Open Qualitative Research: A Primer from UKRN

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What is open qualitative research?

The UNESCO Recommendations for Open Science (also often referred to as Open Research) define it as ‘an inclusive construct that combines various movements and practices aiming to make multilingual scientific knowledge openly available, accessible and reusable for everyone, to increase scientific collaborations and sharing of information for the benefits of science and society, and to open the processes of scientific knowledge creation, evaluation and communication to societal actors beyond the traditional scientific community’ (UNESCO, 2021).

The qualitative family of methods is used primarily in the health and social sciences to explore and understand the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups. The core principles of Open Research – such as transparency, collaboration, rigour, and accessibility – are all relevant to qualitative methodologies. Open qualitative research can mean different things, depending on the context. Transparent qualitative research is that which enables others to meaningfully scrutinise its design, evidence, analysis, reasoning and findings. Opening up qualitative research can also mean allowing others to engage with, influence and even co-produce the research. In the diverse world of qualitative research, the many principles and practices of openness that are applicable to any one project will vary.

How and why to engage in open qualitative research practices?

It is important to understand the rationale behind each open research practice and consider whether it aligns with the aims and philosophical underpinnings of the research at hand.

Sharing documentation

Open materials

Open materials refers to materials (e.g., research protocols, focus group / interview schedules, analysis plans, analytic codes, field notes, memos, research diaries, methodological and analytic documentation, QDAS paradata – see Paulus et al 2017, etc.) that are shared with an open licence and can be scrutinised, adapted and reused by others. Open materials provide a more comprehensive picture of the research process to those who were not involved in it, supporting the practices of open methods and open analysis. Moreover, open materials could be used by others as sources of inspiration, insight, and even adapted for similar projects, reducing duplication of efforts.

Open access publishing

Publishing Open Access involves making published research free to read, reuse and share. This increases accessibility to research, particularly for those who cannot afford journal costs. Some qualitative researchers produce outputs which may be more challenging to publish Open Access (e.g., monographs, book and article reviews) due higher open access charges than for research papers. It is worth noting that 'Diamond' models of publication use business models that do not result in charges being passed to author or reader. Further information is available from the UKRN primers on Open Access and on Rights Retention.

Sharing data

What is Open data / data sharing?

Open data / data sharing involves making research data available for wider dissemination and reuse. Qualitative data includes interview transcripts, field notes, observational data, documents (letters, diaries, journals, reports, books, historical documents, legislation), audio and video recordings, images, responses to open text boxes in surveys, etc. Data sharing can be facilitated by different levels of data processing, as well as different access scenarios for these different levels (e.g., see Table 3 in Branney et al., 2023). Data processing relates to how raw, identifiable data are processed to remove identifiable information and transformed into different formats (e.g., from audio, to transcripts, to illustrative descriptions of themes). Access restrictions (versus fully 'open' data) involve managing who can access the data, and under what conditions (see Sharing sensitive data, below).

Why share data?

One motivation to share qualitative data is that it enables re-analysis of the data. This can facilitate analytic or interpretive pluralism, acknowledging that different researchers may read different results as they approach the data from different points of view (Frost et al., 2010). Moreover, in specific philosophical/methodological contexts, some might argue that shared and/or open data allow others to check the rigour and associated trustworthiness of the research as well (and can be a central part of methods, for example, see Joyce et al, 2022).

Sharing qualitative data can also increase the utility of the dataset. Firstly, it allows other researchers to utilise it for additional research questions. Secondly, open datasets are often utilised in educational contexts by those training to become researchers.

Obtaining informed consent

Data sharing will require that participants provide informed consent about the exact forms of sharing that will occur (what data will be shared, where, and for how long). This should include details of the level of access to the data and de-identification that will be applied, and who might gain access to the data and for what purpose. Acquiring informed consent can be either a 'top-down' or more discursive process. In a 'top-down' approach, the researcher informs the participant what *will* happen with the data. The discursive approach involves discussing one's intentions for data sharing with participants; offering a variety of consent/data sharing options (i.e. to de-identified transcripts, to coded data snippets, to a bricolage approach) and allowing participants to co-define permitted reuse cases.

Both approaches have merits and drawbacks. The top-down approach is less time and resource intensive, as it ensures a single procedure can be followed consistently for each participant's data, as well as not requiring time to discuss the various options. Moreover, it ensures the completeness of the dataset, rather than potentially resulting in different degrees of data being shared for different participants. However, it denies participant agency over what happens with their data. Moreover, it could affect the data that are collected in the first place; some individuals may neglect to participate under certain conditions, while others may participate but alter the information they disclose, or how they disclose it.

In either approach, it is critical that participants consent to all aspects of the data sharing plan before data are shared. To ensure a fully informed decision is made, informed consent can be an iterative process, allowing participants to provide definitive consent after providing the data (e.g., via interview) and/or checking it before it is shared. It may be necessary to state that the data may be used in ways that are beyond the original purpose of the research. Participants will often approve of their data being shared; for a discussion see Kuula (2011). An example consent form can be found here.

Informed consent needs more consideration for vulnerable or marginalised groups. If working with highly vulnerable or traumatised groups, check for existing guidance, e.g., Campbell, et al. (2023), as other people may have faced the same very specific challenges you may encounter. A detailed exploration of some relevant issues is provided by Macedo de Lucas et al (2024). Specific guidance is available to ensure that the rights of Indigenous Peoples are protected in the context of research and data sharing. The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance can be found here.

