The Contexts of Context:
Broadening Perspectives in the (Re)use of Qualitative Data

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Abstract

Questions of ‘context’ are one of the central issues on which debates about re-using qualitative data pivot. Advocates of reuse propose guidelines about how much and what kind of context to include when archiving qualitative data. Sceptics are concerned about the possibility of ever including enough context. The difficulty, if not impossibility, of accessing the context of the production of the original qualitative data is often the issue on which the possibility of re-using qualitative data flounders. Context, and its close companion, reflexivity, are seen as so intrinsic to the process of qualitative research, that without access to these, reuse of qualitative data remains impossible or at best limited. At a moment when the debate over reuse risks becoming increasingly polarised, this paper seeks more fruitful possibilities for reuse, by suggesting that despite persistent ruminations on context, we have not yet paid enough attention to context. Paradoxically the attention to (particular) contexts has excluded attention to other contexts. Certain contexts have been privileged, particularly the context of the original research, which is often reduced to the reflexive production of the data by the researcher. Other contexts are then lost, such as the contemporary context of data (re)generation. The taken-for-grantedness of context in qualitative research has meant that work on context in other domains such as literary theory, cultural studies and history has not been invoked in these dialogues. Yet drawing on this work can enable us to shift attention from context as something static and fixed and bounded, to the processes of the identification and construction of context. In this way we can understand reusing qualitative data as being about the process of recontextualising data, opening up a more productive notion of reuse and more possibilities of meaning-making from reusing data.

Introduction

In the UK the emergence of a debate in the social sciences about reusing qualitative data can be linked with two related events of the early 1990s. The first of these was the establishment of the Qualitative Data Archival Resource Centre (QUALIDATA, and, since 2003, ESDS Qualidata) at the University of Essex in 1994. QUALIDATA was set up not only to provide information and advice about archiving data but also with the explicit aim of promoting the reuse of qualitative data. The setting up of QUALIDATA was followed in 1996 with the publication of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Datasets Policy which asked that those in receipt of ESRC grants offer their data through QUALIDATA for archiving and hence for possible reuse by other researchers. Both events have given rise to growing reflections on the reuse of qualitative data.
Yet the reuse of qualitative data has proved controversial for some prospective depositers of data and those who might consider reusing data, and the emerging debate risks becoming increasingly polarised (Parry and Mauthner 2005: 340). On the one hand are those advocates of reusing data (often linked directly or indirectly with ESDS Qualidata), and on the other are researchers who have embarked on secondary analysis only to find it fraught with more difficulties than were anticipated (Heaton 1998). Some have even written of the perceived failure of their projects to reuse data (Mauthner, Parry et al. 1998). One of the most persistent arguments remains whether it is possible to reuse archived data without knowledge of, or access to, the context in which it was produced (Bishop 2004), given the centrality of context in the process of meaning-making in qualitative sociological research. As Heaton writes: ‘[i]n qualitative research, the interpretation of data is generally perceived to be dependent on the primary researcher’s direct knowledge of the context of data collection and analysis obtained through their own personal involvement in the research’ (Heaton 2004a: 30).

These discussions over context have many dimensions. These range from how much contextual information it is necessary or desirable to archive alongside what might be more generally conceived of as the data, e.g. transcripts of interviews, to whether it is even possible ever to include enough context to facilitate reuse. This concern indicates a shift from an understanding of context as ‘merely’ extra background information to supplement the real or main ‘data’, to an emphasis on data as reflexively produced through the context of the interviewer-interviewee relationship. This common understanding of qualitative research has produced some anxiety about archiving and reuse, given the apparent impossibility of archiving the experience of that face-to-face ethnographic encounter, and the researcher’s reflexive interpretations of this encounter. A key question then is whether it is possible to reuse data, or to do sociological research without having ‘been there’ (Heaton 2004a: 60-61). Thus questions of ‘context’ have been one of the central issues on which the possibilities of reuse pivot, and sometimes appear to flounder (Dale, Arber et al. 1988, Corti 2000, Boddy 2001, Heaton 2004a).

