

## The Value of Qualitative Data and their Archiving: the French Situation

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**Key words:**

creating data,  
preservation,  
archiving,  
producers, re-  
using qualitative  
data, national  
scientific archive

**Abstract:** Much qualitative data has been collected in France since the 1960s, helping to understand real lives lived by real people. They help to grasp the social density of cultures, social bonds, social strategies. They allow feelings and values to be expressed and produce a "not-simplistic" picture of social reality. Most "producers" had strong personal links with the data they created, but they were never encouraged nor helped to archive them with the result that they are poorly preserved, hard to locate, harder to access, and often lost or even destroyed.

CRIBIER analyzes the types of data collected in various disciplinary fields since the 1960s, their criticisms, and the many reasons to preserve them—among others their complementarity with quantitative data.

Collecting this rare and precious material is and will remain useful for several disciplines for understanding our societies. It is necessary to document, preserve, and take stock of these data, creating a national site, but also helping researchers to prepare their data and find the right archives in which they would be safe and useful.

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The Ministry of research asked us to reflect on ways of preserving biographical type qualitative data from research projects conducted on populations living in France during the past forty years.<sup>1</sup> Such data sources give insight into "ordinary society," and make it possible to keep track of the life experiences of the subjects, "what they made out of their lives, and what life made of them" (CRIBIER 1978), and to understand social change. When we know how to question people, and how to listen to them, what they give us is "real lives lived

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1 This work was done with Élise FELLER. We learned a great deal from our colleagues in Britain and Switzerland, who agreed to share their experience with us. The report to the Ministry was finished in March 2003. It will be published on our website ([http://www.iresco.fr/labos/lasmas/accuell\\_f.htm](http://www.iresco.fr/labos/lasmas/accuell_f.htm)) in June 2005.

by real people," so that "a whole social world is set into motion" (SCHWARTZ 1990a). [1]

Because during these inquiries, ordinary people were interviewed, the interviews were not systematically preserved. Neither the universities, nor the CNRS, nor the organizations that funded them were able to preserve them or encourage their "producers" to archive them. Universities had neither space nor time, the research groups of the CNRS were temporary, the funding organizations—public or private—were never interested in these raw materials, never asked for them, and were, thus, not concerned with what was to become of them. [2]

We are now powerlessly witnessing the disappearance of a great deal of this wealth of information. Qualitative surveys that researchers would have liked to use (because they had heard about them or read a publication relating to them) are hard to locate, harder to consult, and often lost or even destroyed; not to mention all the research projects whose existence is practically unknown. [3]

This is an unfortunate situation and a considerable waste of source material, which is still all too rare and would be invaluable for all social sciences. Such data are a legacy common to several disciplines, regardless of the varied background and discipline of those who produced them. Interviews deal with topics that are common to all the social sciences: work, family life, residential history, how we relate to places, social bonds, ways of life, culture, and gender. Pooling all this material should help develop a multidisciplinary view that promotes the inventive thinking we need to understand our societies—for these are no simpler and no less diverse than those of the past. They remain as opaque to themselves as they were in the time of DURKHEIM. Our societies need the social sciences. [4]

## 1. The Modern Qualitative Data Collected in France

From the 1960s, a new type of data emerged in relation to French society due to developments in the humanistic sciences and advances in recording techniques. Two historians have played a pioneering part: Jacques OZOUF collected data from 4,000 former teachers, starting in 1961, and Philippe JOUTARD explored the collective memory of the Protestants of the Cèvennes in *La légende des Camisards* at the end of the 1960s. Many subsequent works related to the history of the women, borrowing from other social sciences a life course perspective (THEBAUD 2001, p.56). [5]

From the 1960s and 1970s, the great ethnological investigations in the Bretagne, Auvergne, and the Bourgogne studied continuities and changes in rural France. The memory and culture of the world of workers and craftsmen, turned upside down by economic and technical evolution, also aroused the interest of ethnologists and sociologists.<sup>2</sup> [6]

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2 Daniel BERTAUX made a pioneering study on bakers.

Today, more and more material has been collected in France, and in many different ways. Testimonials have been collected in many disciplines but the most frequent by far are those by sociologists. Many works, in particular in sociology, demography, and gerontology, can draw on two approaches, quantitative and qualitative, so that their materials constitute a "unit" in a scientific sense, including data files, oral investigations, images, statistics, or qualitative investigations intended to prepare a large-scale questionnaire and/or to interpret questionnaire responses. [7]

Beyond academia, gathering and transmitting accounts has become a matter of duty for active citizenship. This is true for memories of the Resistance and for the fragile experience of exclusion, accounts of which are often brought to light and kept by associations. ATD Fourth World,<sup>3</sup> whose volunteers listen to and support families in severe distress, has published a collection of accounts called "La grande pauvreté à voix haute" (Voices of extreme poverty) (ATD Quart Monde Provence 1987). The Groupe Sida Mémoire collects and preserves accounts given by AIDS sufferers through interviews, diaries and personal correspondence. The aim is not only to safeguard the "memory" of those whom society has not been able to care for, or to make readers aware of the lives of the dispossessed or those who suffer and die from AIDS, but it is also to train active association members so they are better prepared to handle new forms of illness, poverty and exclusion. [8]

