# Qualitative Psychology

## A Total Quality Framework Approach to Sharing Qualitative Research Data: Comment on DuBois et al. (2017)

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COMMENTARY

# A Total Quality Framework Approach to Sharing Qualitative Research Data: Comment on DuBois et al. (2017)

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The aspects of data sharing that have been discussed—in psychology and other social science disciplines—generally revolve around archival and ethical issues such as informed consent and confidentiality. Although we support DuBois, Strait, and Walsh (2017) in their call for qualitative data sharing, we believe greater attention is needed on the positive effect data sharing will have on the quality of qualitative research design and its ability to foster a greater understanding of the human experiences researchers hope to improve. We believe, however, that the true value of data sharing will largely be determined by the materials and resources that researchers actually choose to archive. To that end, we propose an approach to sharing that is facilitated by our Total Quality Framework (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) and that provides researchers with an efficient way to think about and organize the types of information to share about their qualitative studies. We believe that this approach will serve as a useful guide to bring comprehensiveness and consistency to data sharing that will ultimately reward qualitative researchers with heightened attention to quality designs that serve to deepen the usefulness of their research outcomes. We also believe that data sharing that is comprehensive and consistent will provide considerable benefits to the field of qualitative research that will not be as likely to accrue if data sharing is done in an idiosyncratic way from researcher to researcher.

*Keywords:* quality in qualitative research, data sharing, Total Quality Framework, usefulness of qualitative research

We want to begin by applauding DuBois, Strait, and Walsh (2017) for addressing the very important issue of qualitative data sharing in their article, "Is It Time to Share Qualitative Research Data?" Researchers across disciplines and professional organizations have, in one way or another, grappled with various issues associated with the conduct and meaning of qualitative research, yet relatively little attention (particularly in the United States) has been given to the *usability* of qualitative research, specifi-

cally, the question of whether qualitative data should be shared with the greater research community. Among researchers who have discussed qualitative data sharing, many have focused on the mechanics of archiving, such as repository requirements, and/or ethical considerations having to do with informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy (e.g., Bishop, 2009; Cheshire, 2009; Medjedović & Witzel, 2010; Parry & Mauthner, 2004; Williams, Dicks, Coffey, & Mason, 2007).

In our opinion, more attention should be given to the positive impact routine data sharing can have on raising the caliber of qualitative research designs while more broadly improving researchers' understanding of the important issues they investigate. It is this potential contribution to the quality and the "greater good" of qualitative research that we believe should be a key focus in the data-sharing discussion.

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We further believe it is particularly meaningful that DuBois et al. (2017) raised their discussion within the psychology community, in which there has been a noticeable absence of dialogue on the sharing of qualitative data. In contrast, other disciplines have not shied away from considering the merits of data sharing, in particular, sociologists in the United Kingdom and political scientists in the United States. In the 1990s, for instance, British researchers were discussing the advantages of archiving qualitative data as well as the limitations or potential problems that potentially dilute its usefulness (Hammersley, 1997; N. S. Mauthner, Parry, & Backett-Milburn, 1998), followed in the new century by a variety of discussions ranging from the epistemological considerations inherent in qualitative research to issues of ethics and practical matters (Bishop, 2009; N. Mauthner & Parry, 2009; Parry & Mauthner, 2004; Williams et al., 2007). A unique and important contribution to the topic of data sharing is, as DuBois et al. mention, the 5-year qualitative longitudinal Timescapes project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in the United Kingdom to explore personal and family relationships over time (Neale, 2013; Neale & Bishop, 2012).

In the United States, the American Political Science Association (APSA) has been noticeably out in front on the issue of qualitative data sharing. Political scientists have argued that data transparency is "a precondition for improving qualitative research" (Moravcsik, 2014, p. 49) and called for "a generalized norm of sharing qualitative data, and for the establishment of dedicated structures and practices for doing so" (Elman, Kapiszewski, & Vinuela, 2010, p. 23). These discussions are supported by the Qualitative and Multi-Method Research section of the APSA, which, in 2015, published a symposium on transparency consisting of a range of scholarly perspectives on sharing qualitative research data (American Political Science Association, 2015).

To answer the question posed by DuBois et al. (2017) in the title of their article, we *do* believe that it is time to share qualitative research data, but, as importantly, we believe that it is time for psychologists to finally embark on this important discussion and get involved in a meaningful conversation about the archiving and sharing of qualitative data. With few excep-

tions (e.g., Demuth & Terkildsen, 2015; Hoover & Morrow, 2015; Josselson, 2007), psychologists have been silent on this broad and complex topic.

