Rigorous and Ethical Qualitative Data Reuse: Potential Perils and Promising Practices

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Have you read a qualitative data reuse study that left you with questions? In this editorial, I consider some potential ethical perils when using existing qualitative data for an analysis different from what the data were initially gathered. This is a practice known as secondary qualitative analysis or qualitative data reuse, and I refer to the initial study in which the data were collected as the origin research. The increasing use of qualitative data reuse studies and the lack of practical guidance motivated this editorial to advance some promising practices for rigorous studies. To begin, let me tell you a little about my own learning orientation as a researcher.

My research orientations and approaches are continually shaped by my own experiences and interactions with others, as well as by my beliefs and inquiry related to what practices constitute rigorous and ethical research. As a methods-focused scholar, I have a responsibility to read widely and keep pace with rapidly evolving research and practice landscapes. I view my daily interactions with graduate students as a privilege and an opportunity to learn from one another. My pursuit of research practice innovations often emerges from the dilemmas experienced by myself, my students, and my colleagues. The promising practices advanced in this editorial respond to a recent dilemma I faced as an examiner on a graduate student thesis study where the student had reused qualitative data (details have been changed to protect privacy). In the thesis, the source for the reuse data had been a larger origin research project led by the student’s supervisor.

Thesis examination is an opportunity to examine the study undertaken by the student and assess their understanding of quality research practices. The lack of essential methodological study details in the thesis relating the student’s reuse study to the origin research hindered my role as an assessor of study quality. Prior to the oral exam, I read the thesis document and drafted questions for the oral defense. I became aware of the student’s use of secondary qualitative data analysis during my initial read of the thesis, yet I had no idea of the student’s close proximity to the origin research until I asked questions during the oral exam. Of particularly concern to me was that the thesis did not make explicit the following key methodological details: (1) the thesis data were a subset of data collected as part of origin research led by her supervisor, (2) the purpose, rationale for methods, and procedures for data collection for the origin research, (3) the student’s role in the origin research, and (4) the rationale and selection processes for the subsample of participants and methods involved in the reuse study. These details were adequately described by the student during the oral exam, yet I was perplexed by the insufficient methodological description in the thesis document.

The dilemma was intensified by the unanimous resistance from the examining committee members to my request to augment the methodological details in the thesis. The examining committee argued that it was adequate to simply adopt the conventions for reporting the secondary analysis of quantitative data. The strong resistance to additions suggested a lack of recognizing the unique characteristics of qualitative research and, specifically, the need for contextual and researcher details for the origin research to assess the qualitative data reuse research as both rigorous and ethical.

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### Table 1. Types of Ethical Issues, Potential Perils, and Details to Disclose in Qualitative Data Reuse Studies.

| Types of Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research | Potential Perils in Qualitative Data Reuse | Details to Disclose About Addressing the Issue in Descriptions of the Origin Research | Details to Disclose About Addressing the Issue in Descriptions of the Data Reuse |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Seek college/university study approval      | Reliance on the origin researchers to have followed the procedures described in the original ethics application and their willingness to disclose any departures from those plans | Institutional review board approval was sought and received (and if available, any deviations from the approved plan) | Institutional review board approval for data reuse with details about the origin research was sought and received |
| Gain local access permissions after intentional site selection | Reliance on the rapport of origin researchers, collected data, and the willingness of origin researchers to disclose site and sampling limitations | Rationale for adequacy of research question and procedures for identifying sites and local approvals for access and participants | Relate rationale for adequacy of site to reuse question, inherent data limitations, and procedures for data access to origin research |
| Disclose purpose of the study and refrain from pressure on participants to consent | Reliance on the origin researchers to have followed the procedures described in the original ethics application and their willingness to disclose any departures from plans | Procedures for participant recruitment and informing them of the general purpose of the study, and assure participants that their participation is voluntary and describe use of the study data beyond the origin research | Relate rationale for adequacy of participant samples to address the reuse question and procedures for participant sampling to the origin research |
| Build rapport and respect study site and participants | Reliance on the origin researchers to have minimized disruptions to site and avoided deceit with participants | Procedures for building trust and conveyance of anticipated site disruptions and potential use of the study data beyond the origin research | Relate relationship of reuse data researcher to the origin research and data limitations |
| Sensitivity to needs of vulnerable populations (e.g., children) and respect for potential power imbalances and exploitation of participants | Reliance on the origin researchers to have used appropriate methods with their populations and avoided bias in data | Procedures for obtaining appropriate consent (e.g., parents, as well as children) and how protocols were developed and data collected | Relate the adequacy of accessed data for reuse questions to data collection protocols in the origin research |
| Respect privacy of participants and store data and materials (e.g., raw data and protocols) using appropriate security measures | Reliance on the confidentiality efforts of origin researchers and deidentifying data before providing access for analysis | Procedures for assigning pseudonyms or collecting data anonymously; secure data management and storage | Relate how data were received, anonymized, and stored for data reuse |

