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SPECIAL SECTION PAPER

Reasons for qualitative psychologists to share human data

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Abstract

Qualitative data sharing practices in psychology have not developed as rapidly as those in parallel quantitative domains. This is often explained by numerous epistemological, ethical and pragmatic issues concerning qualitative data types. In this article, I provide an alternative to the frequently expressed, often reasonable, concerns regarding the sharing of qualitative human data by highlighting three advantages of qualitative data sharing. I argue that sharing qualitative human data is not by default 'less ethical', 'riskier' and 'impractical' compared with quantitative data sharing, but in some cases *more* ethical, *less* risky and *easier* to manage for sharing because (1) informed consent can be discussed, negotiated and validated; (2) the shared data can be curated by special means; and (3) the privacy risks are mainly local instead of global. I hope this alternative perspective further encourages qualitative psychologists to share their data when it is epistemologically, ethically and pragmatically possible.

KEYWORDS
epistemology, ethics, meta science, open science, practice, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Data sharing, that is, making research data available for reinvestigation and reuse, is a core element of modern open science practice. In psychology, despite the ongoing replication crisis and increasing openness calls, keeping qualitative data sets closed remains the norm. For instance, the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology recently dedicated a special journal section to asking, 'Is It Time to Share Qualitative Research Data?" (DuBois, Strait, & Walsh, 2018), with the lead authors calling for "a change in our default assumption regarding qualitative data sharing' (DuBois, Walsh, & Strait, 2018, p. 415). Despite the increasing discussion, open qualitative data sets are for the most part not demanded by funders, journals and review boards. The guidelines of the *British Journal of Social Psychology* also state that 'there are no clear standards of how qualitative data should be made public' (BJSP, 2022). Although these lacking standards

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are clearly related to the variety of what 'qualitative' itself is, it is also important to acknowledge the conditions through which standard development has been possible in non-qualitative domains. To highlight important differences, I will occasionally refer to the developments of quantitative data sharing as well. I do not, however, present quantitative data sharing as a role model of what qualitative data sharing should be, but rather as a parallel, complementary practice to work with.

Compared with quantitative data sharing (Tedersoo et al., 2021), making qualitative data sets open has lagged due to numerous epistemological, ethical and pragmatic issues. For instance, it has been argued that the data produced in a reflexive qualitative setting cannot be separated from its unique context, due to which sharing qualitative data might be epistemologically complicated or impossible (see Guishard, 2018; Mauthner & Parry, 2009; Moore, 2007). Furthermore, sharing qualitative data has been considered potentially unethical, as the details that characterize qualitative data may put participant (and researcher) privacy at exceptional risk (see Broom et al., 2009; McCurdy & Ross, 2018; Parry & Mauthner, 2004). Furthermore, related to both the above, sharing qualitative data has been deemed pragmatically challenging, as making the data interpretable for reuse as well as removing personal identifiers can be highly time-consuming, usually entailing professional data repositories and special frameworks (see Branney et al., 2017; Neale & Bishop, 2011; Roller & Lavrakas, 2018).

Considering that qualitative data ranges from miscellaneous image and sound formats to text documents, among others, I highlight that most of these data sharing issues apply explicitly to *human data*: data regarding human individuals, with which psychological sciences typically work. The qualitative nature of the data, representing human participants, is commonly cited as a barrier that warrants extreme attention and care and which ultimately leads many researchers to err on the side of cautious non-sharing (for recent developments, see Alexander et al., 2020; Chauvette et al., 2019; Feldman & Shaw, 2019). On the other hand, because not sharing qualitative data is still the norm (DuBois, Strait, & Walsh, 2018), it is also possible that many researchers, until now, have not *chosen* non-sharing, but rather did not consider sharing as an option to begin with. Such caveats further highlight the need for more dialogue regarding both options.