We are pleased to help break the silence and be part of this important discussion, in part because the sharing of data and other information from qualitative research studies is at the core of our Total Quality Framework (TQF), particularly two of the TQF's four components—*Transparency* (the completeness of the reported details and transferability) and *Usefulness* (the extent to which the outcomes advance knowledge, provide actionable next steps, and/or enable others to apply the study design to separate but compatible contexts; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

In this response to DuBois et al. (2017), we (a) elaborate on the authors' "contextualizing" of the "problem" with what we believe are the relevant unique attributes of qualitative research, (b) expand on the authors' discussions of the advantages and concerns related to data sharing, (c) offer a consistent approach to preparing and sharing qualitative data by way of the TQF, and (d) end by listing various questions or issues that should be addressed as psychologists continue to discuss this important topic.

## The Social Component That Uniquely Defines Qualitative Data

DuBois et al. (2017) rightly acknowledge several unique characteristics of qualitative research data, including the various data gathering and analysis methods, along with the diverse set of goals researchers bring to each qualitative study, as well as the nonnumeric format of the data. Although these qualities help to distinguish qualitative data, there are additional attributes that set qualitative research apart and aid in further contextualizing the data-sharing discussion. Of the 10 unique attributes that we identify to define qualitative research (see Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 4–9), two stand out as fundamental qualities with profound implications for the archiving and sharing of qualitative data:

- the "researcher as the data-gathering instrument," and
- "the participant–researcher relationship."

Although DuBois et al. (2017) briefly mention the "relationships built while gathering data," we believe that the cohabitation of the researcher and participant in the research space is central to the qualitative research process. Indeed, we believe it is these close encounters that chiefly shape the research context, the data collection process, and the resulting data in qualitative research. It is this social aspect of qualitative inquiry that begs the question of whether the researcher, as the data gatherer, can collect and interpret data in an unbiased manner, and how the participant–researcher social component drives certain "power dynamics" (Kvale, 2006) with each person striving to control what is and is not said.

The overarching importance of this social attribute and its role in the qualitative data-sharing discussion holds a particular significance for the field of psychology. Josselson (2007), for example, discusses the "power differential" in narrative research stating that the

> interview generally favors the researcher, who is often believed by the participant to be expert in something. Particularly if one introduces oneself as a psychologist or mental health professional, the fantasy (whether conscious or unconscious) on the part of the participant is that the interviewer "knows" the good of living one's life—whether this is cast in terms of morality or mental health. (p. 546)

Haverkamp (2005) believes that applied psychologists, compared with researchers in other social sciences, bear a particularly heavy ethical burden in the conduct of qualitative research as it relates to the social contexts of their research activities. Similar to Josselson (2007), Haverkamp believes that the presence of a psychologist as interviewer alters participants' assumptions: "I would argue that a research participant who describes a personal experience of trauma to a psychology researcher brings different expectations to that conversation than to a research conversation with an anthropologist, a sociologist, or a nurse" (p. 152).

According to Haverkamp, participants' expectations include the notion that the psychologist, more so than an interviewer from a different discipline, can be trusted to protect participants' interests and keep them from "harm." These ethical issues are especially meaningful in psychology, in which researchers are uniquely trained to delve into personal narratives, uncover the participant's highly emo-

tional life events, and thereby reap complex, detailed data.

## The Advantages of Data Sharing: An Expanded View

DuBois et al. (2017) address several advantages to sharing qualitative data which can be summarized by two overarching benefits: (a) transparency, and (b) the ability to reuse existing data sets. With respect to transparency, the authors refer to the opportunity other researchers have to verify the original researcher's interpretations by reviewing submitted evidence as well as the advantage of fostering "public trust in research." Transparency in both cases, as DuBois et al. astutely point out, improves the quality of qualitative research by heightening researchers' "attention to detail." As far as the second broad benefit to data sharing—the ability to reuse data sets—they highlight the power of data sharing to extend a project's findings by way of new analyses and new thinking, while also providing an efficient use of resources (financial and available time) and a valuable pedagogical tool to use with students of qualitative data analysis.

