

Crossing Boundaries with Secondary Analysis: Implications for Archived Oral History Data

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The secondary analysis of archived oral history and qualitative data is a fast expanding area of research, yet little of debates about questions generated or processes involved have been discussed by oral historians. When I gave a paper on this theme at the 2002 International Oral History conference, fired up by my first explorations of someone else's data, I was surprised to find that my audience wasn't equally as excited.

Repeating this experience at the European Social Science History conference recently (Bornat, 2008), I came across the same reactions. The exploration of archived oral history interviews presents interesting dilemmas and indeed controversies. Questions about the effect of time passing, changed contexts for analysis and interpretation, the construction and therefore accessibility of the original data and new ethical considerations are amongst the new questions which secondary analysis poses.

Applying these questions to the re-use of someone else's data, or even to an earlier investigation of one's own highlighted and accentuates these issues, but not it seems for all oral historians.

Perhaps this is because, for historians, the re-use of another's data is normal practice and uncontroversial. As Louise Corti explains:

Unlike the sociologist, the historian will not be daunted by the concept of re-use of material that is unfamiliar to them.

Historians have had to deal with the challenges of assessing provenance and veracity for many hundreds of years – take the Dead Sea Scrolls, Testaments and many other critical texts.

Corti, 2006.

Historians visit and revisit records, government papers, diaries, logbooks, notebooks, photographs and ephemera. When more letters or documents are discovered, or sometimes diaries or photographs, these are welcomed for the new light they shed on existing data, as they enable fresh interpretations to be introduced. Making new

connections, revising perspectives of past times as well as introducing understandings of what we see around us. This is the expected mission of the historian (Bornat, 2003). The process of returning to earlier data needs to be made strange to historians, to be presented from a new angle, if its potential for exposing methodological issues as well as new insights from data are to be appreciated. Working across the disciplinary divide, sociologists with an interest in qualitative longitudinal research, looking at social processes over time by connecting with earlier studies, or reanalysing or replicating studies (Thomson, 2007, p. 571) are now crossing over to include archived oral history interviews. In doing so they are developing approaches and developing debates which are important for oral historians (Heaton, 2004; Corti and Thompson, 2004; Bishop, 2007; Moore, 2007). Of course Paul Thompson, had already embarked on a pioneering secondary analysis initiative, setting up the nationally funded resource Qualidata in 1994 to promote the archiving and disseminating of UK qualitative research data (ESDS Qualidata, 2006) as well as reflecting on and revisiting his own oral history interviews (Thompson, 2000; Corti & Thompson, 2004).

For this overview, I want to look first briefly at the epistemology of secondary analysis, what kinds of knowledge does secondary analysis produce? And then go on to look at three topics which continue to stimulate debate: time, context and ethics.

[Secondary analysis: new knowledge?](#)

Secondary analysis brings rewards for the researcher. These include opportunities for the reconceptualisation of original data, setting it into new frameworks of understanding, searching for new themes and positioning it alongside other, subsequent, data sets and research outcomes. Opportunities to ask new questions of and so to draw new interpretations are also reasons for returning to data or turning to the data of other researchers. In sum, what is produced is new knowledge (Bornat, 2003, 2005a). As Moore puts it, with secondary analysis, 'the data are...being constructed in the process of a new research project' (Moore, 2007).

This focus on the newness of the data and of the enquiry is a response to arguments put forward by Martin Hammersley and by Natasha Mauthner and colleagues (1997; 1998). They argue that because the data are 'constructed', the product of a particular moment in time and of a particular set of interactions they necessarily 'involve an informal and intuitive element'. Hammersley invokes the idea of the cultural habitus of

a researcher, which he sees as the ideas and acquired research experience of one researcher, knowledge which it is impossible for another researcher to acquire or know (Hammersley, 1997, p. 138-9). Hammersley warns that, 'there will also be relevant data missing', even when two researchers are working together very closely, and that with secondary analysis missing data will come to be increasingly significant (1997, p. 139). Finally, he argues, that to go back with a different purpose undermines the importance of context

Mauthner and her colleagues (1998) identify similar and additional problems in an article where they report on what happened when they went back to their own, earlier, data. They too raise the question of missing data, noting that in their original studies they did not necessarily ask all the questions that might have been asked. They emphasise context, noting that their original research exists in 'the boundaries within which the fieldwork was accomplished', (Mauthner et al, 1998, p. 742). They argue that this makes their original data unreachable. They warn against a secondary analysis which assumes that data are 'out there'. This is "'naively realist'" and 'hoodwinks us into believing they are entities without concomitant relations' (Mauthner, 1998, p. 743).