Several previously established reasons, most of which apply to quantitative research as well, speak for the need to share qualitative data. As Bishop (2009) observes, 'most codes prescribe that participants should be exempt from unnecessary intrusion [and] if data already exist to address a research question, further collection of primary data could be seen as intrusive' (p. 259). This concerns elusive populations in particular, the study of which is often laborious for both researchers and participants (see Grinyer, 2009; Long-Sutehall et al., 2011). Likewise, considering that the main reason for many people to participate in research as volunteers is the 'wish to advance science' (Kuula, 2011; see also Bourne & Robson, 2015), optimizing their contributions for scientific progress, by enabling reuse, can also in some instances be considered the most ethical line of data management (see Clark, 2010). Participants should not be perceived solely through their potential vulnerabilities, but also as actors with agency to be respected (see Schulz, 2020). In the end, making data securely reusable will ensure that the valuable materials that researchers and participants collaborated to produce will aid future generations in the collective enterprise of cumulative knowledge and science.

In this article, I continue from the above general reasons supporting data sharing and provide three more, which explicitly apply to coproduced qualitative human data. Starting with the premise that many forms of such data *do* involve distinct risks that need special attention and careful management, I shed light on viewpoints that demonstrate how the generation of these qualitative data also involves potential sharing advantages in practice.

1. Informed consent can be discussed, negotiated and validated.
2. Shared data can be curated.
3. Privacy risks are mainly local instead of global.

To be clear, my goal is not to offer new guidelines or recommendations. Rather, what the argued viewpoints collectively illustrate is that sharing qualitative human data is not by default 'less ethical', 'riskier' and ‘impractical’ compared with quantitative data sharing, but in some cases, qualitative human data sets can be *more* ethical, *less* risky and *easier* to manage for sharing.

Even though qualitative data sharing is a topic of numerous fields, there are reasons for addressing the issue especially in the psychological sciences. Haverkamp (2005) reminds us that psychological qualitative research with human participants involves a fiduciary relationship: one of trust, in which a party with greater power or influence accepts a responsibility for the other, as is present in clinical psychological practice with clients. According to her, hence, there is a distinct need for an ethic of ‘trustworthiness’ for qualitative psychologists (with psychological power and influence) in relation to participants who agree to share their lives for research. I agree that psychology, with related social sciences, does invite participants to share data that entail special professional reflexivity. This reflexivity should naturally carry over to the issues of data sharing as well.

Following the above, a brief note on social psychology: even though psychological disciplines with qualitative sections may differ in their foci, the key methodological approaches and their related human participant data remain similar. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, for example, provides an explicit discussion of qualitative social psychology and its recent key methods, such as conversation analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis and thematic analysis (Brown & Locke, 2011). Considering the widespread application of these approaches, a search for differences in qualitative data sharing, such as between social psychology and clinical or educational psychology, would move the attention away from the questions that matter most. As long as similar participant data and analytical approaches are applied, our conversations benefit from being held across disciplines. This does not mean dismissing critical differences, such as addressing comparative psychology with non-human subject data separately, which I elaborate on in the sections that follow.

The content of this article applies explicitly to those qualitative human data that are produced collaboratively by researchers and participants in dynamic social contexts. I focus on interview and focus group data, which are common in psychological sciences, with references drawn from other qualitative approaches as well (e.g. data in natural settings with researcher involvement). These data types occur in almost all social sciences and beyond, thus making the discussion relevant across fields. The space does not allow discussing other types of data (collection and generation), such as those of naturally occurring online data (see Williams et al., 2017), which I look forward to being addressed in future studies.

Ten years ago, the Finnish Social Science Archive collaborated with four research teams and re-contacted 169 previous study participants who had shared their life stories and personal views (Kuula, 2011). After asking for the participants' permissions to share the related qualitative data post hoc, 165 consented to share (see also Campbell et al., 2007). The Timescapes Archive, in turn, currently shares 14 large longitudinal qualitative datasets involving sensitive topics such as health (https://timescapes.researchdata.leeds.ac.uk), while other qualitative studies from the United Kingdom have anonymized explicit professional data, such as parliamentarians' personal views (Lawrence et al., 2017). Examples like this imply that many of the sharing issues can be overcome; that is, data sharing is often *possible* if sufficient expertise, motivation and resources are available. Because the required efforts are hardly trivial and presumably discarded (and undertaken) after careful risk–benefit analysis, discussing benefits should be as valuable as stressing costs and risks.