We believe that the greatest advantage to sharing qualitative data is the promise it holds of raising the bar on methodological rigor in the qualitative research community. Although DuBois et al. (2017) touch upon this idea, we believe that the principal benefit to data sharing is its ability to bring quality issues to the forefront, leading to scholarly discussions and more explicit and critical self-evaluation, as well as new quality approaches to the design, implementation, and reporting of qualitative research. By way of these more rigorous quality methods, qualitative researchers cultivate other data-sharing advantages such as those mentioned by DuBois et al.—verification and trust through transparency as well as the reuse of qualitative data (i.e., secondary data analyses).

A quality approach obligates researchers to provide transparency by way of thick description to fully inform the consumers of the research for the purpose of verification as well as the purpose of determining the applicability of the research to other contexts, that is, transferability. Importantly, a thick description provides a complete account of the phenomena under investigation along with rich details of the

data collection and analysis processes and interpretations, and also "creates an audit trail by including all relevant materials, such as reflexive journal(s), transcripts, field notes, and the codebook" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 363). The inclusion of supporting materials is critical to true transparency and to giving the downstream users of the research what they need to conduct meaningful secondary analyses without the challenges associated with missing data, vague descriptions of the research settings, and undisclosed explanations for deviations from the research design (cf. Mitchell, 2015).

Transparency of this kind—via thick description in the broadest sense—nurtures another essential and underlining benefit to sharing qualitative data—that is, the collaborations that can evolve among researchers to incrementally improve upon others' methods and, in the course of time, gain more useful insights into the human condition. By sharing and partnering in this way, qualitative researchers remain cognizant that their "primary task is the better understanding of human experience in society, and in time . . . this knowledge will ultimately and along the way lead to a betterment of human life" (Josselson, 2007, p. 560). In this vein, it can be argued that qualitative researchers actually *owe* it to their participants to share their data.

## The Concerns About Data Sharing: Context Fuels Skeptics' Concerns

As mentioned earlier, the participant–researcher relationship is a unique attribute of qualitative research that has significant implications for the archiving and sharing of data. The intimacy and contextual nature of this relationship raise concerns related to verification as well as the viability of conducting valid, legitimate secondary analyses. The question is, does the distinctive relationship that qualitative researchers have with their participants serve as a roadblock to realizing the many advantages of transparency associated with data sharing? In particular, how does the context—that is, the physical and social environment, including the intensity and nature of rapport—shaped by the participant–researcher relationship affect other researchers' ability to verify and/or reuse qualitative data?

There are two important ways that the contextual component plays a role among those who dismiss or are otherwise skeptical of the legitimate benefits of sharing qualitative data. One way has to do with *meaning*, that is, the concern that other researchers cannot possibly be expected to concur with the original researcher's interpretations or conclusions because they are deprived of the meaning that comes from the participant–researcher context. We believe that this concern, however, is based on the false premise that the goal of the data-sharing exercise is to reach interresearcher agreement. This is not so. Although verification or data reuse may result in some form of agreement with the original researcher, it is not the required or necessarily expected outcome from these new analyses. We agree with DuBois et al. (2017) that "there is no reason to think that any two researchers would come to the same conclusions when conducting qualitative research on the same research questions" (p. 4). And we agree with other psychologists such as Svend Brinkmann, who similarly states that "the person who was engaged with producing the data works with data in one way. It's not the only way or the only right way, but it is one way" (cited in Demuth & Terkildsen, 2015, p. 21).

Arja Kuula, a sociologist, is more explicit:

> The perception behind the idea that the original researcher is the only one capable of analyzing the data correctly means that the original methodology is the orthodox way to understand research data. What this implies is that the original researcher has an exclusive right to define the characteristics and nature of the empirical world under investigation. That is an odd presupposition for a research paradigm that often accuses quantitative research of naïve realist epistemology. (Kuula, 2011, p. 14)

Context serves as the foundation from which meaning thrives. Researchers may not agree on the ultimate meaning of the data set given by the original researcher, but they must be given sufficient resources to make their own valid determination of whatever they believe the meaning to be. To that end, an essential element to the archiving and sharing of qualitative data is thick description (discussed earlier), which includes not only "interview guides, field notes, codebooks, sources of triangulation, and references to publications resulting from the original study," as mentioned by DuBois et al. (2017, p.

