

Introduction

This method guide explores the practicalities and processes of using qualitative secondary analysis (QSA, hereafter) developed in an ESRC study on Ageing in Place. Although some commentary exists regarding the re-use of qualitative data, there are few practical guides on how to conduct QSA. To attend to this gap, we describe some of the ethical and epistemological issues involved in this approach as well as discussing how to ask new research questions with existing data. To conclude, we suggest some guiding principles for researchers interested in using QSA for future research projects.

Key points

- Qualitative data often remain under-used and there is the possibility of re-using them in order to explore new themes.
- QSA offers many exciting possibilities to develop new empirical insights with existing data.
- Researchers should also have a substantive reason for exploring previously collected data.
- New research questions must be asked of the data which are sensitive to and shaped by the data.

Background

'Ageing in place' is a popular term in social policy and refers to an approach which helps older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. Although largely driven by concerns over the cost of residential and nursing home care, this policy has been reinforced by academic research concerning the preferences of older people themselves. However, the benefits of this type of approach have yet to be systematically explored, with few studies focusing on the meaning of place for older people, and how this changes over time. Also, while public policy emphasises the benefits of ageing in place, the literature covering this topic remains sparse and there is little sociological research on what makes an age-friendly environment. The aim of the project is to advance empirical knowledge about ageing in place, using a QSA approach.

Why use QSA?

In the last fifteen years, the social sciences have seen a rapid increase in the drive towards reusing data, due to a range of reasons, including improvements to electronic infrastructure (Corti & Thompson 2004), methodological developments that have facilitated multiple interpretations of the same data (Holland et al. 2006) and funding bodies require that all data should be saved for re-use (Moore 2007). But while secondary data analysis of quantitative data has become commonplace and encouraged across disciplines, the practice of QSA has been met with criticism and concerns regarding potential methodological and ethical problems (Ruggiano & Perry 2017). Therefore, while QSA offers many exciting possibilities to develop new empirical insights with existing

Researching Ageing in Place over Time: A guide to using Secondary Data Analysis

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Our approach to QSA

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Timescapes had yet to be analysed in relation to older people's experiences of ageing or place attachment, and therefore provide a rich and valuable resource for QSA. Accordingly, our study focuses on the experiences of ageing over time, asking a new set of research questions about the connections between ageing, temporality and place and also exploring the experiences of ageing, over time. Following Mason (2007), we take an investigative epistemological approach, purposefully exploring 'with and about data' in order to be creative and interpretive. In other words, we apply a new perspective to existing material (Åkerström et al. 2004) exploring themes from the ageing/gerontology literature about the relationship between temporality, belonging to place and ageing to the existing material. In this view, new themes can be studied, new angles can be applied or new methods employed that may not have been possible at the time of the original analysis (Corti & Thompson, 2004). Therefore, it is the fit between data and research questions rather than proximity to the original context that will enable analytic sufficiency and validity (Irwin & Winterton 2011).



Guiding principles for future QSA

In response to some of the issues that our discussion has raised, and reflecting on our experiences on the Ageing in Place project, we recommend the following guiding principles for researchers interested in the potential of QSA:

1. While new data is expensive to collect and using existing sources can be seen as cost-effective, this is not a sufficient reason for conducting secondary analysis (Corti & Thompson 2004).

Researchers should also have a substantive reason for exploring previously collected data (Irwin & Winterton 2011). Qualitative data often remain under-used and there is the possibility of re-using them in order to explore new themes (Tarrant & Hughes 2018). The sorts of analyses which are possible with secondary research may be distinctly different to those imagined in the original project. For example, the Ageing in Place project is exploring the themes of ageing, place-attachment and temporality in a study which originally focusing on travel, transport and mobility because the archived interviews offer a rich accounts on people's everyday lives in later life.

2. The research questions must be new and ask novel questions of the data, but crucially they must be sensitive to and shaped by the data. The aim of the secondary analysis is to examine what these biographical accounts and longitudinal qualitative data tell us about the ways that older people age in place over time. While exploring how place affects ageing over time, our study is also open to emerging themes from the interviews.

3. Acknowledge both the possibilities and limitations of QSA.

Qualitative research should be about 'energetically and creatively seeking out a range of data sources to answer pressing research questions in quite distinctive ways, as well as about using these sources critically and reflexively' (Mason 2007:1.4). Like all research methods, QSA will be constrained in particular ways but expansive in others (Irwin & Winterton 2011).

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