HALF-EMPTY AND HALF-FULL: THE QUALITY OF DATA AS A REASON TO SHARE

Qualitative human data have been shared for more than a hundred years. For instance, anthropologists have shared fieldnotes, films and photographs since the birth of their field (see Broom et al., 2009; Mauthner & Parry, 2009; Wutich & Bernard, 2016). However, the current standards of scholarly ethics differ from the times of early anthropology. Health and other types of sensitive data, which are commonly part of psychological research, entail several data management steps that can make their sharing practically impossible. Although new infrastructures and knowledge regarding qualitative data sharing have been steadily emerging at least for two decades (Corti, 2006), the challenges are still considered insurmountable to a degree that very few qualitative data sets in human research end up being shared (Tsai et al., 2016), let alone reused (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017). Numerous challenges have been identified in qualitative human data sharing (for a review, see Bishop, 2009), but the present article focuses on three of these, arguably the most central ones: *consent*, *content* and *risks*.

Consent as a challenge

Although informed consent remains the 'cornerstone' of human research ethics (Xu et al., 2020), plenty of criticism has emerged regarding the concept throughout decades (also from public health perspectives, see Verity & Nicoll, 2002). In an insightful discussion of the ethical dilemmas in qualitative family research, LaRossa et al. (1981) list issues related to informed consent. Because qualitative research typically involves several unstructured elements, participants can rarely be informed in complete detail of what the study involves. For instance, unexpected themes can be found in semi-structured interviews, and the interview setting itself may involve events (like an interrupting phone call) that lead the interviewee to reveal unconsented information. Because the analysis of qualitative data is often exploratory, the final findings may also turn out surprising to a degree that potentially give some participants second thoughts about their involvement. While all these points apply to qualitative research in general, each concern remerges in sharing, as researchers assess whether the participant was informed properly of what is being shared.

In line with the above, Richards and Schwartz (2002) discuss qualitative health research and highlight the need for consent to be managed as a 'process' rather than as a single event. They refer to the above-mentioned unexpected elements of qualitative research practice and propose keeping in contact with participants so that they have the option to withdraw if new details regarding the study emerge, or if they for any reason consider the reuse of their stored data harmful. In qualitative studies, participants can also sometimes be involved in the planning, implementation and dissemination of research, but consenting to such processes is not always straightforward. As Kaiser (2009) notes, many researchers lack a standardized process for obtaining additional consent, for which it is unlikely to be obtained. She stresses the need to inform the participants of the diverse foreseeable uses of the data as well as their possible re-users and readers and as a solution, suggests an approach to consent where the participants are provided with *multiple* consent options. This naturally complicates the management of consent throughout the study, and communicating such complexities to ethics committees remains a common challenge to qualitative researchers (Smette, 2019).

In a recent interview study with eight scholars having varying experiences with shared qualitative data, Branney et al. (2019) illustrate the operation of dynamic consent in practice and identify consent as one of the key themes in qualitative data sharing. As an implication, they encourage data-sharing researchers to take into consideration the specific *type* of data and their *options* of sharing (e.g. different types come with different risks), the *stakes* and *accountabilities* of both participants and researchers (e.g. how does the relationship affect consenting) and the optimal means for *negotiating* consent with the participants (e.g. at which steps of the research process). These domains are revisited during secondary analysis, as researchers assess whether their motivations regarding the data cohere with the participants' consent. Taken together, the above nuances demonstrate how consent management in qualitative research entails care and ongoing consideration, in both sharing and reusing data sets.

Consent as an advantage

As proper communication of consent to research participants remains a major challenge across fields and methods (Gallagher et al., 2010; Miller & Boulton, 2007), the benefits in the consent procedures of qualitative human data collection should be given more attention, especially in data sharing. When the participants and researchers operate in close social contact, consent can take a deep, dynamic and more transparent form. Instead of relying on a one-off instance where the participant is provided with large amounts of complex information about their rights and the future usage of the data, the researcher can do the following: discuss the forms of consent provided for the participant, (re)negotiate the consent along with the development of the study and validate the nature of the consent at the end of the study, if applicable.