To question whether secondary analysis is, or can, be involved in the production of new knowledge is to place a restriction on sociological research which is not imposed by historians on their data. This curiously ahistorical attitude to past data risks impoverishing investigations and ends up, as Moore suggests, fixing that research in a context from which it cannot be retrieved (Moore, 2006). If historians gain from the practices of sociologists who are interested in what happens when data is re-used, then equally sociologists might also gain from accepting more creative and interpretive approaches to archived data which recognise the potential for reuse as a means for fresh and newly informed conceptualisations of old concerns as well as the recontextualising of emergent ideas within a broader time perspective.

To develop these ideas and to illustrate some of the complexities of secondary analysis and reuse of archived data I'll go on to consider questions of time, researcher context and ethical issues. In so doing it should be possible to respond to the questions that

Hammersley and Mauthner et al raise and also highlight continuing debates for secondary analysis.

Time

Time becomes a key variable in secondary analysis and in a number of different ways. Interview data are gathered at a particular point in time, sometimes including a retrospective aspect, if the approach is biographical or focuses on a life history. Returning to the data after a lapse of time introduces yet another dimension, to which can be added a fourth, the point in time when the analysis takes place. The sum of all these adds a great deal more to the complexity which Hammersley highlights in his focus on cultural habitus, but also introduces possibilities to note the effects of process, change, stability and rupture as well as offering opportunities for comparison and contrast.

Going back to my own earlier interviews I have noted changes not only in myself, but in the range of theories and interpretations available subsequently. All of which lead to new, differently informed interpretations from what is old data (Bornat, 2005b).

Similarly, going back to another researcher's data set can sometimes reveal new knowledge, when regularities and frequencies may be overlooked if the original researcher had taken a different line of analysis or questioning of the data. Here again, time may be a factor, when new contexts for interpretation highlight new, or previously disregarded issues, as for example indications of racial difference (Bornat, 2005b) or of smoking practices in Elliot's re-use of Thompson's archived oral history interviews (Elliot, 2001) and Bishop's investigation of convenience foods, using the same data set (Bishop, 2007).

Timescapes offers possibilities for both short and long term time-based analysis and consequently a variety of ways of conceptualising time itself. To time lapsed between interpretations a longitudinal perspective will add time lapsed, and experienced, within individual lives and the same or similar points in time experienced by people at different stages in the life course. The likely result are analyses informed by a rich and variable awareness of temporality.

Researcher context

Critics of secondary analysis point to the impossibility of understanding another person's research data. As Martin Hammersley puts it:

Where data are produced on the basis of different cultural assumptions, theoretical presuppositions... they cannot be treated as if they represented a common currency, with material from different studies simply being added together.

Hammersley, 1997, p. 139.

Though Hammersley expresses a commitment in a later paper to discovering a 'usable past' (2004, p. 25) in order better to know what may be possible as well as what ought not to be repeated, Natasha Mauthner and colleagues are much less certain, arguing that

...meanings are not to be found in the data, but to be made by those doing the interpreting... 'findings' are not in the data but created (their emphases) through the interaction of ...researchers with particular respondents in particular locations and at particular historical conjunctures.

Mauthner et al, 1998, p. 735.

However, Niamh Moore contests this position, pointing out the impossibility of separating out historical from social science knowledge (Moore, 2006). Some examples might help to illustrate possibilities for secondary analysis while acknowledging limits.

Archiving interview data from a conflict area highlights the issue of 'researcher context' most starkly and suggests that re-use raises even more issues than Mauthner et al have identified. Secondary analysis is productive not only of new data, but also new issues for preservation and recognition. Peter McLoughlin and Robert Miller, looking at the archiving of interviews from the period of the Northern Ireland conflict, raise the issue of the biographical identification of researchers. They show how some researchers in Northern Ireland recognised that their political affiliation had affected both their interviewing and the interpretations they had made. This was despite a hoped for objectivity. Some found that they were advantaged in certain situations. For example one researcher who was perceived to be protestant found that they had easy access to members of the police force who were traditionally likely to be protestant, since they assumed he would be sympathetic to their position. In contrast, another researcher with a presumed catholic identity, found that police and unionist politicians were more

wary of him. They go on to cite a third researcher who, despite having relinquished her religious affiliation found that interviewees persisted in assuming they shared an identity with her because of her name, while her gender and youth provided other sometimes conflicting responses.

McLoughlin and Miller's conclusion from their experience of archiving interview data from the period of the Northern Ireland conflict is that it is better not to include biographical information about researchers when material is being deposited. Instead they prefer the strategy of depositing with the data 'a list of the various publications we consulted in writing the entries' In that way, they argue, any future researchers would be able to draw their own conclusions as to a researcher's political or religious affiliations from what that researcher chose to disclose about themselves (McLoughlin & Miller, 2006)..