At a time when the debate over reuse risks becoming increasingly polarised (Parry and Mauthner 2005: 340), this paper seeks more fruitful possibilities for reuse. Despite extensive prior debate on context, this paper argues that we have not yet paid enough attention to context. Paradoxically, the attention to (particular) contexts, and to particular interpretations of context, has excluded consideration of other contexts. Certain contexts have been privileged, such as the context of the original research, and specifically the role of reflexivity in the production of data. In this sense context is reduced to reflexivity, and other contexts are then lost, such as the contemporary context of the current research project, and reflexivity around this project. Furthermore while context is so much taken for granted in qualitative research, work on context in other fields such as in literary theory and cultural studies, particularly following the cultural turn, has not been invoked in these dialogues. Yet broadening the debate to explore meanings of context in other disciplinary domains (Strathern, 1987) can offer conceptual tools for working through issues of context and enable us to shift attention from context as something static, fixed and bounded, to the process/es of contextualisation and the identification and construction of context. In this way we can come to understand reusing qualitative data, not as the reuse of pre-existing data, but as a new process of recontextualising data. This opens up a more productive notion of reuse and more possibilities of theory building from qualitative data.

**Context in the Context of Qualitative Research**

These discussions involve different understandings of context, and there are a variety of overlapping arguments and positions ensuing from the different issues of context which are raised, from [a position that] data cannot be reused (i) because contextual information does not exist because it has not been archived or preserved; or (ii) contextual information does exist but cannot be provided without violating confidentiality, or breaching assumed or extant ethical and moral codes; or these requirements, e.g. confidentiality, would require stripping the data of some of its most meaningful aspects so rendering the data unusable for qualitative research; (iii) to arguments that it is not possible to reuse qualitative data because it is never possible to archive enough contextual information; (iv) or even that because qualitative data is reflexively produced, the
context for qualitative data is the reflexive production of that data, and so the data, and/or the context cannot be archived and so cannot be reused.

While these first two arguments are often seen to be practical issues, the latter positions are frequently understood to reference deeper epistemological issues. The following section on context, archiving and ethics, suggests that while practical, these first two points also raise epistemological issues, and through teasing these out, begins to reveal how these positions suggest some contexts and not others. I return to questions of context as reflexivity later.

**Context, Archiving and Ethics**

Researchers linked with Qualidata have been particularly responsive to the dilemmas of how much contextual information to archive, and have suggested and implemented procedures to improve documentation of the research process when archiving qualitative research data. Corti and Blackhouse write that: ‘Qualidata has a deep concern both for the rights of the participants and the professional integrity and peace of mind for researchers, and therefore issues of confidentiality, informed consent and indeed, copyright, must be addressed in the context of archiving qualitative material’. Later they render this as ‘procedures must strive between a) adopting a system which fully meets the commitments of confidentiality given to research participants, and b) achieving the greatest practicable accessibility and usability for the data’ (Corti and Backhouse 2000).

One recent commentary suggests that this kind of contextual information is no longer a significant anxiety. Parry and Mauthner state that they ‘have no quarrel regarding the availability of information about the mechanics of qualitative data archiving available on the ESDS Qualidata site’, and that they want to move on to address the epistemological issues which seem more troubling (Parry and Mauthner 2005: 337). Parry and Mauthner may be correct that questions about the type of contextual information to provide when archiving are no longer so controversial now that they have been widely discussed and guidelines issued by ESDS Qualidata. Indeed, van den Berg has also suggested further guidance (van den Berg 2005), and the ESRC-funded QUADS projects in this volume are producing further reflections on archiving and reuse (see specifically paper by Libby Bishop, this volume). Although the question of how much and what information to archive alongside interview transcripts is frequently rendered as a practical, rather than epistemological, problem, I want to return to this subject. The intention is not to question that the current guidelines are adequate, but rather to highlight that there are important conceptual – and inherently epistemological – issues involved in these discussions, and that examining how context has been understood even in these ‘practical’ debates begins to reveal already how certain contexts are highlighted, while others are neglected.