In research where the participants are in *indirect* contact with the research team, the situation rarely encourages discussion, especially if the default option of participation is anonymity (by contacting the research team, the participant usually exposes their identity). In social qualitative research, in turn, the participant has already decided to enter a disclosed relationship with the researcher and a degree of trust is to be established (Haverkamp, 2005). This enables the researcher to ensure that the participant is properly informed and understands the information by, for example, going through the consent form together, allowing the participant to ask questions and using the researcher's own intuition to (re)assess the participant's understanding (Nusbaum et al., 2017). As such, consent in social qualitative settings could be more genuine: participants may withdraw after being better informed, and instead of needing to interpret written (often legal) text, they should have the opportunity to make the researcher explain. Non-verbal communication can be relevant in assessing the participant's evolving feelings, for instance, in cases when participants might be embarrassed or for other reasons cannot verbally communicate their will (for examples of interpreting non-verbal signals in a consent process, see Smette, 2019). Although customized consent assessment adds further interpretive responsibilities on the qualitative researcher's already-heavy interpretive workload (Neusar, 2014), the benefit of the trade-off can be a more authentic form of participant consent.

The openness of the qualitative situation further allows negotiating and renegotiating the discussed consent, assuming the participant is not anonymized. In the spirit of 'consent as a process' (Richards & Schwartz, 2002), strategies of continuous consent are gathering increasing acceptance, focusing more on the respect of participant autonomy in the research relationship (see Stutchbury & Fox, 2009). Klykken (2021) illustrates these strategies by showing how 'reflexive engagement with the principle of informed consent [is] done through the situated ethical work of explicitly and implicitly (re)negotiated consent and dissent' (p. 13). During the research, participants may signal their willingness to keep sharing certain details, which the researcher can thus negotiate with the participant to exclude and include along the developments of the study. For example, in one case,

> only moments after I placed the camera with a group of students, one student got up and sat by another table. The student had formally consented to participate, but this withdrawal from the recorded situation could be interpreted as a non-verbal indication of dissent.
>
> (Klykken, 2021, p. 9)

Instead of invoking the printed words in a consent form, qualitative human researchers often have the option to *update* consent in the light of new information.

Finally, following Kaiser's (2009) idea of the 'post-interview confidentiality form', qualitative researchers may also validate the participant's consent at the end of the study when all (potentially unexpected) information regarding the study has been collected and analysed. This includes the details regarding data sharing, which may (even with a careful data management plan) evolve during the research process. This is an opportunity to supplement the participant with the evolved details of the study and the role of their data in it. Of note, all the above negotiations, if planned to be done, should be agreed by the participant at the beginning of research, as continuous interaction can also be interpreted as making further demands (Grinyer, 2009). For those participants who wish to be comprehensively informed about their participation and data sharing, the qualitative research settings can provide a more ethically robust platform of consent.

To ensure the above, researchers need to critically reflect on power dynamics, with awareness that participants, regardless of being informed, might be discouraged to demand alternative arrangements. As suggested by a recent qualitative review regarding public attitudes towards health data sharing: 'rather than focussing on which consent mechanisms are most favoured by members of the public, it may be more valuable to focus on how relationships of trust are built up' (Aitken et al., 2016, p. 19). Qualitative studies, with participants in direct social contact with researchers, usually have the pragmatic advantage of being able to work towards good relationships of trust.

Content as a challenge

For a long time, qualitative data have been considered epistemologically different from quantitative data (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Although different methodological approaches and individuals can vary greatly in their epistemological positions, qualitative psychology is often characterized by many social constructionist premises—the multiplicity of truth, unavoidability of biases and so on—rather than the positivistic ideals of discoverable objectivity (see Schwab & Syed, 2015). In other words, 'researcher distance or neutrality is not only impossible, but completely defeats the epistemological purpose' (Mason, 2002, p. 92). Or, as is maintained by one of the most popular approaches to qualitative psychology, reflexive thematic analysis: '"proper" qualitative research dare not contain even a whiff of positivism' (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591).

Unlike in quantitative research where 'distance from the data' is often considered an epistemological *benefit*, in non-positivist qualitative research distance can *undermine* the method. As these positions are not always mutually exclusive—for example, different epistemologies may be useful at different stages of research—both sides need to be considered in secondary analyses.

A frequent argument of those working with qualitative human data is that secondary use could be blocked, complicated and even misdirected by the re-user's lack of contextual knowledge, which can only be held by the original, data-collecting researcher (see Berg, 2008; Moore, 2007). For instance, body language that can be obvious for the interviewing researcher may be impossible to include in the transcript that is generated by an assistant based on an audio recording. Because parts of the communicated information are lacking, tones of language such as sarcasm may be impossible to interpret and lead to flawed interpretations. For any qualitative content to be worthwhile in scientific reuse, careful data processing is required in collaboration with the collecting researcher and other involved parties.