I draw on these examples in order to suggest perversely that Mauthner and her colleagues may be right, but that the conclusions they draw are wrong. That the data are created at a specific time and within a particular set of social relations by individuals with particular histories and motivations is incontrovertible. But, as Heaton points out, this is also true of primary analysis, particularly where teams of researchers are working together (2008) but even when researchers are working on their own, a set of fieldnotes and commentaries still present only a version of what was observable at a particular point in time and may still include inaccuracies or gaps. There are clearly many reasons why it might not always be possible to know much or anything about the original researcher and though this may not be desirable, it may also be the case, as McLoughlin and Miller suggest, that revealing an identity might 'not only be unethical, but also arbitrary and misleading' (2006).

What can be learned from this? Outside areas where knowledge of research identities might compromise the safety of a researcher, we might consider a more open reflexivity in the process of doing research and an explicit involving of oneself in the analysis of the data. This is a practice which others, for example Molly Andrews in her investigations into political narratives, have adopted. She positioned herself and her views in the centre of the process, from interviewing to analysis (Andrews, 2007). In contrast, practice being developed for Timescapes suggests following the example of

ethnographers and anthropologists, and writing notes on interviews to be deposited in the archive, alongside the data. While such contextual information would not reveal a researcher's cultural habitus or research context in its entirety, it might provide enough information to further enrich data and the experience of later researchers who seek to use it in other ways.

Ethics

Secondary analysis practices have a helpful way of alerting us to ethical issues which we might not otherwise attend to in carrying out, interpreting and depositing interview data. In this final section of the paper, I'll look at two issues which have an ethical aspect: consent and reputation.

When interview data are being prepared for deposit in an archive, archivists will expect that consent has been given by interviewees for deposit, and that restrictions and anonymisation procedures will have been agreed, with data signed off by contributors (ESDS Qualidata). The Timescapes programme, linking seven qualitative longitudinal research projects each generating interview data which will form part of a usable and accessible archive for secondary analysts, is developing common consent and data deposit forms (Timescapes 2008).

These data management procedures will enable participants to identify particular preferences as to archiving and will set levels of access according to use, but with some level of anonymisation likely for all public re-use. The documentation of such procedures involves much discussion and debate, particularly now that the act of obtaining consent now appears to be diminished in relation to demonstrating and recording the process.

In a recent article, Tina Miller and Mary Boulton argue that increasing regulation and bureaucratisation of consent in the UK if not elsewhere, has led to changes to the meaning of consent and to significant alterations in the relationship between researcher and researched (Miller & Boulton, 2007). Providing interviewees with opportunities to participate in research, for consent procedures to be more open and responsive to their expectations and hopes for the research, is wholly positive and indeed would be recognised as a quality of oral history as a practice. However, as Miller and Boulton point out this is now an elaborate procedure:

...gaining informed consent...in practice includes weighing up risk, privacy and protection, safety and potential harm, trust and responsibility and demonstrating that this has been done in a systematic and auditable manner.

Miller & Boulton, 2007, p. 2209.

They go on to argue that the assumption that informed consent may be guaranteed through bureaucratisation and documentation of the process is illusory. They argue instead for consent to be documented as a process starting from the original invitation to be interviewed, continuing to include arrangements for the interview. They also call for an ethical review procedure that is based in trust, involving participants more democratically, though ensuring anonymity (Miller & Boulton, 2007, p. 2209). Such a process would mesh well with Michael Frisch's notion of 'shared authority' to which many oral historians subscribe (Frisch, 1990). Nevertheless it doesn't necessarily allow for interviews where common ground is not shared, and may remain an ideal for some exchanges.

Whether or not consent is a shared process, its production does not take into consideration later re-use or secondary analysis. No consent procedure can guarantee a fully informed understanding of how data will be used once it has been deposited in an archive.

The Jefferys' interviews with geriatricians provide an example of this. These participants, in consenting to deposit their interviews in a public archive, were agreeing to cooperate with a highly respected retired medical sociologist who had taken part in most of the developments they were being asked to talk about (Jefferys, 2000). They were willing to place their lifetime's achievement on record in the British Library Sound Archive for all to see. The interviews were conducted wholly appropriately with researchers obtaining oral and written consent. Informed consent was given for a personal life history with emphasis on contributions to the development of UK geriatric medicine. Some participants, though we do not know which, also read through the transcripts of their interviews and corrected them before they went onto public display. Legally therefore, there are no ethical issues involved in reusing these data.

