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By Adam Smith

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A smart and modern approach to social data can help give your funding application the edge. Adam Smith finds out from the UK Data Service how you can tidy up your data sets.

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If you're a researcher seeking funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to work on a batch of data, one question you'll be asked is whether you need to collect original numbers or can use an existing set.

According to Louise Corti, functional director of producer relations and collections development at the UKDS, researchers are reluctant to use an existing data set because they rarely find one containing everything they need. "That's an attitude we're trying to change," she says.

Think laterally

Top research ideas and winning applications can stem from existing data—if only the researcher thinks creatively. "People are quite conservative about looking for data," Corti says.

This insight comes from user search records at the UKDS, which hosts national and international survey data collections, international databanks, census data and qualitative data. The service is largely funded by the ESRC, the higher education ICT organisation Jisc and the University of Essex.

The UKDS search records show that researchers scouring the database for sets of numbers to use can be too specific. According to Corti's colleague Lucy Bell, functional director for data access, this is one symptom of the "Google generation". Bell advises researchers to think laterally when searching for data collections to use. "You have to be imaginative," she says, adding that one of her jobs is to look after the service's thesauruses, which can help researchers find associated terms.

"For instance, if someone's interested in poverty, we might have a look at the thesaurus and there might be a related term of 'free school meals', which might be a proxy for poverty," she says.

Novelty value

Researchers using existing data on people should also be able to think creatively about exactly what they want to do with them, and how to make this novel enough to attract funding.

One option is to expand your analysis to include fresh data as they are added to longitudinal studies such as the census. Another example would be to compare the data you have worked on already with those in other sets, such as from other countries in Europe. The UKDS is a good place to start looking for such additional sets.

However, it may be that there is no way to do the work you want to do without collecting your own, original data. Corti says the service supports funding applications that aim to find new data and make them available to others through the UKDS. "If the data are going to be archived with us and we'll have a role, we'll write a letter of support because they're creating something that's going to be beneficial to the service," she says.

But she can't add her support to most funding applications that merely reuse existing data, she says, although the service has endorsed funding applications from researchers who seek to open up an archive of data, and offered its expertise and facilities for this.

Take care to share

Corti offers some further advice for anyone seeking to collect their own data—don't collect them in a way that means they can't be shared later on. It is becoming more and more important to create data sets that others can use, especially when using public research money. But sometimes researchers can inadvertently block this sharing in the way they collect the data.

"Make sure you've not put anything stupid in the consent form that says it'll only be you who looks at the data," says Corti. "If you do that then you rule out its use by colleagues and researchers in the future." The UKDS publishes template consent forms and advice to help researchers avoid this problem.

But researchers applying for funding also have to be careful about costing data sharing into their bids. A credible funding application these days includes the costs associated with making the data available. The UKDS has a guide aimed at helping researchers work out these costs. For instance, you may need to employ a researcher for 2 months at the end of the project to do the work to make the data available, or you may need to employ a high-quality transcription service. "It's not usually media costs; it's people costs," says Corti.

Citation nation

One of Bell's other jobs is to apply digital object identifiers to the service's data collections. Allied to the open-access movement, the idea of data citation has continued to grow in recent years. The UKDS has been doing it for some time, Bell says, but it is now looking at applying DOIs to data sets that grow and change over time.

Funders are pressing researchers more and more to make their data available and citable, and Bell says the service is playing its part by helping and encouraging researchers to do this. "It's extremely important that everyone knows exactly where the data you've used has come from, and which version it is," says Bell. "My personal feeling is that data citation is going to become standard."

Behavioural change is slow, though. The service even has trouble convincing researchers to be careful about how they organise their data. Corti says it's "good practice to make sure you document what you're doing" by using sensible file names that take account of versions, plus sound folder management.

"If you're sharing it in teams you need to know what the most recent master version is," she says. "That's something people do quite badly actually." She says that some researchers go back to the data they used during the frenetic days of their PhD only to find they are of little use. "It can be quite messy."

That's understandable, of course: academics are only human. But those who keep their data sets in order and who know them inside out might just have the edge when they come to rely on them to write a funding application.

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