Indeed Corti and others at ESDS Qualidata gesture towards this in their reflections on the issues around contextual information such as using participants’ names, and related issues of informed consent and confidentiality/anonymity. Bound up in these concepts are particular understandings of the subject of research. They suggest that researchers may be unnecessarily worried about asking respondents for consent for archiving and re-use of data. They write, speaking of their experience at ESDS Qualidata:

> indeed, feedback since 1996, suggests that many participants do not have a problem with this concept [archiving and re-use of data]. They have spared time to offer information, and for qualitative research this may have been hours, and expect use to be made of it. These findings suggest that some investigators may be taking an unduly paternalistic attitude stance towards ‘protecting their research subjects’ and should, where possible, perhaps seek to discuss issues of usage of data in more depth with respondents. (Corti, Day et al., 2000, December, see also Backhouse, 2002).
Paul Thompson, similarly comments on issues of anonymity, making an interesting distinction between practices in oral history and other sociological research. Reflecting on the project which resulted in the book *The Edwardians*, he writes:

> We were very concerned, right from the beginning, about issues of ethics and consent. In this way I think oral history developed interestingly and differently from much social research, partly through the influence of the community groups that we linked up with. The idea of giving voice to the informants was always important, giving them the opportunity to be heard under their own names rather than being automatically cited anonymously. This is, again, a practice that I still maintain. I give informants the choice, ‘Do you want to be anonymous? Or would you like your name to be used?’ I did for *The Edwardians*, for instance; I wrote to all the people who were cited at length. A week or so ago I was looking through all the letters they sent me, and there were some very touching answers, and they were all tremendously proud to be quoted by their name. I wish more sociological researchers did that. (Thompson, 2004: 83)

This then serves as a reminder of what anthropologists have called the ‘native context’ (Dilley, 1999), as opposed to the researchers’ context, of professional codes of ethics, which can result in neglecting attention to the interviewee’s context and their hopes and investment in the interview process. Arja Kuula has even done some research, involving contacting participants in a number of research projects where the original researchers claimed that participants were not willing to offer their interviews for reuse, but on being asked if they would like their interviews archived the overwhelming majority indicated that they would (Kuula, 2005).

These reflections reveal that different disciplinary and political fields provide different accounts of what constitutes contextual information and the ethical issues raised. It is not just a practical issue of deciding what information we need, but also involves specific conceptualisations of the research subject and the research process within the different disciplines. Oral historian Al Thomson has noted the risk of importing models of ethics and of the research relationship from disciplines, such as medical ethics, and unwittingly bringing other epistemological baggage, such as notions of a vulnerable, at risk, research participant (Thomson, 2006). Much discussion of ethics comes from the field of medical ethics which became well developed: not least because notions of informed consent emerged following the Nuremberg Trials, which addressed the forced ‘participation’ in medical experiments of those interned in concentration camps during the Second World War. This serves to highlight that different research domains involve different notions of the subject. Oral history, and much feminist and labour history, rely on much more robust conceptualisations of the subject. These are ‘voices from the past’ (Thompson, 2000), speaking out about being ‘hidden from history’ (Rowbotham, 1975), and refusing continued silencing. Joan Nestle, founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, writes that all archives, not just lesbian and gay ones, ‘are places where those abused by national power or societal ignorance can outlast the small minds and bitter hearts of their persecutors’ (Nestle, 1998: 119). While these kinds of histories have frequently also claimed to be giving voice to marginalised groups, with minimal mediation by the researcher, contrary to much sociological research, it is also the case the need to respond to the challenge of epistemic privilege has forced those, especially feminist theorists, to produce much more nuanced epistemologies (Haraway, 1988, Butler and Scott, 1992). Thus even apparently practical issues already signal the epistemological assumptions of some contexts and not others.

**Context and Realism**

As well as such supposedly practical concerns outlined above there is also concern about whether certain understandings of context rely on realist epistemologies which are inappropriate for interpretive qualitative research. Some researchers do not believe that the collecting and archiving of more contextual information will render qualitative data more usable. Mauthner et al (1998) comment that criticisms of archiving qualitative data have rested on the assumption that without this background information the data remain incomplete; and that the suggested solutions of making sure that as much information as possible is archived
with the data implies that this will then produce a complete dataset. They are critical of the realist and positivist ontology and epistemology underlying this model of archiving and reusing data, and the ‘practical’ solutions offered to address this issue, which they assert cannot adequately work through the implications of the reflexive construction of qualitative data. Implicitly they are arguing that reflexivity cannot be archived, that this reflexivity is essential in order to reuse data and therefore reusing qualitative data is problematic. They are critical of guidelines such as those offered by Qualidata which stress a commitment to ensuring ‘sufficient documentation of the research proposal, aims, methods and outcomes to enable reuse’ (Qualidata, 1997: 7; and discussions of these issues in Hammersley, 1997), reading these as implying that these measures ‘will restore the data to the status that they had for the primary researchers and enable them to be used to generate new findings or theories’ (735). However, Mauthner et al. overstate the claims which those at ESDS Qualidata are making, which are a more modest and perhaps vague goal of enabling reuse; and although they accept that Hammersley does recognise the epistemological nature of some of these issues, they suggest he poses insufficiently philosophical solutions to them:

