

Qualitative Archives and Biographical Research Methods. An Introduction to the *FQS* Special Issue

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Abstract: The use of archival materials as a point of departure when designing and launching social research takes for granted that a culture of archiving (for sharing and re-use) has rooted time ago in our complex societies. This mentality and research practice first flourished and is fairly well installed in the case of statistics, surveys and certain other primary or secondary documents. On the contrary, it is less frequent and certainly not a routine activity for qualitative data. Only some of the raw and elaborated materials gathered during qualitative research become part of an archive for further reanalysis. These can include the backstage practices and experiences of a project, raw materials such as field notes, audio and visual recordings, and other documents produced during the research process. This issue presents a colorful range of articles that deal with experiences, challenges and opportunities of archiving and re-using qualitative material, particularly under the umbrella of biographical and narrative research. It aims to raise awareness of the importance of archiving in qualitative social research and highlights some of the new methodological reflections and approaches that have been and that are being developed within the European landscape. We hope that the articles in this issue will help promote further communication and exchange among qualitative archival practitioners from different countries and with different sensitivities and conceptual horizons.

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1. Introduction: A New *FQS* Special Issue on Archives

This *FQS* special issue on archives, launched in 2011, follows a series that started more than ten years ago. In 2000, *FQS* devoted its third issue of the first volume, edited by CORTI, KLUGE, MRUCK and OPITZ, to: "Text, Archive, Re-analysis." Five years later, in 2005, *FQS* published two issues: one on "Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data" (edited by CORTI, WITZEL & BISHOP) and the other on "Qualitative Inquiry: Research, Archiving, and Reuse" (BERGMAN & EBERLE as editors). Another five-year interval has passed away and the same journal has made the reception of this new issue titled "Qualitative Archives and Biographical Research" (edited by VALLES, CORTI, TAMBOUKOU

& BAER). CORTI has been omnipresent as editor and author contributing extensively to the general topic of archiving qualitative research data: more specifically she has reported on the foundation and development of *Qualidata* (and other European archival initiatives), focusing on the many methodological and technical issues of archiving qualitative materials. Other international journals have also shown special attention on these matters in the last six years, with special emphasis on the longitudinal perspective (see VALLES in this issue). The literature reflects some critical aspects of archiving and reusing qualitative materials (the transferability of experience and context of the act of researching); as well as the advantages (both the knowledge improvement in a substantive field and the benefits for teaching methods). [1]

This new FQS issue on archives gathers in great part many of the papers debated during the workshop on archives and biographical research held in Madrid (September 2009), under the auspices of *EUROQUAL*. This is the acronym of a four-year (2006-2010) program named "Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences in Europe," an initiative of the European Science Foundation for the promotion and exchange of experiences of qualitative research in the social sciences¹. One of the main purposes of this ESF scientific program has been to link scholars in the social sciences across Europe, providing a series of thematic workshops on a variety of qualitative methods. Its activities combined high-level expert workshops with training activities. One of those workshops was dedicated to archives, a decision taken from the very beginning of the design of the mentioned program chaired by Paul ATKINSON, who was actually one of the main designers. Other workshops dealt with digital methods, analysis of visual data, the use of multi-methods, discourse analysis, the ethics and politics or the quality of qualitative research, as well as spatial and network analysis. [2]

The *EUROQUAL: Archives and Life-History Research Workshop* was held in Spain (Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid). The event reunited participants (either invited or selected speakers) from Austria, Cyprus, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Northern Ireland, Poland and Spain). Some of them are contributing in this special FQS issue. The event tried to fulfill a rather overlooked flank of archiving, reuse, reanalysis of materials and qualitative studies. The call for papers and participation included a range of subjects or approaches that gave an idea of the range of contributions that the organizers intended to reunite:

- National / regional / local data archives and initiatives for the acquisition, preservation and dissemination of qualitative data;
- "naturally occurring" archives of collective memory, oral or written history as resources for and topics of social research;
- archival strategies and techniques;
- disciplinary traditions and innovations in life-history research. [3]

1 See <http://www.esf.org/index.php?id=241> [Accessed: March 15, 2011].

2. Mapping the Contributions to this Issue: A European Landscape of Experiences, Projects and Conceptual Horizons

There are three sections in this issue. In the first introductory section, we have included two articles (CORTI; VALLES) that map the field of archives and life-history research, highlight its achievements and strengths and point to its weaknesses and areas that need to be further explored, organized and theorized. [4]

