

Qualitative Research In Ireland:

Archiving Strategies and Development by Dr. Jane Gray and Dr Aileen O'Carroll¹

Abstract

The Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) was established in 2008 with initial funding for three years under the fourth cycle of the Irish Government's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL14). IQDA aims to become the central access point for Irish qualitative social science data, including interviews, pictures and other non-numerical material. We have established protocols to ensure that newly generated qualitative data are documented and stored in ways that facilitate sharing and re-use through online access. Currently we are developing our digital infrastructure, piloting a number of initial collections and building a catalogue of Irish qualitative research. The catalogue has already begun the process of mapping potentially available data, and on the basis of that survey we provide an overview of the kinds of qualitative data that could be archived in Ireland. This paper also reports on: the funding situation for social science research and policies in relation to archiving, IQDA's role in national social science research, our progress to date and the potential obstacles to and benefits of qualitative archiving in Ireland. Information about the archive can be found at www.iqda.ie

Keywords: Qualitative Data, Longitudinal Research, Archiving, Secondary Analysis, Ireland

Introduction

The Irish Qualitative Data Archive was established in 2008, in response to growing concerns that the potential of social science data being gathered by various institutions and agencies was being lost, as much of the data collected did not have a life beyond the specific projects for which it was obtained, thereby limiting potential use and re-use.

Many state agencies are increasingly aware of how the lack of archiving policies is a barrier to knowledge production. In June 2008, the Higher Education Authority (HEA, the statutory body with responsibility for Higher Education in Ireland) introduced a policy on open access to published research. They argued that:



The intellectual effectiveness and progress of the widespread research community may be continually enhanced where the community has access and recourse to as wide a range of shared knowledge and findings as possible. This is particularly the case in the realm of publicly funded research where there is a need to ensure the advancement of scientific research and innovation in the interests of society and the economy, without unnecessary duplication of research effort (Higher Education Authority, 2008).

As a consequence, researchers obtaining part or all HEA funding are required to lodge publications resulting from their results in an open-access repository as soon as possible². The policy further states, "Data in general should as far as is feasible be made openly accessible, in keeping with best practice for reproducibility of scientific results (Ibid)."

However there are barriers to implementing this policy in practice. Forfás is the national policy advisory board for enterprise, trade, science, technology and innovation in the Republic of Ireland. Data archives and repositories were identified as an area needing attention in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in a report jointly produced by the HEA and Forfás, *Research Infrastructure in Ireland, Building for Tomorrow* (2007). The report argued that, "The absence of data storage and archive facilities and their ability to be updated with fresh datasets is a serious and continuing impediment to high quality social science research in Ireland." (Royal Irish Academy, n.d.a) When the report was published, the only archive for Social Science data was the Irish Social Science Data Archive, based at the University College Dublin, which focused exclusively on medium and large quantitative data sets. As will be seen below, in terms of qualitative data, a number of small data archives existed but these tended to be linked to a particular project rather than oriented towards the creation of a general collection. The sense that inadequate investment in data archives was a weakness in the humanities and social science research (HSS) infrastructure was further emphasised by the Royal Irish Academy in *Advancing Humanities and Social Sciences Research in Ireland* (2007). They argued that "A key resource issue for the HSS is the availability of, and access to, data sets,

including the capacity to generate new data, as well as the importance of ensuring widespread availability of, and access to, previously gathered data." (Royal Irish Academy, 2007: 15-17) In addition to facilitating secondary analysis of existing data archives, they maintained that archives (along with libraries and museums) have a key role in "ensuring that Ireland's cultural heritage is recorded and maintained for posterity" (ibid)

It is within this context of this increasing need to build on the wealth of previous research that the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA) was established in 2008. It forms part of the Irish Social Science Platform (www.issplatform.ie), an organisation which brings together Irish academics from 19 disciplines in 8 institutions in Ireland. The IQDA is initially funded by the Higher Education Authority under the fourth cycle of the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL4).