8), but also the researcher's reflexive journal, details of the participant population and research environment, decisions that were made in the field that altered the initial research design, as well as transcripts and audio recordings.[1]

The other way that context raises concerns about the sharing of qualitative data has to do with how context *shapes the data themselves*. It is the contextual aspect of the participant–researcher relationship that potentially fosters an environment dominated by power dynamics and other socially derived influences that may introduce researcher bias, lead to unwanted participant effects, and may even result in the researcher withholding (i.e., not sharing) the data (e.g., due to an unwillingness to share a "bad" interview or in the interest of safeguarding the participant's privacy as well as maintaining the trust established between participant and researcher). There are ways to mitigate these factors, yet the complex and flexible nature of qualitative research all but guarantees that contextual influences will, indeed, mold the data in one way or the other. It is this inherent characteristic of qualitative research data that, as DuBois et al. (2017) state, increases "the potential value of having others examine the data" (p. 8). We would extend that notion by adding that others' examination of the data is only as valuable as the materials and resources that accompany the data. In the next section, we discuss a way to facilitate the sharing of these accompanying materials.

## Using the TQF to Facilitate and Bring Consistency to Qualitative Data Sharing

It is noble to advocate that qualitative data should be shared, and it is quite easy to say that it should be shared. But actually deciding what to share and how to share it is open to debate because, as it is often experienced, "the devil is in the detail." Furthermore, it is not enough to merely share one's data, as data in and of themselves have limited meaning absent information about the methodological context by which they were gathered, processed, and analyzed.

To that end, we now address the issue of exactly what information it is that should be shared about a qualitative research study as part of the "data-sharing movement." In the section that follows, we identify the specific information about methods that we believe ideally should be shared by qualitative researchers, and we do this by advocating the use of our TQF as the template for sharing this information (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). We recommend the TQF because it identifies the key aspects that affect the quality of any qualitative research study. These key aspects are those that are related to myriad possible biases and inconsistencies that can lower the quality of qualitative research and thereby lessen, and possibly negate, its usefulness.

The TQF includes four major components, which are Credibility, Analyzability, Transparency, and Usefulness. Credibility refers to how representative the study participants are of the target population and the quality of the data that are gathered in a qualitative research study. Analyzability refers to what is done with the data that a qualitative study gathers, and encompasses how the data are processed (e.g., transcribed), how sense is made of them, and how findings and conclusions are verified. As we show in the discussions that follow on Credibility and Analyzability, these two major components of the TQF provide a comprehensive and consistent way to think about *what* information to share about a qualitative study. The other two major TQF components—Transparency and Usefulness—assist the researcher on *how* to share and *why* sharing qualitative data is important.

In the following discussions, we address the "what" of data and information sharing. The many forms of information we recommend for sharing should serve as a guide to researchers and help them to incorporate as many of these pieces of information as practicable. It is understood that resources as well as the unique aspects of any given study may limit what sharing can and cannot be achieved.

### Credibility: Scope

The Scope of the TQF Credibility component addresses how well the participants are representative of the target population. The following are the types of information related to Scope

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[1] We do not recommend the sharing of transcripts and audio recordings without informed consent from participants as well as thorough deidentification.

that we believe should be shared by qualitative researchers:

- A clear and concise definition of the target population.
- An explanation of the list that was chosen to represent the target population, and a description of the strengths and limitations of that list (e.g., whether it included all members of the target population), including the possible effects caused by the list not including all members of the target population.
- A description of how the participants were chosen from the list and any strengths or limitations of the selection method. (Note that it should be clearly stated if everyone on the list was chosen.)
- A description of the strategies that were used to gain access to and cooperation from the study participants, including disclosure of the success that researchers had gaining participant cooperation, reasons why not all selected participants cooperated, and how those who did not participate may be "different" from those who did.
- An explanation of how many people participated in the study and why this number was deemed appropriate.
- Documentation of changes related to Scope that were made in the study design during the field period and the rationale and possible effects of these changes.
- An overall statement assessing how well the elements of scope were achieved in the study.

## Credibility: Data Gathering

Data Gathering pertains to how well the data that are gathered actually measure the constructs being investigated. The following are the types of Data Gathering information that we believe should be shared by qualitative researchers:

- A description of the topic or issue, along with the relevant constructs, being studied.
- Copies of the data collection instruments and/or aids that were used as part of data gathering, and an explanation of how they were developed, for example, by way of pilot testing.
- Information about the mode or modes used to gather data, including the rationale for the mode(s) and possible mode effects related to the quality of the data gathered.
- A description of the research team, including their qualifications and training.
- Written documentation about whether anyone engaged in gathering data may have created bias and/or unwarranted inconsistency in the information they gathered, what was done to try to detect and correct these problems, and the likely success of these ameliorative efforts.
- Information on possible participant effects that may have biased the data.
- The actual data that were gathered in the study after deidentification for confidentiality and privacy protection.
- The reflexive journals that were written during the study after deidentification for confidentiality and privacy protection.

