

# Towards a Discourse of Open Qualitative Research

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# Introduction

- Librarian. Trained as a social anthropologist
- Formed and chaired the **Open Qualitative Research Working Group in 2022** because I observed that:
  - Discourse about open research has been mainly in terms of STEM practices and priorities
  - Priorities of qualitative researchers, particularly ethnographic researchers, generally were absent or glossed over in open research discussions
  - When social sciences are considered, either they're 'stemmified,' homogenised or grouped with the humanities

# OQRWG members

- Prof Matei Candea (Social Anthropology)
- Prof Jennifer Gabrys (Sociology)
- Prof Sara Hennessy (Education)
- Ben Jarman (Final Year PhD Candidate, Criminology)
- Ms Kiera McNeice (Cambridge University Press)
- Dr Curtis Sharma (Research Data Management)
- Dr Meg Westbury (Cambridge University Libraries)

# The report

- **Voice, Representation, Relationships: Report of the Open Qualitative Research Working Group**
  - <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/344820>
  - <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.91979>
- **Key findings:**
  - High-level support for open research amongst qualitative researchers **but...**
  - STEMM-oriented open-data policies can undermine the collaboration and engagement crucial for qualitative research (instead of building trust and transparency)

# This presentation

- **Define** qualitative research: What are common approaches regarding epistemology, practices and quality markers?
- **Discuss:** Where are there tensions with mainstream approaches to open science?
- **Propose:** What are some ways forward at Cambridge and beyond?

# Qualitative research

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# Broadly

- Focus on people's lived experiences and how people meaningfully construct and negotiate social worlds
- Sensitive to local context and aims to illuminate social settings and individuals' day-to-day practices
- Written in natural language and tends to be complex and multi-layered
- Useful for telling detailed and compelling stories about human existence

# Many departments at Cambridge use qualitative research

- Clinical Medicine
- Criminology
- Economics
- Engineering
- Education
- Geography
- History
- Law
- Management Studies
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Social Anthropology
- Sociology



# Methods and data

- Common methods include interviews, focus groups, film, photography, journaling, observation and immersive ethnographic techniques such as participant observation
- Interpretation is fluid and emergent:
  - Research questions morph and crystallise over time
  - Usually do not start with strict hypotheses to prove
- Studies, therefore, are negotiated interpretations *co-produced* with interlocutors

# Ethics of care and collaboration

- Highly attuned to the agency of interlocutors and the need, where necessary, to protect participants' identities and circumstances
- Crucial for establishing and maintaining trust
- Ethics procedures tend to engage participants and communities in discussions about the research process
- Commitment to share research results and continue working with participants and communities over time

# Consent

- Consent is always gained
- However, consent is not always written – oral consent may be more appropriate depending on context
- Always evolving, not contractual

# Small sample sizes, much data

- Sample size determined contextually – no magic number
- Qualitative research produces an abundance of data
- Implications for anonymisation
- Many qualitative researchers feel that the written end product – the discursive accomplishment – may be the best way to describe and protect study participants

# Author positionality and reflexivity

- Transparency and reflexivity about positionality and motivations
- Explicit attempts to minimise the effects of bias on interpretations

# Quality markers

- In-depth, 'thick' or 'luminous' description – detailed, not abstracted
- Intensity of engagement with the data – not superficial
- Participants' sense of the truthfulness of the interpretation
- Ability to spark critical perspectives in readers
- Authors' transparency about their positionality
- Transferability of findings to other contexts and populations

## Not (generally) quality markers

- Sample size – bigger does not necessarily mean better
- Reproducibility and replicability – participants' worldviews are paramount, not that their worldviews can be verified by outside sources

# Tensions

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# FAIR data (1)

- FAIR data is a tenet of mainstream open research discourse
- ‘Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable’
- In the context and spirit of qualitative research:
  - Findable = yes (?)
  - Accessible = yes (?)
  - Interoperable = no
  - Reusable = no (?)