If researchers generate new substantive findings and theories from old qualitative data, without attending to the epistemological issues, they are being naively realist thus unwittingly serving to reify the data by hoodwinking us into believing they are entities without concomitant relations. (Mauthner et al., 1998: 743)

Mauthner et al.’s account, despite claims to being interpretivist, is almost as realist as those they critique, in their implication that because it is not possible to archive everything, including the reflexive production of data, the possibilities of meaning-making from secondary data are limited. Despite attention to context, Mauthner et al. appear to lack a developed sense of historicity:

Furthermore, while archives may be an extremely rich source for historical and methodological exploration, any attempt to go further than this is incompatible with an interpretive and reflexive epistemology. Archived data clearly have value as historical documents for studying the past. Methodologically, they can provide insights about where and how researchers were positioned in relation to theoretical, epistemological, methodological and substantive issues of the time of the research. (Mauthner et al., 1998: 743)

Their references to ‘history’ and ‘methodology’ are somewhat disparaging. This account of history and sociology proceeds as if historical knowledge can be separated from social science knowledge. After all, the social sciences also exist in historical time, and historians are often excellent in being reflexive. Mike Savage’s account of using the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) at the University of Sussex offers a much more complex account of the possibilities of reusing data, and of the significance of history and methodology (Savage, 2005). Rather than focusing on how one particular study could be read, Savage looked at a number of studies on class identities in the MOA, to examine changing understandings of class over time. His work drew not only on respondents’ responses to questions about class, but also drew on details of the original project itself as data, as something to be examined as part of his own research process, rather than as pre-given ‘context’ with which to make sense of the ‘data’. For Savage the ways in which researchers sought to elicit class identities were as valuable as data as the respondents’ commentaries. This points us toward the next section where I argue that reuse of data may be more productively understood by attending to the process of re-contextualising data through a new research project.
Reflexivity as Context

Mauthner et al. (1998) appear to provide the definitive rebuttal to advocates of reuse in their 1998 article ‘The Data Are Out There Or Are They?’. While they concede that some arguments about contextual information may have been resolved or adequately addressed, they persist in their argument that epistemological issues have not been sufficiently worked through. Reflexivity provides the definitive context for the generation of qualitative data, and this cannot be archived.

In stressing the role of reflexivity in the construction of data, they ‘contend that the conditions under which the data are produced are inescapable, thus rendering their reinterpretation at some later date problematic’ (Mauthner et al 1998: 733). These conditions constitute the reflexive and interpretive nature of qualitative research. Failure to acknowledge this epistemological issue [reflexivity] leads researchers unwittingly to adopt a ‘naively realist’ position (Mauthner et al 1998: 733). In such discussions, reflexivity is produced as a privileged context. Mauthner et al. invoke reflexivity to signal a shift from practical to epistemological concerns, in their efforts to shift the terrain of the debate from ‘practical’ solutions to recognition of the epistemological issues that the question of background information raises. Their primary argument is that qualitative data are reflexively produced, that the data are a co-construction of the researcher and the research participant. They argue that the epistemological implications of the reflexive nature of the production of qualitative research have not generally been adequately explored in secondary analyses.