In the second section we have included six articles (HOLLAND; LEJEUNE; MEDJEDOVIĆ; SANCHEZ-CARRETERO, CEA, DÍAZ-MAS, MARTÍNEZ & ORTIZ; SCHUBOTZ, MELAUGH & McLOUGHLIN; and SMIOSKI) which present and discuss a wide range of archival and life-history research projects that span six European countries—Austria, France, Germany, Spain, UK (England and Northern Ireland). These articles vividly demonstrate the richness, diversity and multiplicity of this research field, bringing forward the argument that histories and geographies matter in how the field is being shaped, and there is therefore a need for more communication amongst researchers within Europe and beyond. [5]

In the final section we have included four articles (CASTILLO; MUNTÉ; VERD & LÓPEZ; TAMBOUKOU) that deal with some theoretical and methodological considerations around archives and life-history research. Through the different perspectives they adopt, all four contributions reveal a diversity and plurality of philosophical and epistemological approaches to archives and life-history research and point to the need for more interdisciplinary connections to be made. [6]

2.1 Re-entering the field of qualitative archives and biographical research

In the first article of this section, Louise CORTI presents the state of the art of qualitative social research archives. She particularly focuses on archives and the secondary use of qualitative data by using the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) *Qualidata* unit at the UK as a case study. She outlines six ways in which data can be used and considers challenges and ethical concerns in doing these. CORTI particularly points to the discrepancies and differences between qualitative research initiatives in the UK and the European landscape. In CORTI's view, the UK can become a model case for other European countries strategies in developing and sustaining qualitative data research use and re-use, but her proposal raises questions around the feasibility of such a program in countries that have quite different epistemological, philosophical and theoretical traditions in doing research. Indeed the seven contributions, in section two, allow glimpses into some of these differences and the kind of questions, issues and challenges that European projects will have to grapple with. [7]

In the next article of Section One, Miguel S. VALLES maps the territory of archival and biographical research, and points to its strengths and weaknesses. His article is a thoughtful reflection on some of the questions raised and issues discussed in preparation for and during the Madrid workshop. Irrespective of conceptual plans, perceptions and good intentions, what is it really happening in the field? VALLES asks: do researchers make use of existing data, do they

record, publish and write about archival practices and do they archive their own data? VALLES further poses the need to systematize the archiving and use of data that go beyond the traditionally perceived archive material, namely written documents, to include oral and visual sources and data. The main question he is grappling with is whether there is "archival sensitivity," as he puts it, in the methodological literature of social research techniques and methods. Not surprisingly he identifies a significant gap here that the present issue is seeking to address. VALLES's article tries to respond to some of the questions raised by CORTI and, although it focuses on the Spanish case, it maps the European terrain more broadly and offers a tentative model for *archival sensitivity* to be inscribed in our social research methods. [8]

2.2 Archival and biographical research projects (and initiatives) in six European countries

In this section, the first article by Janet HOLLAND introduces and describes the study known as "Timescapes: Changing Relationships and Identities through the Lifecourse," which is the first piece of research in the UK designed and funded specifically as a large-scale qualitative longitudinal study. HOLLAND explains how three broad "timescapes" are of interest: biographical, generational and historical. She describes the development of the study and places it in the context of the debates about archiving, secondary analysis and re-use of qualitative data. HOLLAND further discusses the conceptual basis of the research, substantive and empirical issues, and the contribution to qualitative longitudinal methodology, as well as the archive that is being developed to house the data. [9]

In his article on the story of the *Association pour l'Autobiographie et le Patrimoine Autobiographique*, Phillip LEJEUNE presents an autobiographical story himself, as the founder of this society in France, which is committed to reading and collecting autobiographical texts of ordinary people. LEJEUNE discusses the complexity and multiple implications of such an undertaking, from the ethical issues involving privacy, to the questions of cataloging and indexing, storage and access to researchers. Rarely an autobiography is not true, writes LEJEUNE. With this statement the author rejects any positivist understanding of the material. The interest of it does therefore not rely on an (impossible) empirical correspondence between text and "reality," and its inherent richness for researchers. However, it is notable that mostly historians use the collection of autobiographies as primary sources to study, for instance, the history of railways or rural life in certain times and regions. Being that also the discourse and narrative modalities employed by the autobiographer can be the object of research, LEJEUNE regrets that his association is still ignored by literary scholars and also by those sociologists who still stick to the quantitative paradigm. The author also underlines the openness of the collection, and the lack of theory behind it. LEJEUNE does not develop the implications of this argument, but precisely here he puts the finger in the methodological sore spot of archiving qualitative data: any archival logic (that implies a certain degree of consistency, standardization and uniformity) might be conflicting with the inherent heterogeneity of qualitative material. [10]