## 2. The Value of Qualitative Data

Qualitative information is valuable in that it helps to grasp the full social density of cultures, social bonds, and the complex strategies of subjects and groups within societies where, for nearly two centuries, people's main concern has been to manage their lives (GIRARD & ROUSSEL 1982). The qualitative approach is a sensitive form of knowledge. It penetrates the intimacy of the social actor's experience of living, and it is attentive to words and to the ways of being of those who are speaking. Because this approach allows feelings, intentions, and values to be expressed, it produces a less simplistic picture of social reality than the predefined categories often used in quantitative analyses. Moreover, the social sciences do not "explain," but instead propose interpretations. Qualitative materials contribute much to interpretation. [9]

Numerous sociologists in France still argue against the use of qualitative material on grounds of scientific unreliability, but a great number of them do conduct interviews. Yet, contrary to the anthropologists, many of the latter tend to be reluctant to consider the material they gather as potential sources of interest and informative input to other research, and other researchers. Many also take little interest in the "existential" dimension of personal accounts, and try mainly to elicit answers to specific questions. [10]

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3 As in Tiers Monde (Third World), Quart Monde refers to the dispossessed in wealthy countries.

One must indeed say that collecting data that is really qualitative, and comprehensive, is difficult. Few interviewers possess the skills and knowledge necessary for good interviewing. Some of those interviewed invent a character or "resist" because the interviewer was unable to establish the "two-way" relationship needed to elicit a life story or a first-hand account of a delicate subject. The main reasons for this "resistance" are that many of those interviewed, especially working class men aware of their cultural shortcomings (SCHWARTZ 1990a), feel threatened by the inquiry, and that other men and women, from all walks of life, have a vague feeling that the truth they are expected to utter could jeopardize a rather fragile psychological balance. In my opinion, this is the main ethical problem raised by this type of inquiry. [11]

The objection made by Pierre BOURDIEU in a short article written in 1986, which has had significant repercussions in France, rests on the view that any interview situation induces people to stage the story of their lives, shaping it into a coherent whole, so that the resulting biography is an "illusion" (BOURDIEU 1986). Teleological illusion overestimates reality, using the benefit of hindsight to reconstruct a whole, which is directed towards various goals. The illusion of always being oneself allows individuals to "retrieve their wholeness" from the complexity of their states of being. Finally, the illusion of personality, of difference from others, is strongly taken to task by BOURDIEU, who, in his belief that subjects giving an account of themselves are actually "manufacturing a life for themselves" (SCHWARTZ 1990b), considers that the quest for "distinctiveness" is the principle underlying the speaker's behavior. [12]

But our experience in gathering accounts has led us to take a different view. Staging their lives is very rarely the prime motivation for the people whose stories we hear. Rather, their main concern is to express themselves and to tell us what they experience as the truth. The common work realized during interviews by "ordinary" people and social scientists, constitutes a unique source of knowledge. And over and above this view, I believe that behind these three "illusions" lie some of the essential realities of today's societies.

- Intentionality—an illusion? Yet, as HUSSERL maintains, human thought and behavior are set towards goals, and in modern societies the prime concern in people's existence, whatever their place in society, is to manage their lives and to maintain some control.
- Remaining oneself—an illusion? Yet one of the major characteristics of the human psyche is surely the ability to "remain oneself," not only through change, but presumably also as a result of change.
- Distinctiveness—an illusion? Yet people truly are different from each other. Mass society does not diminish the diversity of subjects, and the highly complex societies we know today no doubt produce even more differences than in the past. [13]

What is the relationship between qualitative and quantitative data in France today? First, the major quantitative projects initiated by the State and the high

quality processing they receive are recognized and held in great esteem. Secondly, social scientists, to a greater or lesser extent, are all aware of the qualitative work carried out by LE PLAY, Oscar LEWIS and many others: life stories and in-depth inquiries about modern-day society. Many social scientists, as mentioned earlier, try to use qualitative and quantitative data. Yet most historians of contemporary times have remained very reticent, as have many sociologists who "prefer" quantitative analysis and consider qualitative data "unreliable." Some sociologists collect qualitative data but tend to use first-hand accounts to "illustrate" theories which were not built from these observations. Franco FERRAROTTI (1981) ironically refers to this use as "decorative." The "quantitative-qualitative" relationship is less controversial in France now than it has been in the past, and the combination of the two approaches is not rare and is often "well managed." In my opinion and although it is never actually stated openly, the quantitative-qualitative opposition may be now as much a matter of rivalry in terms of academic position, university doctorate "markets" and contract "markets" as it is a matter of opinion on the value and proper use of data. [14]

### **3. Why Preserve Qualitative Data?**

Beyond the heritage value of qualitative material, there are at least three additional reasons to advocate a wide-ranging endeavor to preserve it and highlight its value. [15]