Another aspect that separates qualitative human data from most quantitative data forms is the potentially unpredictable 'intimacy' or 'sensitivity' of content (Kuula, 2011). Whereas the nature of quantitative data can be predefined somewhat clearly by closed-ended response options, open-ended responses give the participants the option to share delicate and highly personal information to a different degree. Disclosing private details regarding one's health, political opinions and sexuality, among other such themes, yields data that are usually subject to special management requirements (e.g. the European Union's *General Data Protection Regulation*, Art. 9). Although the same regulatory conditions apply to quantitative data, (pre)determining the level of sensitivity in qualitative human data can be more difficult due to their less structured nature (see Connor et al., 2018).

As a result of the above, many experts remain sceptical about qualitative data sharing. For instance, Broom et al. (2009) carried out an interview study regarding qualitative data archiving/sharing with 37 related experts, and one of their three key findings was specifically a group of concerns related to the privacy of information. In addition to the information associated with the participants' privacy, the experts also voiced issues regarding their own privacy and rights as coproducers of data (for meta-data sharing, see Branney et al., 2022). Taken together, qualitative human data, due to their less controllable content, are generally considered to involve more interpretive and regulatory challenges in reuse.

Content as an advantage

In human data sharing, it is common to remove participant details such as exact age and residency that, when combined, significantly contribute to the potential identification of participants (Chalmers & Muir, 2003; Wiles et al., 2008). In research where the participants are not interacted directly with, as in online surveys, the removal of such details remains one of the few means to protect participants from being identified when sharing the data sets. In direct qualitative human research, in turn—where the researcher and participant should have established trust in a social context—the data may be collaboratively curated to find the most optimal shape for sharing. As the saying goes, qualitative data are not *collected* but *created*. Although not all research designs allow collaborative engagement with the participants, such efforts have become an asset for many qualitative studies.

In focus groups and interviews, a general term covering most of the above co-curatorial work is 'member checking' (Birt et al., 2016; Harvey, 2015; Tong et al., 2007). By contacting the participants after initial data collection, the researchers can supplement, triangulate and validate the data with the participants' follow-up input, which may also contribute to the data sharing process. For instance, transcribed documents can be returned to the participants for assessing the quality of the transcripts and making sure that details the participants do not wish to share will not be included as such in the archived documents. A case in Carlson's (2010) member checking is illustrative:

> When I received the checked transcripts back from Barry, I discovered he had made scores of editing notes, often correcting his original grammar. He had also added new items of information and deleted other things that I had thought were relevant, but apparently he did not.
>
> (p. 1107)

In the above instance, Barry's edits were so major that the researcher had to re-consider how to interpret them in the light of the original data. At risk of stating the obvious, utmost care is needed in deciding how follow-up input will be taken into consideration, such as by acknowledging that participants' opinions may change over time and forming a view based on *all* data (see Candela, 2019; Goldblatt et al., 2011). Researchers and participants may choose to exclude some parts from the shared transcripts to protect a participant, yet apply the knowledge generated in those parts in their analysis. On the other hand, the participants may request some parts to be removed from all analyses, in which case the researcher must assess the request against the negotiated consent, their personal understanding of the data and the overall context in which knowledge is being co-produced (see Irwin, 2013; Wiles et al., 2006). This is consistent with the previously discussed issues of epistemology. Sometimes knowledge is developed beyond sharable data, and this must be accepted; nonetheless, being able to locate different epistemological *levels*—including sharable and un-shareable sources of knowledge—is part of the qualitative researcher's interpretive work. The opportunity for the participants to further reflect on their own responses has also been found to be beneficial for the participants themselves (Harper & Cole, 2012).

