

Breaking a 'strange silence'

Ruth Sheldon explores the potential for reusing existing qualitative data to inform policy, with a focus on ageing policy

There is often an assumption that qualitative research equates to primary research involving original fieldwork. However, when policymakers require qualitative evidence, they rarely consider the potential for examining existing data and there is a drive among policymakers and funders to conduct original fieldwork afresh with each new piece of research.

As part of a programme of work exploring policy around ageing in the UK, the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) undertook a unique collaborative study with Joanna Bornat and Bill Bytheway at the Open University, who are conducting an ongoing qualitative longitudinal project called 'The Oldest Generation' (TOG). ippr's small pilot study investigated the value of reusing the TOG data to inform our policy work, the first time that ippr has conducted secondary analysis of qualitative data.

'The Oldest Generation' is one of seven empirical projects that makes up the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)'s qualitative longitudinal initiative Timescapes. The seven projects have been designed to span the life course, and have generated detailed evidence which is both retrospective and prospective, in exploring change as it happens, in 'real time'. It also explores the perspectives of family members of different generations over time. The methodological approach used by TOG involves repeat life history interviews with a family member who was over the age of 75 at the time of being recruited. Another family

member is keeping a diary and is taking photographs over 18 months. Twelve families are involved.

The potential for reusing qualitative data

My interest in conducting secondary analysis of qualitative data arose from a sense that important types of evidence, and the perspectives of some groups of people, are being overlooked by the policy community. Reuse of existing data has the potential to redress these gaps in a number of ways.

Policy-focused research often has to be delivered within relatively short timeframes, which can preclude the use of methodologies that bring longitudinal and historical perspectives to policy issues. The pressure on researchers to be 'original' and up-to-date, and the under-resourcing of dissemination, can also make it difficult for new policy researchers to build on the continuing history and ongoing debates surrounding particular issues. Yet in a wide range of policy areas, ageing policy being an important example, there is a particular need to understand social change in the long term. Ageing policy needs to be informed by evidence that is holistic and continuous, and that explores how different areas of policy impact (or fail to impact) in the long term in people's lives. It has also been claimed that many government departments do not have a good institutional memory of what policy initiatives did and did not work in the past (O'Neill 2009,

Porter 2007, Lodge and Rogers 2006).

Researchers can respond to this deficit by ensuring that historical and longitudinal evidence informs current policy decisions. For example, longitudinal data may be built in to the design of the dataset itself, as is the case with the evidence collected through Timescapes. Other data sets, which may not be longitudinal in design, can be revisited from the perspective of particular policy interests to provide insights into that nature of policy at different points in time.

The short time frame of policy-driven research can also result in the exclusion of some people from research. For example, people in the 'older old' age group (often defined as people over the age of 85) have previously been excluded, sometimes because of their frailty and limited mobility (Carr 2004). Drawing on existing research with very elderly people via secondary analysis is one practical way of including their perspectives in evidence used to make policy.

Why has there not been wider reuse of qualitative data?

As Paul Thompson has argued, there was until recently a 'strange silence' among the social science academic research community about reusing qualitative data that has been collected by other researchers (Thompson 2000). There appears to be a lack of communication between social scientists (who may adopt historical approaches, such as longitudinal or life history methodologies) and historians, and the two have been portrayed as competing for policy influence. This apparent tension seems to create unnecessary barriers between researchers from different disciplines who are interested in ensuring that historical evidence is used in policy. Social research tends to play down the historical context, prioritising the here and now and the inevitabilities of social structures and political processes. But reusing qualitative data

gathered over different time periods necessarily brings a historical perspective to policy problems.

There also appears to have been resistance to using historical evidence in 'evidence-based' policymaking. As academics involved in the History and Policy network¹ have argued, history can be inconvenient and embarrassing for policymakers who may not want the public to be reminded of the genesis of their 'new' policy ideas. Research has found that it can be difficult for politicians to admit to something being tried before (Berridge 2007). Where historical evidence is used by politicians, it often plays a rhetorical role which is dependent on particular policy situations and political cycles (ibid).

The complexity of qualitative evidence may also explain why secondary analysis of quantitative evidence is more common. Quantitative data tends to simplify the complicated and is more amenable to being used to support policy decision-making; as a result, policymakers have tended to prefer it (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). In contrast, administrators, policymakers and politicians have often dismissed qualitative research as 'anecdotal' because it is based on small sample sizes. Because qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding social phenomena in context, the reuse of qualitative data raises additional epistemological, methodological and ethical questions about how data that is collected for one purpose can be used for another.

Finally, until relatively recently, qualitative data sets have not been easily available to researchers because they have not been archived. This is now changing with the development of Qualidata² and the funding of Timescapes by the ESRC.