1. Qualitative Research in Ireland

According to Conway (2006), social research in Ireland has drawn predominantly on quantitative methods, with qualitative methods such as ethnography, participant observation and archival research receiving much less attention, though he notes that qualitative studies are evident in some sub-fields such as the Sociology of Religion. In 1988 in a statement on the social sciences arising out of a conference hosted by the Royal Irish Academy, Damian Hannan criticised the weakness of qualitative research in Ireland (Cited in O'Dowd, 1988). Since this time there has been an increasing use of qualitative methods. Most undergraduate and post-graduate social science courses contain both quantitative and qualitative research components and in many universities postgraduate theses are based on qualitative methods. The IQDA is currently mapping the extent of qualitative research in Ireland. We have created an online catalogue of qualitative research. This is an ongoing project but by March 2011 the catalogue contained information on over 480 projects using qualitative research methods.

The constituency using qualitative methods has also expanded beyond social science departments in universities. The IQDA has presented information seminars on archiving to audiences varying from post-graduate social scientists, to nursing students, to oral historians. Many Irish Government research bodies incorporate a qualitative element to their research processes. For example, the Women and Crisis Pregnancy Study, conducted by Mahon et al (1998) and commissioned from the Department of Health and Childcare, was based on in-depth interviews and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency continues to commission mixed methods research. The project 'Growing up in Ireland,' (described in more detail below) also combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies in its research design. In compiling entries to the IQDA catalogue, we found that qualitative research had been produced by various commissioners of research, such as the National Children's Office, the Employment Research Centre in Trinity College, Combat Poverty Agency, the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, Focus Ireland, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), The Equality Authority, the National Disability Authority and the Immigrant Council. The methods used include ethnography and community studies and the use of in-depth interviews and focus groups. Recently there has been increasing interest in biographical, life history and oral history approaches and the use of more varied types of research methods such as the use of photographs (Quinlan, 2008) or texts written by young people (O'Connor et al, 2002).

Additionally in recent years, there has been an increase in longitudinal research, including qualitative longitudinal projects, and those using mixed methods. We have identified a number of longitudinal projects (see Appendix 1) with an integral qualitative component based in Ireland (some have been completed, others are on-going).

Major government and EU-funded quantitative longitudinal studies are archived at the Irish Social Science Data Archive. We are in the process of archiving some of the qualitative longitudinal projects mentioned above.

2. Archiving and the Research Culture

All new qualitative social science data generated within the Irish Social Science Platform (www.issplatform.ie) will be deposited electronically and made available online through the IQDA. This represents a major step forward in the development of a culture of data sharing and archiving within the social science research community. The IQDA is engaged in the ongoing development of protocols (see below) that will frame the parameters and standards for archiving qualitative social science data within the Irish research community. However, more work needs to be done in order for data sharing and archiving for re-use to become an integral part of the research culture in Ireland. In particular the cost requirements of preparing data for archiving need to be built in to research funding, and funding agencies need to change their approach away from simply facilitating the production of data towards supporting its use and re-use. Additionally projects based on secondary use of archival data need to be eligible for funding (even where no 'new data' is being produced); this would require a shift in funder priorities in favour of data analysis (with less emphasis being placed on the generation of new data).

3. Current Archiving Strategies

The remit of the IQDA is to archive Irish qualitative data. This remit is interpreted broadly to include

- Research by Irish researchers on Ireland and Irish issues,
- Research on Ireland by visiting researchers,
- Research by Irish and non-Irish researchers on the Irish Diaspora
- Research by Irish researchers living outside of Ireland,
- Research on Northern Ireland (as appropriate, in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive (NIQA))

The IQDA is committed to archiving new qualitative social science data generated within the Irish Social Science Platform. We will also archive selected 'legacy' research projects. We currently have nine projects either deposited or in various stages of preparation for deposit addressing a range of issues

1. Life histories, 20th century Ireland
2. Integration of new migrants to Ireland
3. Career trajectories of returning Irish migrants
4. Social life in new Irish suburbs
5. Growing Up in Ireland: The National Longitudinal Study on Children
6. Protestants and Irishness in Ireland
7. Irish women's work experiences during the Second World War
8. RACCER: Re-use and Archiving of Complex Community-Based Evaluation Research
9. NIRSA photographic archive of the people and places of Ireland
9. Ned Cassidy photographic archive of the Irish built environment since 1970

A variety of methodologies are represented, including life story interviews, life history calendars, social network schedules, qualitative interviews, observation, shadowing and visual methods, focus group interviews, key-informant interviews, children's essays, drawings and other visual methods (for further information see the appendix).