In an oft-cited review of qualitative research validation strategies, Morse (2015) states unequivocally that the 'researcher's background in theory and research methods must outrank the participant as a judge … therefore, member checking as a strategy is not recommended' (p. 1216). For Morse, however, the object of assessment is validity and not the data as such. In data sharing, member checking remains a powerful tool that enables respecting the participant's evolving understanding of consent and working for solutions that, at the same time, allow the sharing of the valuable data for secondary use. Although straightforward removal of participant-selected details remains an option—the researcher must then assess case-by-case how they take this into consideration in analysis—it is also possible to negotiate alternative ways for expressing relevant information. In such instances, it is important to mark the shared transcripts accordingly, including meta-data, so that in reuse the edited or omitted parts can be distinguished and critically assessed. As Fielding (2000) stressed already more than two decades ago: 'it is very important that archived materials include as much information about the context of the original data collection as possible' (p. 23).

One means for reducing the risk for participant identification when sharing 'as much as possible' can be *data abstraction*, that is, replacing specific (potentially identifiable) details with more abstract terminology. For instance, a section in a transcript where a participant describes being 25 years old could be rephrased as 'in their 20s' (with appropriate indication of edits). Because in qualitative human research *how* things are told typically represents the most important content, details such as exact ages, locations, names, times and many others can often be abstracted with minimal loss. Even though similar strategies can be used in quantitative data sharing (e.g. turning exact respondent ages into age groups), the fundamental nature of statistical analyses (e.g. replicability-wise) and their lack of member checking options makes data abstraction generally more useful in qualitative research. Sometimes direct or indirect personal identifiers may be an explicit subject of qualitative analysis, for example, in conversation or discourse analysis. In such cases, researchers may consider applying 'noise' (common in quantitative data sharing, see European Commission, 2014) in a special way—as 'qualitative synthetization'—by modifying the data so that content maintains the meaning of the original, but is disconnected from the participant.

Again, many scholars might consider the above curatorial processes useless due to the fundamental epistemological inability for secondary users to understand the data in their full context. Referring to qualitative data sharing, Feldman and Shaw (2019) have recently expressed scepticism along these lines, being further afraid that 'if viewed merely as discrete bits of information, any assessment of the claims made by the original author are vulnerable to being judged as inadequate' (p. 712). It is the dialogue of adequacy, however, that has sparked scientific progress for centuries. Although qualitative methods are often singled out as operating with plural epistemic principles, these principles cannot exclude the possibility of inadequacy—like all researchers, qualitative researchers also sometimes make mistakes that can lead to inadequate outcomes. All findings from research data are a construction that must be conveyable to others (Bishop, 2006), and investigating data from multiple viewpoints simprovides opportunities for the progress that defines cumulative science.

Risks

The risks related to sharing research data can be divided into two connected but distinct domains: probability and damage caused to participants (see also Bahn & Weatherill, 2013). In qualitative human data sharing, the former is often considered to be greater than those in the quantitative domain. Parry and Mauthner (2004), for instance, support the above by describing how it is more difficult to conceal the identity of qualitative research participants than it is of those from quantitative research. As a result, the 'measures taken to prepare qualitative data for archiving, including preservation of respondent anonymity and removal of key identifying characteristics, may compromise the integrity and quality of the dataset' (p. 148).

The above concerns dovetail with the previously discussed concerns regarding context, which cannot be completely reproduced by an anonymized transcript or other documents that are abstractions of the ephemeral multisensory data, which one or more researchers co-produced. Even though current technology would enable storing and sharing these data in richer forms such as audio and video recordings, the risks they involve are typically deemed to exceed the benefits, not least because many regional guidelines consider such data as automatically involving personal identifiers.

In concert with the discussed notion of qualitative content being 'personal' or 'sensitive' in a special way, it is possible that, in case of a security leak, the damages caused by unintended publicization of qualitative human data are also different. Such differences would be associated even more strongly with the specific type of content, however. When the content poses an increased risk, researchers can give special attention to both the means of collecting and storing the data. Mealer and Jones (2014), for instance, used the telephone as their medium for interviewing individuals exposed to trauma, which allowed the participants to share their experiences without being visually exposed to the interviewer. Notably, similar risks of psychological stress also apply to the researchers who carry out difficult emotional work in processing sensitive human experiences as interviewers and in other roles (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

Risks of different modes

Despite the researchers' best efforts to secure anonymity for participants, 'anonymity' is not binary in practice but scales from strong to weak. Rocher et al. (2019) recently estimated that combining 15 attributes would be enough to reidentify an 'anonymous' American respondent in a dataset with 99.98% accuracy, and even fewer attributes are needed for lower accuracy especially in groups such as older people, which can be relatively small. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that 'it is more difficult to conceal the identity of qualitative as opposed to quantitative research participants [because] the *level of detail* in these combined datasets renders identification of respondents easy' (Parry & Mauthner, 2004, p. 144, 147, emphasis added).