## Analyzability: Data Processing

The Data Processing part of the TQF Analyzability component is chiefly concerned with data transcription and making sense of the data.

**Data transcription.**   The following are the types of information that we believe should be shared by qualitative researchers about the data transcription process:

- A description of the people involved in transcribing the data, including their qualifications, training, and monitoring procedures that were used to oversee the quality of their work.
- A statement about how the transcriptions were created, including instructions to transcriptionists and whether the transcriptions were merely literal ones or whether the transcriptionist added or ignored certain content such as information about voice quality.
- A description of other forms of data processing (e.g., data in video format that were enhanced or otherwise altered in some way).

**Sense-making of the processed data.**   The following are the types of information that we believe should be shared by qualitative researchers about how their processed data were analyzed to generate findings from the study and how those findings led to the interpretations and recommendations that were reached:

- An explanation of how and why the unit of analyses was selected.
- An explanation of how codes were devised.
- A description of the coding process, including coders' qualifications, monitoring of their work, and other information that may have affected the quality of coding.
- The rationale and manner in which meaningful categories were identified in the coded data.
- The rationale and manner in which themes or patterns were determined.
- An explanation of how interpretations and implications/recommendations were derived.

## Analyzability: Verification

Verification is the stage of Analyzability when the researcher seeks evidence to support or refute early interpretations of the qualitative data. The following are the types of information that we believe should be shared by qualitative researchers about the verification process:

- A statement concerning the forms of verification that were utilized (e.g., peer debriefings, triangulation, deviant cases) including why these forms of verification were used and not others.
- A description of how the results from the Verification stage were used, including why and how revisions were or were not made to the preliminary findings and recommendations.

## The Burden of Sharing Information About a Qualitative Research Study

We believe that for the data-sharing movement in qualitative research to reach its potential, there needs to be consistency to what is actually shared. The TQF offers a method to bring consistency to data sharing in qualitative research that we believe will aid in achieving this potential much sooner than otherwise will occur.

Our aforementioned recommendations of what to share about a qualitative research study will create a burden on qualitative researchers who are committed to taking the high road in data sharing. This burden is one of time and cost. We recognize that these obstacles may deter some researchers from sharing the full extent of material that we outline, while others

will view what we have proposed as totally impractical, if not simply impossible.

We believe, however, that, by utilizing the TQF to bring consistency and comprehensiveness to data sharing, qualitative researchers will be rewarded with heightened attention to quality designs that serve to deepen the usefulness of their research outcomes. Furthermore, as researchers learn to do what it takes to share data and related information in a consistent manner from their qualitative studies, the process will become less challenging. We say this because we believe that, in knowing that they will be sharing information, researchers will regularly engage in more documentation of their methods during all stages of their studies. And, in doing so, the quality of qualitative research and the usefulness of qualitative studies will be raised considerably.

## Final Comments

In our response to DuBois et al. (2017), we have discussed our agreement with the underlying proposition that qualitative data should be routinely archived and shared. We fully support this view for the principal reason that it will hold qualitative researchers to a higher standard and raise the quality of qualitative methods, while also furthering researchers' understanding of the lived experience related to myriad human conditions and issues. We also fully support the continuing conversation in the psychology community regarding the archiving and sharing of qualitative data and hope that this special section of *Qualitative Psychology* will serve as the impetus for that.

As the discussion moves forward, we anticipate a dialogue on a range of important issues pertaining to qualitative data sharing. To name just a few,

- What are the unique data-sharing issues associated with each qualitative method?
- What are the issues pertaining to "ownership," for example, who owns the data, the meaning and interpretations from the data?
- What guidelines are needed to motivate and facilitate proper documentation for archiving?
- What is the best approach to promote data sharing and motivate research psychologists to deposit their data in a central archive?

- What can and should journal editors do to foster data sharing?
  ◦ Are standards needed for journal procedures and policies related to publishing qualitative studies in order to accommodate the use of thick descriptions?
- How will the burden associated with the time and cost of sharing data be allocated in a way that does not deter researchers' willingness to contribute their data?
- Under what circumstances should data *not* be shared, for example, when anonymization distorts the data, when particular risks of harm have been identified?

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