up to now most of the data itself has not been accessible in a digital or machine-readable format. Furthermore, the archives lack basic standards of data management and preservation, and therefore are not visible to prospective users from the research community. Some of the archives

are affiliated with university departments, and many are non-profit associations.

Up to now, there are no policy or procedure materials between these qualitative archives that could be shared. Concerning long-term preservation and long-term availability of digital resources in general, nestor – the German network of expertise in digital long-term preservation – is concerned with these issues and provides guides and workshops for libraries, archives, museums and other institutions and individuals involved in long-term preservation and archiving of digital resources (See, <http://www.langzeitarchivierung.de/>).

6. Development planning

Based on the results of the feasibility study, ALLF intends to establish a central national service organisation for archiving and disseminating qualitative data (*QualiService*). Though centralised, this service infrastructure will also utilise the benefits of specialised resources and archiving, whether by integrating and supporting already existing archives or by thematically and methodically centred data acquisition for our own data holdings. This includes also special attention to longitudinal data which are of particular value for reuse.

As cooperation with experienced archives such as the GESIS-Data Archive is indispensable, a conjoint application for building up QualiService within the *GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences – the German institution for Social Science Infrastructure Services* – was submitted in October 2008. Unfortunately, due to the new restructuring of GESIS and therefore new foci of activity, this application was not successful at that time.

Development priorities

Thus, our priority for the upcoming years is to realise the development of basic infrastructure for QualiService and corresponding data management standards locally at the University of Bremen.

1. Therefore, we have applied for project funding at the DFG⁸ together with the *eScience-Institute*⁹ (at the University of Bremen), the *Library of the University of Bremen* (Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Bremen)¹⁰ and the *GESIS Data Archive for the Social Sciences*.

2. Furthermore, we are making contributions to the scientific debate on archiving and secondary analysis of qualitative data by presentations at national and international symposia as well as publications in scientific journals and books. To demonstrate the potential of reusing data as well as to meet unsolved questions and objections surrounding secondary analysis, a research project started to conduct an exemplary secondary analysis that combines several relevant qualitative studies in a thematic field of family/partnership/gender.

3. Last but not least, we have initiated a network for supporting existing specialist qualitative archives in Germany (*Initiativgruppe qualitativer Archive – Langzeitarchivierung und Erschließung qualitativer Dokumente und Daten*)¹¹. The idea results first of all from the enlargement of the data holdings through further qualitative data (e.g. group discussions, texts, documents) and through improvements in the accessibility of data from other German-speaking archives through a central mediation function between those archives and researchers searching for appropriate data.

Barriers

1. In Germany the discussion about the need for a policy for archiving qualitative data is a rather recent phenomenon and includes contributions of the *Bund-Länder-Kommission* (2006), the

Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF 2009) and the German Research Foundation (DFG 2006; Kluttig 2008). The realisation first of all depends on overcoming the lack of cooperation between academic experts, libraries, archives, and information professionals. Similar to the *Deutsche Initiative für Netzwerkinformation* (Arbeitsgruppe "Elektronisches Publizieren" DINI 2009), a report of the *Alliance of German Science Organisation* (2008, S. 6) suggests that cooperating academic and information specialists should develop technical standards and define the division of labour related to the process through pilot projects. This should then facilitate the establishment of reliable and accessible archives for primary research data as well as the creation of international, interdisciplinary, and inter-operable access interfaces. The *German Council of Science and Humanities* (Wissenschaftsrat 2011) which provides advice to the German federal government and the state (Länder) governments on the structure and development of higher education and research argued recently, that the qualitative Social Sciences and the Humanities should have a comparable position of the development of science-infrastructure like the quantitative Social and Economic Sciences.

2. Unlike the ESRC in Great Britain, the German Research Foundation (DFG), the predominant funding organisation in the social sciences in Germany, does not require researchers to offer copies of their data to an archive within three months after the funding period has expired. There is no national policy that *mandates* archiving and sharing of research data. Although the *German Research Foundation* (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), since 1998, *recommends* data "shall be securely stored for ten years in a durable form in the institution of their origin" (DFG 1998, Recommendation 7), the responsibility for the data rests with the individual researcher.¹² Often the data is stored in offices or at home, where as a rule it is not accessible for others and where the long-term storage is uncertain.

3. The splitting of the methods section of the *German Sociological Association* (DGS) into a qualitative and a quantitative branch illustrates the fierce competition between qualitative and quantitative research. Also the current situation of ALLF is indicative: unlike in the UK, the USA, or Finland, ALLF is not part of a national data archive, collecting and offering both qualitative and quantitative data. In view of the fact that there are many mixed methods studies, ALLF tries to overcome this gap and facilitate access for users by providing a simplified and improved reference system. This is why ALLF from the very beginning has tried to establish cooperation with the *GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences*.

Assistance of existing organisations

A good deal of work in building up QualiService will require establishing standards for the management of data (and production of metadata) throughout the data archiving life cycle. For this purpose we hope to rely on already existing expertise, e.g. provided by CESSDA and IASSIST. Also we appreciate the cooperation with ESDS Qualidata¹³ Timescapes Archive¹⁴ and the Institute for Qualitative Research, Freie Universität Berlin/INA¹⁵.

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 4. Reusing other researchers' data seems to be less common than the quantitative results indicate, as not all of those cases of stated reuse in the questionnaire turned out to be such in the face-to-face interview. This points out an unfamiliarity with secondary analysis and its definition.
 5. For details on the publications of the ALLF members see the publication list at: www.lebenslaufarchiv.uni-bremen.de.
 6. See: <http://www.qualitative-forschung.de/methodentreffen/>
 7. Collaborative Research Centres are long-term university research centres in which scientists and academics pursue ambitious joint interdisciplinary research undertakings.
 8. Within the DFG funding programme 'Scientific Library Services and Information Systems' (LIS)
 9. See: <http://www.escience.uni-bremen.de>
 10. <http://www.suub.uni-bremen.de>
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Notes

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