*Source: Adapted from Creswell and Poth (2017, pp. 55–56).*

There is much evidence of a greater emphasis on the secondary analysis and reuse of quantitative data than qualitative data (Glaser, 1963; Yoon & Kim, 2017). In many ways, the inaccurate perceptions of qualitative data reuse as a “new” research practice perpetuate the negligible attention being given to the scholarship specific to qualitative data reuse research. A detailed description comparing secondary analysis of qualitative and quantitative research is available in the work of Heaton (2004). Even though I was familiar with the practice of qualitative data reuse, I recognize that my reading had not kept pace with emerging literature.

My subsequent review of the recent qualitative data reuse literature in the social sciences (e.g., Beck, 2019; Carmichael, 2018; Corti, 2018; Yoon & Kim, 2017) revealed limited guiding practices for conveying details of the origin research necessary for assessing the data’s adequacy and relevance to the reuse question and examining data reuse procedures’ adherence to ethical and rigor principles. This precipitated this editorial to spotlight two questions that also serve as my goals: First, what ethical perils for qualitative data reuse researchers can be mitigated through detailed methodological descriptions? Second, what promising practices can provide guidance for researchers to conduct rigorous qualitative data reuse studies?

**Potential Perils: How Can Ethical Issues Be Mitigated in Qualitative Data Reuse Studies?**

Among qualitative data reuse studies, the relational distance of those undertaking the qualitative secondary analysis to the origin research provides a distinguishing feature. Whereas qualitative reuse studies characterized by a close proximity tend to have direct access to the researchers who conducted the origin research and some are even undertaken by the same researchers, distanced studies have no relationship with the origin research.
research and may draw upon, for example, a data set from a repository or data archive. Not surprising, proximity differences yield unique opportunities and perils: Most qualitative data reuse studies benefit from the cost- and time-effectiveness of accessing existing data, yet researchers accessing data repositories may be limited to the information provided with the data set. In contrast, continuing access to the origin researchers may benefit reuse studies with close proximity because researchers can seek greater methodological details (Beck, 2019; Coltart, Henwood, & Shirani, 2013). The increased access may provide the qualitative reuse researchers with a “close-proximity” advantage as they “strive for ‘understanding,’ that deep structure of knowledge that comes from visiting personally with participants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meaning” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 253).

In my experience, transparency in the methodological descriptions of origin research expedites the assessment of rigor of any (i.e., qualitative or quantitative) study. What has been called the “transparency agenda” has reemerged in the past decade in response to fraudulent research claims. Corti (2018) describes the need for qualitative researchers to convey the context for the data and integrity in the research process for both the origin and reuse studies. This means I consider details relating the why, where, when, what, and how the data were generated in the origin research as a key quality criterion for assessing rigor and adherence to ethical principles in the reuse study. I am not alone in my thinking, as researchers of data reuse research. Coltart, Henwood, and Shirani (2013) point to “close ties to the [origin] project and one another have proven to be incredibly valuable in terms of providing checks and balances against misinterpretation” (p. 282).