Next to observations like the above that typically focus on the strengths and weaknesses of anonymity, the different *modes* of anonymity are less often discussed. In one useful study, Tolich (2004) separates 'external confidentiality'—that researchers do not reveal participants' identities to externals without consent—from 'internal confidentiality', meaning the 'ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other' (p. 101). The latter, while not limited to qualitative studies, represents a critical instance that scholars using qualitative human data struggle with more often than their quantitative peers. To further illustrate these methodologically specific differences, I argue there is also a need to distinguish between *local* and *global* risks related to human data, the former of which is more (but not solely) associated with qualitative data. In this context, 'risks' represent all unintended disclosures of identity and as such, may involve different degrees as well as types of adverse outcomes.

By local risks, I refer to that 'level of detail', which many scholars and stakeholders consider problematic especially when it comes to sharing qualitative human data. Narratives about one's personal experiences, events that have taken place in a community and curiosities that are known only by a few are examples where pieces of information can immediately reveal the participant's identity to a reader who belongs to a local group. Notably, these readers are not limited to those involved in the research environment (as in Tolich, 2004). Locals with the capacity to easily identify a participant of a qualitative study are very few and, in the long run, their number will unlikely increase due to the ephemeral and historical nature of the events that constitute the primary risk for revealing participants' identities. For example, if a participant shares details regarding an event that took place between three people, these three will remain as the group with a high probability to identity the participant, and the probability for this group to expand (e.g. by details being retold) is relatively small. Unless there are reasons to believe in special motivations for others to seek out the data—for example, if the data concern victims of abuse or political targets—local risks can be significantly smaller than global ones.

By global risks, in turn, I refer to the (often demographic) attributes that participants of especially quantitative studies disclose as part of their participation. When such attributes are explicitly collected and listed for each participant in a shared data set, the related risks are less about a selected group of (local) people being able to connect these data to the participant, and more about the available computational methods being able to reconstruct a profile that anyone with the right tools can connect to the participant with a high probability. Because these methodological developments are rapid and unpredictable (Nature, 2019), global risks are less temporally controllable. Specifically, a data set with specific human attributes that has had strong anonymity in the past may have weak anonymity today.

Of course, local and global risks are not mutually exclusive and all human data sets involve both to some degree. Nevertheless, the risks associated with qualitative human data sets, which are co-produced in social researcher–participant interaction, are distinctly more local than global. Even though these risks may be more immediate in the sense that the right local persons may have a high probability of being able to identify the participant, the number of these persons (and thus the probability of critical data access) is significantly smaller; moreover, the risks related to the development of new methodological means for combining participant attributes into identifiable profiles, based on recent developments, are of smaller scale. Accordingly, when discussing the risks related to sharing qualitative human data, it is important to recognize that the concept of risk is not merely a matter of “high” and “low” but also of *mode*, and in some instances, the local risk types common to qualitative data forms may be lesser than the global risks related to many quantitative datasets.

It is part of the researcher's ethical responsibility to inform the participants of the risks that participation involves. This means that studies with human participants can benefit from assessing both local and global risks, respectively, and integrating these assessments with the consent procedure. In doing so (see Consent as an advantage section), the qualitative researcher can negotiate with the participants—before, during and after data generation—the level of risk they are comfortable with. In some cases, even one person being capable of identifying a participant may be enough to warrant limited sharing, highly controlled sharing or non-sharing. Instead of simply claiming the data to be anonymous, the qualitative researcher, having established trust, is in a privileged position to communicate to the participants about the degrees and modes of anonymity, the risks of which may be perceived very differently by individuals.