In rhetorically asking in the title of their article, ‘the data are out there, or are they?’ Mauthner et al. question whether there are data ‘out there’ that can be reused. Their argument is that data cannot be reused, or only in very limited ways. Rather I want to suggest that the data are not out there at all, because data are always (re)generated in the here and now of a research project, and that attention to the process of the production of data is always important, even and perhaps especially, in projects involving the (re)use of qualitative data. Thus Mauthner et al.’s title reveals a flaw in their argument. They seem to conclude that the data are indeed out there, just possibly not of much use, because ‘out there’ is constituted as so far in the past that the data can only be used for some impoverished historical or methodological research, and that the data cannot be used to generate substantive new research findings. Arguably, however, it is the rider to their question that is important here – ‘or are they?’. I suggest that the data in fact are not ‘out there’ at all, that the data are here and now, being constructed in the process of a new research project (as Savage, 2005 so clearly demonstrates).

Thus the contemporary context of the new research project is often neglected in these kinds of criticisms of reuse. Mauthner et al.’s viewpoint then could be enriched by pushing even further the notion of context and general principles of qualitative research, and considering, not just the context of the ‘original’ production of the data, but also the ‘context’ of the ‘reuse’ of data. Their account, with its attention to the context and reflexivity involved in the production of the so-called ‘pre-existing’ data, proceeds at times as if they understand reusing data to be about some attempt to repeat or reconstruct the original research project, as if it is another interview project, rather than as a new project in its own right, this time an archival or documentary project. They fail to appreciate the necessity of attention to the context and reflexivity of the current project, which effectively makes new data out of old. Ironically it is their mistaking of the temporality of the context and reflexive production of the data which underlies their belief in the limitations of reusing data. Their construction of the issues in this debate consistently leaves the data behind in the past, in the original project that produced the data. This highlights a further limitation of terminology such as ‘secondary analysis’, which emphasises the process of ‘analysis’, at the expense of attention to the setting up of and the production of the current research project. As Libby Bishop notes, ‘the implication is that archived data are immune from practices of co-construction and reflexivity’ (Bishop, 2005b).

Drawing on work by Lisa Adkins on reflexivity, I want to follow through the implications of Parry et al.’s use of reflexivity. Adkins challenges conventionally held notions of reflexivity as a way of countering dominant ways of knowing, and offering alternative ways of producing knowledges (Adkins, 2002). She suggests that ‘such reflexivity should not be read as transgressive but rather as involving the very inscription of difference
and the making of hierarchies’ (Adkins 2002: 84), in ways which enable certain subjects to speak and exclude and silence others. For Adkins, self-consciousness on the part of reflexive ethnographers often relies on making respondents as well as ‘the field’ stationary (Adkins 2002: 345). Specifically Adkins argues ‘that reflexivity in relation to knowledge practices concerns a speaking position constituted in terms of a mobile relation to identity on the side of the knower in relation to the known, a position from which there are a number of exclusions’ (Adkins 2002: 86). This provides a useful way of interpreting the work which Parry and Mauthner use ‘reflexivity’ to do. For Mauthner et al., context, which for them is reduced to reflexivity, is always fixed in the past. Their argument relies on consistently fixing data in the past, fixing disciplines at particular moments, fixing the earlier self of the researcher as naïve, and fixing respondents. All are rendered immobile, in a way which enables the researcher to have moved, and to produce herself as a more sophisticated academic:

We had not only moved on in our personal lives, but also in the disciplines in which we worked, in our substantive interests and in our theoretical and methodological positionings. (Mauthner et al., 1998: 739)

In particular we found our data to be constrained both by the concepts and ideas which were current at the time of our research, not only in the academic world but also in our own worlds and the worlds of the respondents. (Mauthner et al., 1998: 741)

As a consequence the data were produced reflexively via interaction between the researcher and respondents through the very act and experience of participation. The data were inextricably bound to the unique conditions of their production. While interesting from a methodological stand-point, for the purpose of generating either new substantive findings or theories the data were wholly inadequate. (Mauthner et al., 1998: 740)

A consequence of this practice of reflexivity is the fixing of context, of data, of respondents and of disciplinary knowledges, in a way which enables Mauthner et al. to provide accounts of their researcher selves which highlight their mobility, academically and personally, in terms of disciplinary knowledges, epistemologies and methodologies. This fixing of context is at odds with other ways of thinking about context. Thus contra Mauthner et al., the work of Ricoeur suggests that research data are both culturally and historically situated, and the product of a process of objectivation. Once collected, any research material acquires a certain autonomy from its original context of production as well as from its original author - a detachment which makes re-analysis of such data feasible (cited in Mottier, 2005).