The IQDA is primarily a digital repository as it lacks the resources to store other types of data. Therefore it accepts interview transcripts, field notes, and other research documentation, audiovisual files and photographs in digital format only. We provide advice on the preferred

formats for archiving and on the technological options available to researchers.

4 Infrastructure for the management and re-use of data

A key goal of the Irish Qualitative Data Archive is to provide a national infrastructure for the management and re-use of qualitative longitudinal data. There are a number of components to this goal. Firstly it involves implementing digital storage solutions that enable depositing of and access to data. This includes the setting of metadata standards to facilitate data retrieval. Secondly protocols that meet the ethical responsibilities of qualitative researchers must be in place. Thirdly, it will be necessary to create networks of researchers around the archive to facilitate and encourage the re-use of the data. These issues will be discussed in the following section.

4.1 Technical database structure

One of the first goals of the IQDA was to design a digital infrastructure that would integrate two previously existing photographic archives with a new catalogue of qualitative research in Ireland as well as a database containing non-visual data. The existing photo archives were housed in two different databases, built specifically for each set of data. Most qualitative archives appear to adopt the approach of building such bespoke solutions. Generally the difficulties in this approach are that such solutions become increasingly difficult to maintain over time and that there is a certain amount of redundancy in effort, as internationally, each archive reinvents its own 'wheel'. IQDA was designed to use Fedora Commons, a general purpose open source digital repository, in preference to building bespoke databases. Fedora Commons has the advantage of being an open source project that is widely used and as such there is a large community of support to draw on if future problems arise. In addition, there is considerable documentation on its use. It is a general purpose solution which allows almost all types of digital objects to be stored; additionally it can preserve relationships with other objects. It is being run on a virtual GNU/Linux server.

The front end of the database is powered by Fez, an open source interface to Fedora. In a piloting phase we tested two other systems: Isadora (a Drupal plug-in; Drupal is an open source content management system) and Elated z but decided that Fez provided the best solution. Fez was initially designed by developers at the University of Queensland, and has since been transferred to the Sourceforge (a web-based source code repository) so that it now is developed by a number of different organisations. One note of caution must be observed however: Fez is designed with library projects in mind and as such the default is often to openness and accessibility – something that is not necessarily always desired with more sensitive qualitative social science material. Therefore it was necessary to modify the Fez operation such that it defaulted to the highest levels of security (see below). Indeed one factor in the decision to implement Fez was its ability to allow us to set access controls over each individual piece of data.

Finally we use Drupal as the content management system which powers the IQDA web presence. This was chosen because, again, it is an open source software, supported by a community of users, with many tutorials on its use available online. Additionally its modular system allows the site to be upgraded with little difficulty and the capability of the site to be expanded over time (for example, we have added a modification which allows us to display selected photographs from our archive online). It is hoped that Drupal's powerful capabilities will enable us to expand the site such that it can facilitate the development of networks of Irish researchers.

A goal of the archive is to become a central access point for information about other archives in Ireland (such as the migrant lives and women's oral history projects described above) and elsewhere. The Drupal end of the site collates information about these archives, as

well as information on preparing data for archiving, upcoming events and issues of note to qualitative researchers. In the future we plan to develop a component on using qualitative data in teaching.

4.2 Metadata

Metadata, often described as 'data about data', is vital for enabling data retrieval (either through browsing or searching collections). Metadata standards can facilitate robust data management and assist in the uploading of data. Further, shared metadata standards allow co-ordination with other data sets and harvesting of the data (to ensure, for example, that search engines like Google are able to identify and return searches appropriate to the archive). A key challenge of the IQDA was to introduce shared standards across the pre-existing databases that we inherited and the newly created ones. Dublin Core is an international standard for metadata, designing the minimum numbers of elements necessary to allow objects in a networked environment to be discovered. It is a very minimal standard. The IQDA added to this standard, drawing on the metadata applied in other national qualitative archives (particularly ESDS Qualidata – a specialist service of the ESDS led by the UK Data Archive, and the Henry Murray Archive based at Harvard University, Boston in the U.S.). Metadata relating to the content of the material archived is in the first instance added by the researcher depositing the data. They are encouraged to use Hasset (Humanities and Social Science Electronic) Thesaurus when specifying key words. The Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) is a "metadata specification, an emerging international standard for the content, presentation, transport, and preservation of documentation about datasets in the social and behavioural sciences" (www.cessda.org). It is our intention to provide contextual documentation that is "marked up" according to the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) and we are tracking developments in the generation of qualitative DDI standards. In addition to being searchable by key word, we are currently drawing on expertise available to us within the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis to develop a map based interface which will encourage search by geographical place. For confidentiality reasons, most interview data will be searchable only by broad geographical area (see below), however for photographs it will be at the level of the townland or village.