CONCLUSIONS

The increasing encouragements for data sharing have significantly improved the quality of research across psychological and other fields, resulting in higher levels of reliability, replicability and transparency in general. While not all of these improvements are relevant to qualitative researchers whose value concepts tend to be partially different (Kapiszewski & Karcher, 2021; Stenbacka, 2001), this should not discourage qualitative scholars from pursuing transparency in data sharing. Some forms of replicability *do* apply to qualitative research as well (see Goodman et al., 2016; Peels & Bouter, 2018; see also Pownall, 2022), and as Bishop (2005) has noted,

> transparency makes it possible to reveal the deep expertise and considered judgement researchers put into difficult choices … New and experienced researchers alike can benefit from this kind of scrutiny of archival materials.
>
> (p. 334–5)

As a counterargument, some qualitative researchers might consider data sharing to be explicitly harmful, because it allows researchers with inappropriate goals or knowledge to report findings that misdirect scientific progress—in fact, such arguments have been made also in the most positivistic corners of research (Devereaux et al., 2016; Longo & Drazen, 2016). For these kinds of arguments to be properly weighed, better pragmatic tools are needed for separating respectable scientific disagreements from ‘misdirecting’ reuse. Because ‘correctly directed’ reuse, by definition, contributes to cumulative science and can reduce future human harm or even save lives, the decision to not share is rarely ethically neutral. Martone et al. (2018) rightly point out: the ‘issue of who is harmed by sharing data needs to be balanced against who is harmed by not sharing data’ (p. 117).

Likewise, several pushbacks with epistemological, ethical and pragmatic concerns have contributed to qualitative human data sets remaining largely unshared. Many of these concerns are valid and scholars need to keep assessing the trade-offs of sharing all kinds of data, usually on a case-by-case basis through an ethics of practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). With respect to the sensitivity needed to assess the shareability of each data set, my goal has not been to produce recommendations, but rather to highlight that sharing qualitative human data is not by default ‘less ethical’, ‘riskier’ and ‘impractical’ compared with quantitative data sharing. Rather, in some cases, qualitative human data sets can be more ethical, less risky and easier to manage for sharing. In this article, the claim was supported by three advantages of qualitative data sharing:

- In qualitative research with direct participant contact, informed consent can be discussed, negotiated and validated—an option that is rarely available in quantitative data collection.
- In qualitative research with direct participant contact, the researcher–participant relationship enables tools such as member checking, which can be assets in data sharing.
- In qualitative research, the risks related to participant privacy are essentially *local* rather than *global*, that is, endemic knowledge is usually necessary to reidentify participants.

Despite the above advantages of qualitative data sharing and its numerous general benefits—for example, increasing research transparency, reducing participant labour and archiving valuable materials for future historic or scientific use—it is also important to acknowledge the nontrivial labour in the process. Whereas numeric data are relatively easy to share and interpret across languages, lexical and other qualitative data often require laborious anonymization, back-translation and repository collaboration (Karhulahti, 2022). Due to these costs, the benefits of data sharing for qualitative psychologists should be great enough to justify the effort.

Additionally, it could be argued that the social relationships that qualitative psychologists have with their participants are, in some cases, possible *exactly because* those data are not shared. This is a valid concern; however, allowing participants to choose their preferred type of consent (to not share) will be efficient in preventing selection bias—keeping in mind that the same problem also applies to other forms of human data. As it remains for each research team to carry out their own study-specific decisions, I hope this article has contributed to the discussion in a way that helps researchers make better cost–benefit analyses.

As a limitation, the nature of this article did not allow the discussion of multiple distinct data types and the methods of their creation. For this reason, some readers may question the generalizability of my conclusions. That said, it is unlikely that qualitative research or data management can ever find a one-size-fits-all solution. For instance, qualitative data that have been created with a positivistic epistemology and realist ontology arguably entail a different approach to sharing versus data coming from a constructivist epistemology and pluralist ontology—*how* the data are shared (and *should* they be shared to begin with) remain to be answered differently by researchers with different philosophies of science (e.g. Mauthner & Parry, 2009). Future research would do well to examine the nuances of sharing diverse qualitative data types, as they are being generated in different epistemological and ontological contexts.

Finally, many national archives have recently made significant progress in supporting qualitative scholars with data sharing challenges by offering their experience and infrastructures (Bishop & Kuula-Luumi, 2017). National archives, however, tend to be limited to local use (e.g. for linguistic reasons). Efforts should be directed towards building more global archival networks that enable scholars from all backgrounds and cultural groups equal opportunities for data sharing.

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The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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