DARIS survey of qualitative data producers and users (2012)

About the survey

The Data and Research Information Services (DARIS) unit of FORS conducted a survey of researchers who work with qualitative data in Switzerland. The purpose was to assess the qualitative research practices and views of researchers that are relevant to the sharing and re-use of qualitative data. In the end, 1'434 researchers completed the survey.

Summary

While there is some degree of informal sharing and re-use of qualitative data within institutions, within projects, among trustworthy colleagues, and more or less within different disciplines, there is still not yet a broader culture of data sharing and re-use in Switzerland in the social sciences. On the other hand, there seems to be an overall willingness to consider the possible benefits of doing so. Obstacles include collection and documentation practices that prevent sharing later (e.g., regarding informed consent, metadata), principled methodological and epistemological objections, ethical concerns, and resource limitations. Data sharing is hardly encouraged within research environments (i.e., by institutions or research funders).

Research methods

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Researchers who had been responsible for qualitative projects in the last 5 years were asked to describe all their methodological approaches:

- 52% of respondents applied purely qualitative approaches, and 42% used mixed methods with a primarily qualitative orientation (Figure 1).
- Researchers in anthropology were most likely to have projects with purely qualitative methods (77%), followed by sociology (67%) and human geography (65%), whereas those in social work and communication sciences were most likely to apply mixed methods with a qualitative orientation (59%).

![Figure 1: Methodological approaches used in the last 5 years (N=1090, answers not mutually exclusive)](image-url)
Respondents who had been responsible for qualitative research projects were asked which data collection methods they used in the last 5 years:

- The most common collection method was semi-structured and in-depth interviews (81%) (Figure 2).
- Collecting data through interviews was most common within anthropology (99%), human geography (98%), and sociology (94%).

![Figure 2: Data collection methods (N=1090, answers not mutually exclusive)](image)

**INFORMED CONSENT**

Respondents were asked whether it was their practice in their studies to get informed consent from respondents:

- 70% said that they get informed consent from their respondents, while 10% did not, and 20% deemed it not relevant for their type of research.
- Of those whose practice it was to obtain informed consent in their projects: 55% had obtained written informed consent, 50% obtained non-recorded verbal consent, and 25% obtained a recorded verbal consent (Figure 3). 53% promised use of the data only by primary researchers, and 14% promised destruction of the data after completion of the study.

![Figure 3: Form of informed consent (N=755, answers not mutually exclusive)](image)
Data sharing

Researchers were asked whether the data that they had collected could be shared and used by other researchers to address other research questions:

- 17% said that their data could be shared, 47% were prepared to share their data under certain conditions, and 36% were against sharing their data.
- Researchers in history (28%), linguistics (23%), and political science (22%) were most favorable to the idea of sharing their data unconditionally.

Obstacles to sharing qualitative data

Analyses of question responses and open-ended comments of respondents revealed the following key obstacles:

- ethical and legal constraints (e.g., informed consent, data confidentiality, data ownership),
- publishing priorities,
- fear of losing control of data, and
- lack of sufficient resources to prepare data for sharing (e.g., anonymisation, documentation).

Encouragement of data sharing

Researchers were asked about the extent to which sharing and dissemination of their qualitative data was encouraged or supported by their institutions, their colleagues, and their research funders:

- Encouragement of data sharing was more likely to come from colleagues than from institutions and research funders (Figure 4).
- The disciplines receiving the most encouragement by their institutions to share data were linguistics (62%), economics (46%), and social work (41%).

Figure 4: Encouragement of data sharing
Re-use of data

Respondents were asked whether they had ever re-used qualitative data collected by others:

- Eighty percent of respondents had never re-used qualitative data.
- Of those who had re-used qualitative data, 97% said that they had achieved their research goals fully (57%) or in part (40%).
- Researchers from the disciplines of linguistics (48%), history (33%), and political science (22%) were most likely to have re-used qualitative data.
- Of the 80% who had never re-used the qualitative data of others, 39% said that they would be willing to consider doing so in the future, whereas 45% said they were not sure.

Obstacle to re-use of qualitative data

Analyses of respondent comments point to the following primary obstacles to re-use of qualitative data:

- The difficulty of using data from other research projects based on different research goals, questions, underlying concepts, and terminology.
- The difficulties of reconstructing the research context and the problem that not all data are of good enough quality or well-enough documented.

For further information on the survey or to deposit and share your data, contact DARIS at: dataservice@fors.unil.ch