4.3 Access and Confidentiality

A key concern of the IQDA is to meet the ethical commitments that researchers make with those who participate in their research. As with quantitative data there is always some degree of risk that confidentiality could be breached, and so archives have an obligation to ensure that interviewees are protected through anonymisation, withdrawal of sensitive data etc. The remit of the Irish Qualitative Data Archive includes the establishment of procedures and protocols, in line with international best practice appropriate to qualitative data. To that end we have developed an Ethical Use Framework drawing on best practice developed at ESDS Qualidata, Timescapes, a multidisciplinary longitudinal qualitative project based at the University of Leeds and the Henry Murray Archive in the US. Our best practice handbook is now available (http://www.iqda.ie/sites/default/files/IQDA_Best_Practice_Handbook.pdf)

There are **four** interconnecting components to this framework. The first is informed consent to archive data obtained at the time of the fieldwork. The IQDA has prepared pro-forma letters and forms that have been used in previous Irish and UK studies. The second is the use of a rigorous anonymisation protocol. Such a protocol has been developed by the IQDA based on the experience of Irish and UK research projects. As Opatiz and Witzel (2005) outline, it is difficult to develop a general solution to the problem of anonymisation because such data

are extremely heterogeneous in terms of the themes and areas of life covered. The protocols that we have developed alert researchers to issues they need to be concerned with and suggest possible solutions. The third component is a Rights Management Framework which includes depositor and end-user licenses and legal agreements, in which the user undertakes not to breach confidentiality by using identifiable information in published work or to try to contact research subjects and agrees to ethical use and re-use of the data. The third and final component is a system of options for access and user restrictions; for example, access to very sensitive data may be closed for a period of time.

In addition, along with all social science researchers in Ireland, we subscribe to the ethical standards imposed by professional organizations such as the Sociological Association of Ireland (www.ucd.ie/sai). Part of our role involves alerting researchers to these standards, thus promoting high quality research procedures. Our work here is also informed by the RESPECT project (www.respectproject.org), which was funded by the European Commission's Information Society Technologies (IST) Programme, to draw up professional and ethical guidelines for the conduct of socio-economic research.

5. Challenges for the Future

In order to fulfil its mandate to become the central access point for all qualitative social science data generated within the Irish research community, the IQDA will require additional and sustainable funding and must face a number of key challenges in the future. Key to the success of the archive will be to encourage use and re-use of data through a process of training, publicity and the development of networks of researchers. In addition continued liaison with the social science research community and other stakeholders will ensure that the archive will develop in a way that matches the needs of researchers. We especially aim to work with post-graduate students, to foster a culture of data archiving and re-use, and ensure that archiving is built in at an early stage of future projects. This work must be matched by liaison with agencies responsible for the development and implementation of social science policy, in order to promote the use of qualitative social science research findings and funding for the processes of preparing data for archiving, which will ensure long term value for money in state funded projects.

In addition there is a considerable volume of legacy research in Ireland, currently sitting in offices and under desks. We have been contacted by researchers asking about the possibility of adding these to the archive. One challenge will be to address problems such as the absence of informed consent and outdated digital formats when archiving of such legacy data.

We will continue work with other digital archiving projects in Ireland, and with the recently announced National Audiovisual Repository (NAVR), a multi-institutional project funded under PRTL15, in which IQDA is a funded partner (<http://www.ria.ie/research/navr.aspx>) to develop and implement a common set of methods, policies and standards and continue ongoing development of policies and guidelines that comply with national and international law. We aim to broaden the development of our IT infrastructure and data management tools especially to facilitate deposit, search and retrieval of data. Currently we are developing sample 'soundscapes' drawn from data within the archive in order to raise the profile of the resource.

We are additionally part of EQUALAN, the newly formed European network of qualitative researchers and archivists. EQUALAN is committed to promoting and implementing a strategy for preserving and

organising qualitative and qualitative longitudinal data resources, and we intend to work within this network to develop shared approaches to archiving and to promoting re-use of our data.

