

# Working across qualitative longitudinal studies: A feasibility study looking at care and intimacy

The research is being conducted by Professor Rosalind Edwards and Dr Susie Weller from the [University of Southampton](#) and Dr Emma Davidson and Professor Lynn Jamieson from the University of Edinburgh and the [Centre for Research on Families and Relationships](#). It is a part-time project funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) as part of a package of research by the [National Centre for Research Methods](#) due to end in January 2020. Our website <http://bigqlr.ncrm.ac.uk/> has further information including a blog where guest researchers talk about aspects of their related work.

This project is exploring procedures for extending existing good practice in analysing volumes and concatenations of data that qualitative researchers would not normally consider feasible or desirable.

We are exploring

- working with large volumes of qualitative data well beyond the norm and beyond the quantity that a solo researcher or small team could normally read and re-read in order to be faithful to the conventional set of analytical techniques that constitute current good practice
- pooling qualitative data drawn from a number of archived qualitative data sets, hence putting together data that have been framed rather differently by the original research teams. This creates new challenges given that existing epistemological understandings of the process of qualitative researching agree that the context profoundly shapes the data and often emphasise that data are co-constructed by researcher and researched
- pooling multiple qualitative longitudinal data sets. The procedures and principles we've been exploring apply to studies done in one-time period but the longitudinal element introduces additional challenges with the added complications of dealing with waves of data and change over time.

Despite the objections that some qualitative researchers raise concerning secondary analysis and scepticism about why we would want to do this, we argue that the potential gains are significant. There are growing volumes of archived qualitative data that offer quality controlled, well-documented data that are under-used. We argue that there are ways of conducting secondary analysis that enable new questions to be asked and to enable new generalization to be developed. However, this is not an easy or quick process of 'scaling up'.

There is enormous interest in working with large volumes of written and spoken data across many disciplines and an absolutely burgeoning industry of digital text analysis across disciplines using techniques that might loosely be called 'data mining'. Although that terminology 'mining' suggests deep digging, from the perspective of a qualitative researcher the techniques used are often surface skimming often using algorithms that treat the text as a bag of words. What this project has been and is doing is exploring how to bring together and combine techniques of looking across breadth and depth, using an iterative approach. We are seeking a way of working without sacrificing the depth and rigour of conventional qualitative techniques.

In our first paper about the techniques we have been developing (Davidson et al 2018), we've called it breadth-and-depth method. In our description of the steps of our method we use metaphors drawing on analogies with archaeology and talk about moving back and forward between –aerial survey giving a bird's eye view of a very large area, a geophysical survey more carefully mapping the surface, shallow test pits, deep excavation.

Our practical demonstration involves conducting secondary analysis using archived data from the [ESRC Timescapes project](#) and focusing on the substantive topic of care and intimacy, shifts in practices of care and intimacy over time and across the life course. One more general research question we are interested in is whether or not there is convergence in men's and women's practices of care and intimacy overtime.

Note that this is a methodological project funded under the auspices of the ESRC centre NCRM rather than a substantive project; however, we take it for granted that methods of data analysis are for a purpose, value is demonstrated by being fit for purpose, and over abstracted discussion without reference to any substantive content would be less helpful.

**Reference:** Davidson, E., Edwards, R.S., Jamieson, L. & Weller, S. (2018) Big data, qualitative style: a breadth-and-depth method for working with large amounts of secondary qualitative data. *Quality & Quantity*, 1-14.