The original researchers were very clearly focussed on one purpose and it seems likely that they understood that their words might be analysed by a range of researchers

concerned with different aspects of medical history or medical sociology. Some respondents were aware of the tape recorder and even deliberately spoke off record, but there is no evidence that they were thinking of others using their life stories for different purposes in the future. There is no record of discussion about the ways that the values of future researchers, their areas of interest, the language used, and the interpretations thought viable, would change over the coming decades. It was clear that informed consent did not, and could not, have included a full discussion of potential uses for the data. More specifically there is no evidence that any of the interviewees would have anticipated that the accounts of their medical careers might be used to explore recruitment practices in the specialty nor, even more specifically, the existence of racism and prejudice in medical hierarchies. One can only speculate that, if given the opportunity they might well have refused to give consent.

From this I would conclude that there must be limits to participation and to informed consent, limits which are recognisable in terms of time and also in relation to historical and scientific enquiry. Original studies cannot be fully replicated because we cannot know enough about how data were created at any previous time and because research practices differ from those in the past. Similarly, informed consent cannot be fully given because no-one can know how data will appear in the future.

My final point, relating to ethics is the question of the reputation of the original researcher. When researchers deposit their data they too are engaging in a process of consent giving consent to others to re-use what they created. However, while new data may be created, as Moore (2005) suggests, this should not normally lead to the overshadowing or discrediting of the original researcher. Margot Jefferys' research data stands as an important and rich commentary on aspects of UK health care both before and after the coming of the NHS and her recognised standing as a well-regarded medical sociologist should remain intact. Indeed it might be argued that to go back to an old data set is to demonstrate esteem, even if new evidence and new probably unanticipated interpretations ensue.

If the original researcher somehow failed to ask the questions a later researcher might have wanted to see answered, then this might be explained in terms of a particular context or focus. Their standing as a reputable researcher is not then likely to be

affected. However, if that original researcher's data includes language or expressions which appear to be at odds with that researcher's reputation, then uncomfortable questions beg to be asked. This point is made in a recent article by Tanya Evans and Pat Thane who have been reanalysing research data deposited by the well-known UK sociologist, Dennis Marsden. In the 1960s he interviewed a group of 'lone mothers', taking notes during the interviews which he afterwards read and audio-recorded, for a study which he later published. Amongst the deposited material are his research notes, which he included in the recording and which, according to Evans and Thane, make: '...personal comments about the mothers...sometimes disparaging about their appearance, their homes, their language' (Evans & Thane, 2006). Tanya Evans and Pat Thane express surprise that 'comments revealing about the class, race and gender attitudes that could be openly expressed by a highly educated, left-leaning, socially conscious sociologist' (Evans & Thane, 2006). They have been able to discuss his use of language with Dennis Marsden, who recognises that times have changed since he carried out his research. Attitudes and expressions relating to race and gender have changed, however he feels confident that he could be sensitive when it came to class difference and that the women he interviewed responded well to his non-threatening manner. The point that Evans and Thane draw from this is that it is necessary for secondary analysers to understand the differences between research practice in the 1960s and 'the norms which prevail now' (2006) if they are to effectively interpret what they find in the data.

To have that awareness is essential but the ethical implications for researchers, who sometimes are neglected in the development of ethical procedures, may be very great. If secondary analysers are in a position to defame, at worst, or revise, at best, an earlier researcher's reputation, or cultural habitus, through examination of their research practice, then the result may be that research practice may be affected if it is known that data are to be deposited for use by others. Notes may be carefully edited, even excised, questions deleted and emails censored during the lifetime of a project and when data is deposited. Defensive practice may be developed to protect a reputation against future investigators. Ethical procedures may sometimes have a tendency to produce outcomes which are perverse and unintended.

Conclusion

Secondary analysis has many benefits, not least the possibility that research lives on in the hands of later researchers. As well, re-use of archived data offers the possibility of taking a longer look at processes and relationships, across time.

This paper has looked at some of the debates which are yielding interesting issues, for both original researchers and for those who go back to re-use data from earlier studies. In rejecting arguments which question the possibility of re-use I have suggested that awareness of time as a contextualising factor enables the re-framing of data with the prospect of recreating that data with interpretations benefiting from subsequent theorising, later studies and changed social attitudes. I've agreed that to enter the research context or cultural habitus of an earlier researcher is not possible, but have suggested that there may be ways of dealing with this deficit, some of which have been adopted by original researchers and others which researchers may consider as strategies as a means to leave a more revealing trace of their mindsets and influences. Finally I considered some ethical issues emerging from the re-use of archived interview data. To engage in the secondary analysis of another's data is likely to lead to a critical analysis of the researcher, if only by attending to questions and aspects which may not have been included in the original research. It is also possible that going back to another's research may result in recognising differences in approach which, viewed positively, are indicative of changed practices both socially and in relation to research. Where the original researcher is able to respond, a productive dialogue may ensue. However, if that dialogue is not possible, then inferences may be left uncontested. This may be a difficult outcome for researchers to come to terms with, but not uncommon in the annals of scientific enquiry.

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