Context in the Context of the Cultural Turn: Reusing Data as Recontextualising Data

For all the concern with context, context seems curiously taken for granted in much of these discussions, as if we might already know what it is and how it works (see also Dilley, 1999). Given the self-evident tone of references to context in much of the literature on reuse and qualitative research in general, it is important to consider the interpretation of context in other fields. We need to ask the context of context – and one context for context is what has variously been termed a cultural, literary, or interpretive turn across the humanities and social sciences (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1987, Culler, 1988). The study of texts has been intrinsic to this turn, and has sometimes been understood as a tendency to reduce all social phenomena to texts. Yet this can be more usefully be thought of as a turn from attention to the formal or aesthetic aspects of a text to attention to the emergence of, and implication of texts in, various social, political, historical and cultural contexts. Thus cultural studies can be characterised not so much by an insistent ‘textualism’, but rather by an insistent ‘contextualism’ (Grossberg, 1997 cited in Saukko, 2003). Clearly the domains of the cultural/literary turn are
not entirely distinct from sociology; however it is worth noting that these contexts are rarely acknowledged in the methodological literature on reuse. Thus certain contexts appear absent or forgotten in these discussions.

Yet such a turn, or return, might be productive for social scientists interested in reuse, particularly given the influence of Foucault and Derrida, and their respective texts, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Archive Fever*, which both in different ways reflect on contexts, archives and the production of knowledge. Admittedly these texts are less concerned with some of the issues which face those currently charged with constructing archives, such as ESDS Qualidata, or with thinking through depositing ‘data’. Nonetheless the absence of any reference to these texts and debates is suggestive of the insular nature of some current discussions, and the potentials offered by broadening attention to other disciplinary debates.

For literary critic Jonathan Culler any attempt to resolve the dilemma of the meaning of a text by insisting on the ‘proper’ context for a statement is bound to fail. Accepting that ‘meaning is determined by context’, he recognises the double bind this creates, because though ‘meaning is context bound, context is boundless’ (Culler, 1997: 67). Because context knows no bounds and context determines meaning, it can therefore be assumed that meaning is also boundless. This does not produce a relativist argument, but rather a contextualist one; not an argument that data can be interpreted in any way, but that data can be interpreted in endless contexts, thus opening up the possibilities of meaning making. So while some sceptics close down and limit the possibilities for meaning-making from reusing data, this approach offers the possibilities of opening up processes of interpretation.

Culler also alerts us to the latent positivism of ‘context’ (1988 ix); providing a reminder that context is not given but produced, thus context is a process, and turning to the verb, ‘contextualise’ might serve to remind us of this. This shift opens up the possibility of understanding reuse as involving the process of recontextualising data. Paying more attention to issues of context may reveal the complexities of how data are co-constructed through a new research project (Moore, 2005). New research projects provide new contexts for the creation and emergence of ‘data’, particularly through the contemporary production of the relationship between researcher and data. Thus secondary analysis can be understood, not so much as the analysis of pre-existing data; rather as involving a process of re-contextualising, and re-constructing, data. Libby Bishop’s account (2005) of drawing on two datasets, Mildred Blaxter’s *Mothers and Daughters* and Paul Thompson’s *The Edwardians*, to examine practices of using convenience foods, is an unusual example, in revealing much about the reflexive processes of recontextualising data and reconstructing data. As Heaton has noted in her study of many accounts of reusing data, “[s]urprisingly, given the complex circumstances in which secondary studies are produced, reflexivity was not a particularly strong feature of the studies reviewed” (Heaton, 2004: 105). Bishop’s paper is rare in providing a detailed account of just how the process of reusing an existing dataset was carried out. This includes details of the messiness of how the (apparent) limitations of the existing datasets led to a shift in focus of the research questions; and how the research questions revealed dimensions of the data which had not hitherto been explored: for example, despite extensive use of *The Edwardians* dataset, no one had previously focused on issues around food. On the Baxter study, Bishop reflected: in a sense we were co-constructing different data. Their primary focus was on health, not food, and even in the food article, they structure their analysis on the generational comparison. In my project I was focused almost exclusively on food, and on the discussions of tinned food especially, and secondarily, as I didn’t have the daughter data for comparison, within-case analysis was my only option.