We will continue to promote best standards and to educate the research and higher education community about the desirability of qualitative social science data archiving. As we have shown above there is an emerging interest in qualitative longitudinal research. Archiving such research requires intense, ongoing management and interaction with researchers, but potential rewards are high. However, the principal barrier anticipated is the securing of sustainable funding into the future. Lack of such security hinders long term management and planning.

Appendix 1: Longitudinal projects with Qualitative Dimensions

1. Life Histories and Social Change in 20th Century Ireland

In this project qualitative interviews, live history calendars and retrospective social network schedules were collected from a large sample of Irish people from three key birth cohorts: 1929-1934; 1949-1954 and 1969-1974. The research design links retrospective qualitative longitudinal data is linked to a panel study. The interviewees were selected from the nationally representative sample of people interviewed from 1994-2001 for the Irish part of the European Community Household Panel. The data will be archived in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive.

<http://sociology.nuim.ie/lifehistory.shtml>

2. Growing Up in Ireland – Qualitative Module of the National Longitudinal Study on Children

In this government funded study prospective qualitative data is linked to a panel study. The study follows two cohorts of children, aged nine months and nine years. The study was officially launched in 2007 and will be completed in 2013. There is an embedded qualitative module, the data from which will be archived in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive. Data from the first wave are now available.

<http://www.growingup.ie/>

3. Towards a Dynamic Approach to Research on Migration and Integration

This is a prospective longitudinal qualitative study of migrants to Ireland will track sixty migrants from two migrant cohorts over a two year period through interviews, observation, shadowing and visual methods. The project will run until December 2010. The data will be archived in the Irish Qualitative Data Archive.

<http://geography.nuim.ie/staff/gilmartinmary>

4. The Process of Youth Homelessness: A Qualitative Longitudinal Cohort Study

This prospective QLL study uses a life history method to investigate the experience of youth homelessness based on young people's accounts of becoming and being homeless. Criteria for inclusion include: a) being between 12-22 years and; b) being homeless or in insecure accommodation. Forty young people were recruited with the co-operation of statutory and voluntary agencies with responsibility for providing services and interventions to young people who are without a home. The recruitment strategy aimed to include relevant

diversity across key variables including age, gender and geographical location. Phase I: Baseline interviews were conducted with 40 homeless young people, based on the life history model, which prioritises young people's accounts and experiences, both past and present. Phase II: Follow-up life history interviews are ongoing at present. <http://www.tcd.ie/childrensresearchcentre/index.php?id=121&pid=16>

5. Migrant Careers and Aspirations

This is a prospective qualitative longitude panel study of Polish migrants to Ireland. Their sample included 22 men and women aged between 22 and 38 years who almost all arrived in Ireland post 2004, following enlargement of the European Union. Interviews were conducted every four months over a period of two years, including interviews with migrants who have returned to Poland.

6. Irish Centre for Migration Studies Life Narratives Collection

This is a retrospective qualitative longitudinal study, data from which has been collated in an online digital archive. This archive contains four collections of life narratives centring on different aspects of migration in the Irish experience. <http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/testing/index.html>

7. Women's Oral History Project

This retrospective qualitative longitudinal study documents the working lives of Munster women during the period 1936-1960, through the collection of oral histories. The project is a study of the stories of women who engaged in paid work in the period 1936-1960. <http://www.ucc.ie/wisp/ohp/index.html>

8. Leaving School in Ireland

This prospective longitudinal study tracks the school and post-school experiences of a cohort of young people who took part in the Post-Primary Longitudinal Study (PPLS) in 2002. In 2010 in-depth interviews will detail the influences on young people's post-school choices and pathways. http://www.esri.ie/research/research_areas/education/leaving_school_ireland/

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Notes

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2. All researchers must lodge their publications resulting in whole or in part from HEA-funded research in an open access repository as soon as is practical after publication, and to be made openly accessible within 6 calendar months at the latest, subject to copyright agreement. http://www.heai.ie/files/files/file/Open%20Access%20pdf_.pdf page 2

3. For further information see, <http://www.ucd.ie/issda/>

4. For further information see, <http://www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/about/introduction.asp>

5. For further information see, <http://www.murray.harvard.edu/>

6. For more information see, <http://www.data>