In the third article in Section Two, Irena MEDJEDOVIĆ recounts the nationwide feasibility study on archiving and secondary use of qualitative interview data which was carried out in Germany and provided the scientific basis for building up a national archive. MEDJEDOVIĆ explains that, while Germany has had for over 50 years a quantitative data archive, there has been no widespread culture of data sharing in qualitative research. The Archive for Life Course Research (ALLF) at the University of Bremen is addressed. The feasibility study surveyed experts—qualitative researchers—on their views and challenges envisaged for secondary analysis of qualitative data. MEDJEDOVIĆ presents researchers' observations and asks whether the objections they raise against secondary analysis of qualitative data constitute obstacles which are insurmountable? [11]

In the fourth article of Section Two, Cristina SÁNCHEZ-CARRETERO, Antonio CEA, Paloma DÍAZ-MAS, Pilar MARTÍNEZ and Carmen ORTIZ present and discuss an interesting archival project, "The Archive of Mourning." This is an interdisciplinary research project, which focuses on the mourning ritual practices after the Madrid bombs in 2004. The project puts forward the interesting notion of "grass roots memorials" and discusses the rituals and practices involved. The challenges of interdisciplinarity are particularly prominent in the discussion of this project, which by its nature crosses borders across work done by professionals such as librarians, archivists and museologists and curators, as well as by folklorists, social anthropologists and literary scholars, among others. The project further addresses questions of how to present and preserve the visual, the oral and the tactile; it also raises questions of inclusions and exclusions as well as of inventing and implementing new archival and coding techniques, suitable for the polyvalent nature of the archival material and data. The article significantly raises questions of the always precarious relationship between academic and political considerations involved in such a project and how the researchers have dealt (or not) with them. [12]

In the fifth article in Section Two, Dirk SCHUBOTZ, Martin MELAUGH and Peter McLOUGHLIN present various lessons from the case of Northern Ireland regarding the experience of "archiving qualitative data in the context of a society coming out of conflict." The sensitivity of the material (specially in a social context where anonymization is not easy to materialize) and, as in the previous article, the complex question to what extent archiving can have political implications becomes evident in this particular context. Moreover, the authors deal with the horizons that can be foreseen while learning from setting up the Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive (NIQA). The new archive has been made available (since 2009) thanks to the funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), managing to compile an archive of digital materials related to victims, survivors and commemoration. The compilation of the archive involved coping with a number of sensitivities. The authors reflect also on the debate about "official" memorials, grassroots or spontaneous memorials, offering a complementary reading to the previous article in this Section. The reference to the "large-scale international storytelling project" accomplished by the Shoah Foundation raises an important meta-methodological question on the special social moral, educational or political role ascribed to archives (in relation to the

evolution to our societies)—the document becomes "monument"—, particularly those dealing with stories of violence, victimhood and trauma. [13]

If a large storytelling archive had been compiled in the late 1920s or 1930s, using the best recording technology then available, and people were able to relate their experiences of the conflict, and such an archive was used, say, in teaching history in schools, would this have made subsequent periods of conflict less likely to have occurred? [14]

In the final article in Section Two, Andrea SMIOSKI discusses how Austria incorporated qualitative data archives into its survey archive, and extends her own experiences into detailing some of the essential requirements for successfully establishing a national qualitative archive. She describes technical issues, tools and standards of archiving and distribution of high quality data; and welcomes the support from joint projects and working groups such as IASSIST, the International Association for Social Science Information Services and Technology to build common practices. [15]