#### **3.1 Fresh perspectives on work analyzed**

The usefulness of qualitative data often goes beyond the project for which they were collected and, later on, they could be used to study various and sometimes unexpected problems. In addition, a new reading can shed new light on what was said due to the passage of time and because the questions to be answered have changed. [16]

#### **3.2 Methodological groundwork on how disciplines are built up and on the requirements for multidisciplinary**

Multidisciplinary approaches, in which people from different backgrounds can explore an entire range of common topics together, enable each discipline to render its own concepts, questions, and procedures intelligible to others. The need, therefore, is to look anew at researchers' methods and how their work is produced: an analysis of practice, which is a vital part of the history of the social sciences. [17]

#### **3.3 Complementarity between qualitative and quantitative information**

The links between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms are underestimated by those who believe that qualitative research is a poor substitute for quantitative research, and by those who believe that only the human voice can speak about society. "Qualitative" and "quantitative" are actually two sides of the same

endeavor, which ultimately seeks to describe and understand the workings of a society. [18]

#### **4. Building Up the Project**

There is thus a need to preserve and take stock of existing qualitative information gathered from ordinary people over the last thirty or forty years, and to make it available to the scientific community. Simultaneously, it would be useful to develop valid procedures to document and preserve future material, which, to be usable, has to be placed exactly in context. All matters related to interviews are complex. Many different types of media, sometimes perishable, have been and are used. Inquiries raise complex ethical issues, depending on their nature and on the promises made to the interviewees at the outset. I should add that researchers have intimate relations with their qualitative data: some remain "possessed" by their investigations and some are torn between two fires—to keep all or to keep nothing, or at least to leave nothing behind and not let their material be used by others! [19]

a) An inventory of the documents collected over some thirty years for different purposes and in different situations is necessary to make the most of such a wealth of poorly known information. The approach has to start from the ground up. One should contact the authors of the research projects, speak with them about their work and discuss how and where their documents could be preserved, and the terms, conditions and lead times for the possible transfer of all or part of the data for reuse. [20]

b) We prepared and circulated a questionnaire to colleagues from various disciplines, which inquire about the conditions of the data holder, in order to promote concrete preservation actions. Initially, there was considerable reluctance among researchers, especially sociologists, who were afraid of unskilled, unfair, and even malicious use of their data, and, as aforesaid, who were hesitant to consider the material they gathered as sources for research conducted by other researchers. We can observe that attitudes are now changing somewhat. Systematically circulating a questionnaire seems now feasible (if challenging) through a public body, and also perhaps through disciplinary associations or journals. This would mean entrusting follow-ups to people who are well connected in research circles and have enough time because these tasks are demanding. [21]

c) Such a project should also develop a culture of preservation, as I strongly believe was the case for Qualidata in Britain. The task will not be easy in France because things move slowly, but the significance thereof rests in the fact that attitudes can be transformed, cultures of conservation can and must be created, and researchers (and not only novices) must be trained to "document" their data. [22]

We also contacted various repositories to review the current situation with their custodians and inquire which methods, structures, and means would be the most appropriate to safeguard and validate this long-neglected legacy. This problem is

by far the most pronounced in France. For this enterprise, they should be linked to research communities. [23]

d) Such a project should respect the researchers' wishes in terms of the decision as to whether or not to archive their data, the choice of repository, and the conditions for access and reuse. It should propose a flexible, decentralized structure to help the producers prepare the data (for many people, it will be a great deal of work) and to point users to the different repositories where the data will be available for consultation. The main objective of such a project will be to create a single resource database which can be searched on-line via a "portal" where all accessible surveys, whether already in or in the process of being integrated into the repositories or available for consultation in a research center, will be listed and referenced. [24]

This structure would address ethical and legal issues, the rights of interviewees and researchers, intellectual property rights, confidentiality and data protection rights and the fulfillment of undertakings. These issues will obviously have to be examined on a case by case basis for each data set, but this would be done in accordance with mutually agreed principles that respect researchers' wishes and that are accepted and respected by all organizations with responsibility for data, whether public or not. A scientific committee would be responsible for launching a debate on this subject. [25]

The same portal could subsequently be used to provide access, under certain conditions, to the documents that can be posted on-line. The various disciplines and the various national research centers span a wide range of interests and do not necessarily have the same expectations or capacities. Their differences therefore have to be reckoned with, even though advances in digitization techniques will soon enable data of every kind (sound, text, images) to "travel" and, in some cases, with the permission of the right holders, to be searched on-line. [26]

This undertaking, which is already under way in several countries, is just as necessary in our country and is also feasible, provided that each partner's commitment, skills, and available resources are harnessed to work together. Another condition is that there exists real governmental support, able to counter various forms of resistance. [27]

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## Citation

Cribier, Françoise (2005). The Value of Qualitative Data and their Archiving: the French Situation [27 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 35, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502357>.

Revised 3/2007