Re-using qualitative data to inform policy: The Oldest Generation

ippr's short pilot study of The Oldest Generation data found that accessing exist-

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¹ www.historyandpolicy.org

² ESDS Qualidata (www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata) is part of the UK Data Archive which provides access and support to over 5000 social science qualitative data sets including many classic historical and sociological studies.

ing longitudinal data enabled exploration of the role that policies play in people's lives beyond a particular policy cycle. For example, one TOG participant, Mrs Watson³, had provided a caring role for her disabled brother for the past 70 years, in an unstable and largely unsupportive policy context. In her interview, and in the diary evidence recorded by her son, Mrs Watson described how her life had been intertwined with her brother's. She talked about her sense of stigma on being associated from a young age with a brother with cerebral palsy and how her caring responsibilities had impacted on her life choices. Her account highlighted the implications of changing cultural attitudes towards disability at a personal level, in relation to service provision and policy:

Today I have seen on TV that a footballer ... who has a son with cerebral palsy has raised £100,000 from an appeal the family made to send the boy to Düsseldorf for some specialist treatment. How times change. That child reminds me of my brother Jack at that age. My mother had to make an eight mile round trip on a bus for Jack's physio. No help of any kind. I myself after her death decided to give him two walking sticks and I suppose I bullied him to walk. I ponder which is the most humane procedure. In those far-gone days families were left to get on with difficulties, both in health and social care. Apart from no financial help there were not any practical services of any kind, often only strange expressions. (Diary entry, 1 February 2008)

Accessing this data also provided evidence of the interplay of different policy areas over time; for example the ways in which past employment policies, family or health policies impact on people later in their lives.

Reusing data in this way can provide new perspectives on policy 'problems': we were able to search the TOG data for topics that were not planned into the original research design or generated with particular policy frameworks in mind. This approach, referred to as 'using browsing and serendipity' by some researchers (Timescapes website), has particular advantages. Where participants

speak about topics unprompted, this provides an opportunity to understand the kind of intensity that the subject has for them, the language that they use to speak about issues and the contexts within which particular issues arise (Bishop 2007, Bornat 2003).

The pilot study enabled ippr to access data from research participants who were not sampled and recruited through more typical research gatekeepers such as service providers and agencies. The TOG participants were not sampled to explore a particular policy agenda, but instead were found by the Open University's networks around the country. This methodological approach provided new perspectives on policy problems in a number of ways.

First, it highlighted the potential for secondary analysis to provide more detailed understanding of hidden or stigmatised issues. One example is the policy agenda around mental health in later life. There is evidence that suggests that there are rising levels of depression and emotional distress among older people but an ippr scoping study found that evidence about well-being in later life often contradicts this, perhaps in reflection of the stigma associated with discussing poor mental health in public contexts (Allen 2008, Age Concern and the Mental Health Foundation 2006, Age Concern 2007). Reusing TOG data enabled perceptions of well-being to be explored indirectly, rather than through primary research explicitly aiming to generate evidence on this subject. The longitudinal nature of the project may have meant that participants felt more able to open up about these issues to TOG researchers as compared with a researcher working on a shorter-term project.

Second, the pilot provided an understanding of the ways that tensions between different policy approaches are reflected in people's lived experiences. For example, there can be a tension between policy approaches designed to support independence in later life and preventative strategies based on early intervention. This tension between needing support and wanting independence was

³ Participants' names have been changed throughout

reflected in Mr Roberts's account of the choices he had made in caring for his wife:

I've been offered help by the doctors and the vicar and everybody, but as long as you can manage on your own you want to manage on your own. They say, well you can get home help and that and now they've even offered a visitor to come and take her out for days. But you don't want that if you can possibly help it. (Interview with Mr Roberts, 19 September 2007)

As this example highlights, this data set had the advantage of preceding as well as following possible referrals to health and social care agencies. It therefore provided evidence about the decisions people make about professional intervention, set against the backdrop of their everyday lives.

Existing research has suggested that social relationships and community engagement are among the most important drivers of well-being in later life

Third, analysing data that was not collected for a particular policy purpose raised questions about the paradigms underpinning policy thinking, in this case how paradigms of old age relate to people's experience of ageing. For example, Bowling has highlighted how previous policy and practice frameworks have adopted 'positive' or 'negative' paradigms of old age. 'Positive' paradigms take a view of old age as a positive and natural period of life while negative or 'pathology' models focus on issues of dependency and need (Bowling 2005). Yet these paradigms or models which have underpinned policymaking may well be disconnected from older people's experiences (Age Concern and the Mental Health Foundation 2006). Reality is more complicated: people move between these different paradigms of

ageing and have different strategies for dealing with these two polarities.