(Bishop, 2005b)

As Bishop noted ‘data are co-constructed whether reading or doing a live interview’. In carefully working through the process of recontextualising the data, rather than trying to fix the data, the interviewees, or the interviewer in the past, Bishop produces a very different account of the possibilities offered by reusing data
than Mauthner et al. Thus highlighting that the interpretive turn in social research risks being an incomplete cultural turn in this corner of the social sciences if we do not attend to the contexts of context.

**Conclusion**

ESDS Qualidata, and the ESRC Datasets Policy, are transforming the (future) history of sociology in the UK. In this process we are being offered an opportunity to reflect on the research that we are conducting and what traces of that research we would like to leave. Yet with the endless attention to the original context of the production of data, there is so much less attention being paid to the production of the archive, and to notions of historicity and the future of sociological knowledge. This neglect of attention to the construction of the archive risks leaving the archive to the ‘pioneers’ of social science – ESDS Qualdata are currently focusing on ‘recovering’ and ‘rescuing’ data from pioneering sociological studies before they are ‘lost’. But what then when this canon has been constructed? While the 1996 ESRC Datasets Policy asks that those in receipt of an ESRC grant offer their data for archiving, ESDS Qualdata are in no position to archive data from all projects funded by the ESRC. Thus those at ESDS Qualdata are also engaged in a process of making decisions about what contemporary ESRC-funded research to archive. Furthermore there is anecdotal, if unsurprisingly little written, evidence of researchers in receipt of ESRC grants ‘resisting’ the possibilities of archiving their data, for example, by suggesting to interviewees that they do not need to grant consent for reuse of their data. Yet we might want to question how effective a strategy this secret and invisible resistance to the apparent undesirability of archiving is.

If we understand research as not just describing social realities but also as helping to create them (see Law, 2004), archives are implicated in this process, as Derrida has noted. In his reflections on the Freud Archive in London in his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* he writes:

> this archival earthquake would not have limited its effects to the secondary recording, to the printing and to the conservation of the history of psychoanalysis. It would have transformed this history from top to bottom and in the most initial inside of its production, in its very events. This is another way of saying that the archiving, printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.

(Derrida, 1996: 16-17)

Furthermore as Derrida notes in his introduction and postscripts, in his exploration of the Greek roots of the term archive, it stands for both ‘commencement’ and ‘commandment’, highlighting that it is not just origins that are at stake, but also authority. Thus for Derrida archiving represents an attempt to preserve something to be remembered and the leaving out of something to be forgotten. This contradictory impulse can be found everywhere – even in social science research.

Researchers could currently be engaging in a debate about what kind of social realities we want to create and what kinds of records we would like to generate. Instead one is left concluding that perhaps the key questions that will preoccupy researchers in the future are ‘why our obsession with a particularly limited and limiting notion of context’ and ‘why the archive is so bare’?

Antoinette Burton argues that:
it is the archive itself which should be subject to continual suspicion and radical doubt, serving as it does to normalize, through classification and re-presentation what are invariably “fragmented, fractured and disassembled” strands of historical evidence and experience. If we fail to recognise how historical practice (or, indeed, any practice of looking) is in danger of reassembling and calcifying what counts as evidence – and in turn, what ‘looks’ like it belongs to the domain of the social or the cultural or the political – we miss a valuable opportunity to interrogate our own investments in those domains.

(Burton, 2001: 66)

Thus rather than leaving decisions about what to archive to those at ESDS Qualidata (however informed by advisory panels and others with particular interests in archiving), and equally to those who choose to opt in or out of the process of archiving, we could be initiating a more open and explicit debate among a much larger and broader share of the social science community about the meaning and status of a social science archive and what we may or may not want to archive. This need not be an insular debate, and could draw on, and benefit from, the expertise of those who have much experience of archives, as well as to recent and not so recent ‘turns to the archive’. Currently however attention to particular and limited notions of context and reflexivity risk foreclosing the possible debates to be had around reuse and archiving.

Notes

1 I use (re)use here to call into question the notion of data being reused, rather than used, or rather (re)generated and re-contextualised in a new research project. See (Moore 2005); (Bornat 2003); (Corti and Thompson 2003).

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