2.3 Theoretical and methodological reflections on qualitative archives and biographical research

In the first article of this final section, Juan José CASTILLO gives an interesting account of what is happening in the archives that are related to the world of work, highlighting the notion of "the memory of work" as crucial in the on-going construction of what we understand as "heritage." CASTILLO's argument is that the memory of work is an interdisciplinary field encompassing approaches, perspectives and knowledges from sociology, history and industrial archeology. Identifying the sources and disciplinary fields is not enough for the project of "the memory of work," CASTILLO argues: it is the epistemological profile of the researcher that is crucial, since "you can have the evidence, the data in front of your eyes and not be able to see them, even less to interpret them" (CASTILLO, this issue). His contribution is an attempt to configure such an epistemological profile, particularly focusing on questions and problems arising from the difficult project of "recovering memory." Here material evidence and particularly the systematic study of places and specifically buildings—or what remains of them—is considered as important as the study of documents, both public and private, as well as oral sources. It is the complex and multifarious nature of the research that makes the whole project of the memory of work so rich, interesting but also in need of more theoretical consideration. As CASTILLO (this issue, p.24) writes, following BACHELARD (1972 [1938]), it is about "thinking to do research, and doing research to think." [16]

In the second article of this section, Rosa-Auria MUNTÉ draws on the concept of *autofiction* to discuss SEMPRÚN's fictionalized autobiographical writings on his Holocaust experience. Familiar with the theoretical framework on the debates on literary Holocaust representation, the author considers the importance of literary fiction in filling the gaps of the limits of narrative in recounting traumatic lived experiences, for which the Holocaust has become paradigmatic. In looking into

the multiplicity of narrative modes that have been employed in the textual representation of limit events such as the holocaust, MUNTÉ considers Philippe LEJEUNE's canonical definition of *autobiography*, particularly as it portrays the threefold constitution of the autobiographical figure as author-narrator-protagonist, as well as the idea of the *autobiographical pact*. The author further examines blurred boundaries and overlappings between history, testimony and fiction, locating the literary field of autofiction in the testimony/fiction interface. SEMPRÚN's work is discussed within this analytical framework as a quest for truth. The article raises interesting questions around the problem of "inventing" truth, rather than finding it, which can open up or rather continue controversial debates on the problem of representation of traumatic events in history through fiction and the epistemological—and hence moral—statute of different genres. [17]

In the third article of Section Three, VERD and LÓPEZ discuss the advantages of using life-stories in a project based on the life-course perspective. They meticulously show the advantages of incorporating qualitative methods in such research projects, particularly in the way the agency of social actors is highlighted, understood and analyzed in ways that quantitative research could not achieve. The authors suggest that life histories are particularly effective in capturing the nuances and subtle complexities of the life course; particularly in the light of globalized conditions that have radically destabilized traditional biographical trajectories as well as traditional social research methods and techniques of capturing, analyzing and interpreting them. The authors particularly emphasize the relevance of applying life-history research methods in longitudinal studies that attempt to evaluate social protection systems and further suggest future models in social policy. The final argument of the article is that social scientists have to do more to develop research methods that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches that are organically and coherently deployed in the research strategies of longitudinal studies of the life course, particularly emphasizing the importance of turning points in the life of social actors and the catalytic role of their agential interventions. [18]

In the fourth and final article of this Third Section, Maria TAMBOUKOU draws on her own experience of doing archival research at both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (France and the United States). Reflecting on the material and spatial conditions of reading two women artists' letters, she deals with the way a researcher makes certain choices when working in the archives. These apparently prosaic decisions she narrates, relate to deeper methodological issues about the optimal place a researcher should occupy when trying to find equilibrium between proximity and distance, involvement and detachment. One can also find original theoretical contributions as, for instance, the *hetero-temporalities* concept which the author relates to her perspective as feminist researcher (the "chronotopes of the feminist imaginary," among other interpretive threads). TAMBOUKOU combines the feminism paradigm with FOUCAULT's genealogical strategies, the latter being a primary theoretical and methodological field of resources for her more comprehensive research project where this contribution is a part. Critical feminist approaches are used to theorize *epistolary narratives*. The research focus (in this article) on letters written by women artists aims at improving the state of the art

on the constitution of the self, as lived by women of different times and generations. TAMBOUKOU captures the attention of the reader, who is led through the research process from the first steps (design decisions) to the resulting issues, some of them highlighted as article headings ("Whose archive?," "Whose time is it?"). [19]

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