Sharing sensitive data

As a general rule, the higher the risk for harm (to researchers, participants, others) and deductive disclosure, the more restricted access to data should be. For example, data from vulnerable groups can be considered more sensitive, and therefore it is likely that access should be more restricted and data more processed (*note, such specifics can be negotiated with participants to ensure that they understand and are comfortable with what is being shared, and how)*. Qualitative dataset repositories specifically designed for use with sensitive data are an option for sharing sensitive data; e.g., Qualitative Data Repository.

Sharing of sensitive data can be made legally and ethically feasible through the use of data use agreements (between the data owner and re-user of data) which set out how data can be shared, with whom, and under what special conditions. Legally, only personal and sensitive data are considered confidential under GDPR; this information can often be removed through anonymisation or pseudonymisation. However, it is important to consider that this is very labour-intensive, and should be duly costed into grants (e.g., see Stewart & Shaffer, 2021).

There are resources to help you anonymise data without data losing its value (UK Data Service, 2024). For example, data fabrication involving ‘creative, bricolage-style transfiguration of original data into composite accounts or representational interactions (Markham, 2011)’ can be used to protect participant privacy.

Deciding not to share sensitive data

Sometimes, the most appropriate action might be to *not* share data openly. Some participants may wish for their data to not be shared. Similarly, some may be reluctant to disclose important, sensitive information, for fear of identification within an open dataset. As a researcher considering sharing qualitative data, it is important to consider whether participants can be sufficiently de-identified in order to protect their anonymity. There may be challenges in finding all the indirect identifiers in qualitative data (i.e., a combination of identifying information), which may expose participants to identification. Moreover, there can be challenges anonymising highly personal and sensitive information, when salient details are relevant to the project aims.

Even when data may be shared legally (e.g., with consent) sharing qualitative data responsibly entails being aware of and respecting cultural norms and expectations around them; consulting with research participants, or following specific protocols when working with certain populations. Librarians and data managers are often skilled to assist qualitative researchers to prepare their data for sharing and safe storage. Research Ethics Committees may provide comprehensive guidance that fully addresses ethical issues raised by sharing qualitative data.

Sharing Metadata

Good documentation reduces the need to have 'been there' during data collection. Sharing metadata is an important aspect of providing sufficient information and context for others to understand what is being shared. Generating metadata (e.g. descriptions of context, reflections and observations) as quickly as possible following data collection activities can minimise contextual information loss. Considerations for sharing qualitative research metadata include standardisation (using standardised formats to ensure consistency), completeness (provide as much information about the data as possible, such as research context, methods, data processing, analysis), accessibility (by using open formats and clear documentation) and legal/ethical considerations (removing personal identifiable information of participants).

Qualitative metadata may include: 1) information about the file (format, software needed to open the file etc.); 2) information about any interaction with research participants (where possible and ethical) – i.e., when, where, why, and with whom the interaction took place; 3) broader considerations – funder/ project scope, researcher positionality and approach, and the community, political, spatial, and temporal context. For a simple example of what might be included in qualitative metadata see the readme for this dataset.

Participatory Research

Participatory Research, also often referred to as co-production, participant and patient involvement (PPI), and community engagement in research, aims to involve groups or communities impacted by research in the research process. Given that qualitative research often studies individuals and communities, engagement activities can be highly relevant to many qualitative projects.

Participatory involvement in shaping the questions, methods, and outputs of qualitative research can help to ensure that research questions are meaningful to participants, and that outcomes of the research can be more impactful. Ultimately, it can make research more equitable, by involving those who might historically have faced barriers to participating in the conduct of research. Looking at case studies of how others have used participatory methods can help to identify whether and how you could integrate them into your own research. See McCabe and colleagues' (2024) UKRN primer for more information.

Pre-registration and Registered Reports

A pre-registration refers to submitting a study plan to a publicly-accessible repository before data are collected. Pre-registrations can either be publicly available immediately upon publication, or else can be embargoed for a set duration, during which they cannot be accessed. A Registered Report involves peer review of the background and proposed research design before data are collected. You can learn more about preregistrations and Registered Reports in this UKRN Primer (Stewart et al., 2020), as well as finding a case study on the use of preregistration in qualitative research here.

Pre-registration can help qualitative researchers think through the various aspects of their project design in advance, while also creating an artefact for future reference that enables comparisons and reflection on changes that have occurred across the research process. This can provide a useful source of reflection on the research questions, objectives, and even philosophical underpinnings have developed over time. The pre-registration does not have to set everything in stone, but rather can state which aspects of the research are not going to be specified in advance. Pre-registration can also be useful for the subset of qualitative research which aims to test hypotheses.

Pre-registration templates for qualitative research exist, which fit a wide range of qualitative approaches, and may include sections such as: study information, design plans, data collection plans, analysis plans and other (e.g., reflection on researcher positionality; Haven et al., 2020).

Positionality statements

Positionality statements (or researcher reflexivity) involve the researchers describing their personal characteristics relevant to the research topic, reflecting on how this may have influenced the collection and interpretation of the data. Such statements may be relevant to many kinds of research, but perhaps especially to qualitative research. While it is common for qualitative researchers to practice this reflexivity, authors sometimes neglect to report them in a positionality statement. Sharing your personal reflections can therefore be seen as an open practice which facilitates transparency and others' understanding of how conclusions have been drawn (Finlay & Gough, 2003).

The same could be said of statements on the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning a project. Authors sometimes neglect to report these, despite their being central to the fundamental inferences drawn from the research. Openly stating the philosophical assumptions of the study could therefore also be considered an important practice of transparency and comprehensive reporting.

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