For example one couple in their late eighties, living in a very rural area to which they had moved following retirement, were also far from their children and were highly dependent on being able to drive and the support of friends and neighbours. In her interview fieldnotes, Joanna reflected on what might happen in the future:

I wondered if I should ask about planning for their future, but they didn't offer any kind of lead in so I left it. Yet again in one of these interviews, happiness and contentment are being radiated and I don't like to disturb this account. But, I do wonder what things will be like when I come back in eighteen months' time. (Fieldnotes from interview with Mrs Arthur, 3 September 2007)

The longitudinal nature of the data and the incorporation of other family perspectives was able to reveal times when things were more difficult.

Fourth, the pilot highlighted ways in which reusing qualitative data can enable policymakers to draw on evidence about people's existing ways of life. For example, analysing *TOG* evidence provided an opportunity to trace people's social contacts and social networks over time. This level of detailed observational data revealed sources of support and networks, and gaps in support, which might be overlooked by researchers, policymakers and by participants themselves when asked about this directly. This is extremely important for policymakers who are concerned with ensuring that communities meet the needs of an ageing population. Existing research has suggested that social relationships and community engagement are among the most important drivers of well-being in later life (Allen 2008). Policy that responds to this needs to start from an understanding of the forms of social and community networks that are important to people.

Finally, the process of conducting the

analysis raised ippr's awareness of issues that was absent from our planned work on ageing: notably, the subject of death, the process of dying and the longer term impact on families of absence through death.

Analysing The Oldest Generation data also provided an opportunity to explore how reported large-scale trends play out at an individual and family level over time. For example, the greater geographical dispersal of families, changes in residential circumstances and living arrangements have been identified in quantitative studies as key factors impacting on later life (Hyde and Higgs 2004, Young and Grundy 2006). The TOG data provides an opportunity to explore the different experiences of older people whose families were living close by compared with those who were much more distant. The evidence also provides detailed insights into the processes by which older people make decisions about where they live.

The reuse of qualitative data for policy purposes could also result in more innovative collaborations between academics and applied policy researchers

For example, several of the TOG families had transnational links and these had important consequences for the oldest generation. Mr Shaw, 83 years old at the time of being interviewed, described how his decisions about where to live were closely related to the movements of his daughter Josie, who was previously living in Australia. He was part way through applying to move there to join her when she decided to return to England.

We were glad that she moved back before we got there [to Australia] otherwise we'd have been landed out there without Josie and we'd have had to travel back to England to see her. It's good, you

know, from the point that when Josie was here [in England] if I was ill she was down there straight away to see, look after me and do anything. She's been a good daughter in other words. (Interview with Mr Shaw, 1 October 2007)

The reuse of qualitative data for policy purposes could also result in more innovative collaborations between academics and applied policy researchers. It appears that Timescapes' concern with archiving and user engagement is helping to break down more traditional academic resistance to collaboration. This feeds into broader debates about the extent to which policy agendas (and therefore the decision-making of policymakers) should shape the focus of academic research (Hammersley 2006).

Conducting a secondary analysis alongside the primary research team raises methodological, ethical and practical issues which need to be considered when policy researchers reuse qualitative data. For example, reusing data requires a reflective approach to the potential and limitations of the sampling strategy used to generate the original data set. It also requires engagement with complex questions about ethics, in relation to the consent and anonymity of research participants (Bornat 2003). Throughout this article, we have used pseudonyms for participants in order to protect their identity. This raises questions both for other researchers reusing this data and for the Timescapes team involved in archiving. Is it important to ensure that future researchers refer to participants in a consistent way so that participants featured can be located in the archive? How can we ensure that participants' anonymity is maintained in a context where data may be used in a cumulative way by different researchers?

Existing literature about reusing qualitative data has focused particularly on the implications of doing so while having limited knowledge of the original research context (for example see Corti *et al* 2005). In applied qualitative research, knowledge of the original research context is needed in order to understand the extent to which qualitative evidence can be generalised to other times

and places (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). As such there are complex questions for academics involved in archiving qualitative data about what 'meta-data' (additional data about the context of the research) should be included. Policymakers can input in to this process by advising on the usefulness of different contextual data. Our pilot study found that where secondary analysis is conducted alongside the primary research team, the unrecorded reflections and interpretations of the primary researchers themselves can become an important source of contextual data for secondary analysis. In our pilot analysis, discussions about which data the secondary analysis should start with were based on Joanna and Bill's existing familiarity with and interpretation of the data.

Conclusion

ippr's pilot study demonstrates that there is much potential for secondary analysis of qualitative data to be used more widely to inform policy. Doing so will open up access to new types of evidence that are currently overlooked – historical and longitudinal evidence, data about everyday life and the perspectives of people who may be excluded from more traditional policy research design. This will provide an opportunity to use qualitative evidence that is not prescribed by the time-scales of particular policy cycles but is concerned to assess the long-term impacts of policy in the lives of people, families and communities.

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