From a research ethics perspective, secondary qualitative data analysts must attend to both the issues in the origin research as well as in the reuse study. In the thesis I examined, insufficient information was provided as evidence of the issues considered; key is the researcher’s responsibility to conduct ethical research. This means that the researcher is responsible not only for describing the procedures they undertook in the reuse study to access the data but also conveying the procedures undertaken in the origin research. For example, the thesis included statements that the student had completed the requisite institutional review process for accessing data for secondary analysis and that the origin researchers had also completed an institutional ethical review process. What was missing were details about whether (or not) the origin research had included the possibility of data reuse in their initial consent form and the extent to which the origin researchers had followed the procedures described in their ethics application. These ideas align well with the purpose of qualitative research to bring “complex ethical issues to the surface because of the personal nature of this activity when qualitative methods are used. As we have all heard many times, ‘the researcher is the instrument’” (Mertens, 2018, p. 33).

Many ethical review boards have unique criteria and procedures for assessing data reuse research and secondary analysis. The ethical review process can sometimes be interpreted as an obstacle to be dealt with rather than an opportunity for ensuring understanding of the qualitative origin research. It is critically important that qualitative data reuse researchers are aware of how they are conducting themselves in an ethical manner throughout the research study. Common across the research process is the reliance on the origin researchers to disclose their efforts, and I draw attention to the need for including this information in the qualitative data reuse study. Specific details to disclose addressing six potential ethical perils in qualitative data reuse studies are summarized in Table 1; these focus on relating methodological details of the data reuse to the origin study.

### Promising Practices: What Guides the Conduct of Rigorous Qualitative Data Reuse Studies?

The complexity of undertaking and describing the reuse of qualitative data is highlighted by the apt description by Corti (2018) of the role of a secondary qualitative analyst as a detective who engages in “appraising the materials and examining provenance to satisfy oneself there is an adequate context surrounding the data and that the limitations are understood and fully appreciated” (p. 164). The three promising practices for qualitative data reuse advanced below reflect current understanding in the rapidly evolving research and practice landscapes. These will evolve, and the further questions will arise as essential catalysts for discussions as illustrative examples of rigorous and ethical qualitative research practices emerge.

Make explicit the proximity of the data reuse researcher to the origin research for the purpose of specifying the nature of the relationship and implications for insights about the origin research that would be otherwise inaccessible. In the data reuse example of the thesis, it was important to disclose that the source of their data was research led by their supervisor, which they had contributed to aspects of the data collection that was ultimately used for their study. Further questions for consideration:

(a) What is the nature of the relationship between the origin research and data use research?
(b) What access does the data reuse researcher have to the origin researchers to clarify questions as needed?
(c) What role (if any) did the data reuse researcher have in the origin research?

Describe the relevance of the data reuse study’s purpose to the purpose of the origin research to assess whether the sample participants and data methods are adequate to answer the question. In the thesis example, it was essential to convey the connection between the origin research’s purpose and the reuse study’s purpose. The sampling procedures used to identify the subset of participants for the data reuse study in addition to the origin study details were needed, as was the rationale for
selecting data methods from the larger origin research in light of the reuse research question. Further questions for consideration:

(a) How does the data reuse research question relate to the purpose and outcomes of the original research?
(b) What is the relationship of the reuse study sample to the origin research sample?
(c) What is the rationale for selecting data in relation to all the available data methods in the origin research sample?
(d) To what extent are the data reuse interpretations limited by the data collected in the origin research?

Detail how the ethical issues were mitigated in both the data reuse study and in the origin research to adhere to principles guiding the conduct of ethical research. In the thesis example, it was vital to communicate how consent was sought and participants were protected, the efforts of the origin researchers to collect data appropriately and avoid harm, the procedures for data management and storage, and how confidentiality was maintained. Further questions for consideration:

(a) How do the data reuse procedures adhere to the consent procedures of the origin research?
(b) How do the data reuse procedures adhere to the data confidentiality procedures of the origin research?

There is a continuing need for informing and educating researchers about practices for mitigating the potential perils alongside promoting benefits of qualitative data reuse studies. It is my hope that this editorial promotes awareness of the qualitative data reuse literature and reflexive practices. As researchers, examiners, and supervisors, we have a wealth of experience to draw upon to support our continuing learning about established and emerging research approaches and practices. It is expected that qualitative data reuse studies will become more prevalent, and it is essential that we embed practices that provide evidence of rigorous and ethical research.

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