## FAIR data (2)

- The discourse of FAIR data suggests:
  - Data are portable and sharing is straightforward
  - Data carry *inherent* meanings
  - Diverts our attention from ethical considerations
- The focus on FAIR – and policy compliance/return on research investment generally – diverts our attention from creative and affirming possibilities of data sharing and reuse

# Transparency and replicability

- Ontological differences in these terms between STEMM and qualitative research:
  - Transparency in qualitative research is not about interoperability, it's more about researchers' reflexivity
  - In qualitative research/ethnography, *participants' worldviews* are paramount, not necessarily that they can be verified by outside sources

# Archives

- In FAIR data discourse, archives are seen as neutral and reliable repositories of truth but:
  - Is data ours to share?
  - Difficulties of anonymisation
  - Colonial tensions: Logic of extractivism, gatekeeping
  - Divorcing data from context and means of production
  - Control over one's data: surveillance and scrutiny
- Do the requirements of archiving data shape research imaginations by tagging them as 'sensitive' and, therefore, messy?
- Do such requirements create new versions of the project for the archives?

# Consent and anonymisation

- Do contractual paper consent forms undermine trust? In some contexts, yes
- Consent is complicated – what does ‘in perpetuity’ mean for one’s words? What does ‘informed consent’ mean in this context?
- Anonymisation is not a panacea
  - Enormous, never-ending process
  - Arguably, denudes data of richness

# Towards a discourse of open qualitative research

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# Language

- Need a discourse of open research that appreciates the complexity of qualitative data and respects the quality markers of qualitative research
- We need to move away from the *logic* of quantitative inquiry
- Qualitative methods should not be judged by the standards of other methods. They should be judged based on what they're *designed* and *trying* to do

# DEAR data

- Dialogic, Emergent, Abundant, Relational
- Data not easily divorced from context or means of production. Data isn't always portable
- But...
  - There *are* existing discussions in the qualitative research community about data reuse and anonymisation
  - Some participants *want* their names and circumstances widely known!
  - So, it's complicated, and we need to move away from rigid thinking



# 'Open' as a social construct

- As a social construct, open research has a historical context and is entwined in complex and evolving assemblages of political and material factors
- Need to move away from ahistorical and homogenous modes of discussing open research. What is the history of open research? Who does it benefit?
- We need to talk more about critical topics such as historical context, social change, power dynamics, political economy, invisible labour, technology choices/consequences, hidden assumptions and imaginaries of open research (i.e., how open research is conceptualised and portrayed), the politics of archival curation, academics' voice and agency
- Such critical discussions would help engage more qualitative researchers about the principles and merits of open research

# Accountability

- If putting sensitive data into archives isn't always feasible or desirable, we need new approaches to signal accountability in qualitative research:
  - Long, descriptive excerpts of data?
  - Discussions of contrasting experiences amongst interlocutors?
  - Explanations of researchers' positionality?

# Routes towards open research?

- Reflexivity
  - 'Meta' thinking about one's project, but...
    - Possible issues of performance
    - Possible issues of inspection and surveillance
- Re-analysis
  - Bringing fresh thinking and comparable perspectives to archived data

Next steps

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# Rebalance the discourse (1)

- Need to rebalance the discourse at Cambridge and beyond
- Need for more flexible and inclusive language about open research that centres qualitative researchers' concerns
  - Start discussions from the perspective that qualitative data cannot easily or lightly be made open
  - Sharing should be opt-in, not opt-out
  - 'As open as possible, as closed as necessary'

## Rebalance the discourse (2)

- Qualitative researchers *themselves* need to move from ‘grumpy naysayers’ to being engaged with developing policies that align with their commitments to participants and interpretive scholarship – i.e., *to take care of* the data they have co-produced
- We need to shift *our own* conversations from policy compliance and return on investment to creative possibilities
- The open research movement suggests an *audience* for our research workings and outputs. We can embrace that, build on it and set our own discourse and knowledge innovation!

# Other kinds of open to consider

- Bibliodiversity
- Citizen science
- Open metrics
- Open peer reviews
- Credit for contributor roles (CRediT)
- Creative approaches making research/data open

# Promising initiative

## **Fostering Cultures of Open Research (University of Sheffield)**

- Research England grant
- Survey and interviews of qualitative researchers
- <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ihuman/our-work/human-futures/fostering-cultures-open-qualitative-research>



# Thank you

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