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Viewpoint

Sharing data from research on illicit drug economies

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Researchers are increasingly required by funders, science bodies and publishers worldwide, including this journal's publisher, to demonstrate openness and transparency in their research, and to make research data available for future reuse (Van den Eynden & Corti, 2020). At the same time, sharing research data can pose ethical challenges (Parry & Mauthner, 2004; Tsai et al., 2016), particularly in the case of qualitative data generated from interviews and life histories, which can be difficult to anonymise when shared for reuse (Tsai et al., 2016). We reflect here on how researchers can navigate the complexities of research transparency and sharing research data. To do this, we set out the coordinated approach taken by the Drugs and (dis)order project, a research collaboration involving twelve partner organisations investigating the social-political dimensions of illicit drug economies in the context of war to peace transitions in Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar (Drugs & (dis)order, 2020).

The studies by the Drugs and (dis)order project, many of which are papers in this special issue, have generated data through interviews, life histories, focus group discussions, observations, photographs and surveys, as well as through third party data, media reporting and satellite imagery. Participants in these studies included people who use drugs, people involved in drug production and trade, local communities affected by the illicit drug trade, policy stakeholders and third sector workers. Much of the data generated deals with sensitive as well as illicit activities where the non-secure handling of data and/or disclosure of study participants' identities potentially places participants and researchers at risk. The Economic and Social Research Council (2018) who funded this research expects the sharing of research data so that "valuable publicly-funded resources" are available for future reuse.

Sensitive data, transparency and sharing

According to Moravcsik (2014) there are three dimensions to research transparency: data, analytic and production transparency. Analytic and production transparency is non-controversial to researchers. This requires access to information about data analysis, the interpretation of evidence and the methods by which particular evidence is selected from a body of information. Researchers grapple more with sharing data, especially in sensitive qualitative research, though as Parkinson and Wood (2015) argue it is feasible to publish oral histories based on research in violent environments, so long as participants have given their consent to do so. Otherwise they question the ethics of data sharing and transparency. Possible disclosure of the identity of research participants through reuse of data carries the potential to harm participants.

Trusted data repositories that specialise in qualitative social science data can facilitate ethical sharing and reuse of data. Examples are the Qualitative Data Repository at Syracuse University and the UK Data Service. CoreTrustSeal certification provides trust to data creators and users that archived datasets are held securely and best ethical practices are applied (Dillo & de Leeuw, 2018). Encouraging researchers to gain informed consent from participants for future reuse of data, combined with redaction of data to anonymise or de-identify them, and access controls so data are not made public (but can still be reused) makes data sharing possible (Bishop, 2009; Kapiszewski & Karcher, 2019). Data that are difficult or impossible to anonymise can be reused combining restricted access techniques with specialised data use agreements (Mannheimer, Pienta, Kirilova, Elman & Wutich, 2019). Bishop (2009) also advocates for ethical duties regarding research data to go beyond protecting privacy. Protecting research participants from unnecessary intrusion is also an ethical duty in research. If existing data can answer a research question, then further collection of primary data would be intrusive. Sharing data via trusted repositories can thus prevent this.

The drugs and (dis)order project's approach

The project's data manager worked with each partner organisation to enhance capacity in good data management practices in the project.

Data security

An initial priority was placed on safe and secure storage, transfer and handling of collected research data. Some of the partners have basic IT infrastructure and no dedicated IT staff. UK partners are bound by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) for handling personal data, such as those collected during interviews. Practical guidance was developed interactively and security measures were implemented at each site (Van den Eynden, 2019). All steps in the data collection and processing cycle are covered: taking field notes and interview notes, audio-recording interviews, making photographs, transcribing interview recordings, translating transcripts to English, etc.

Researchers protect the anonymity of participants by not recording or writing down names. Codes are used for participants and researchers in all data files such as recordings, transcripts or translations. Audio

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recordings of interviews are only transported from field site to office on an encrypted laptop. All laptops that may hold research data are encrypted and data files are encrypted before sending to for example translators. Glasscubes is used by the project as secure online collaborative workspace to share research data with project partners and store finished datasets for the duration of the project. It is ISO27001 (Information Security Management Systems) certified and has Cyber Essentials certification. Before data are placed on Glasscubes, they are de-identified by removing identifiers such as names, place names, organisation names, employment details. These security measures set the standards for correct handling of sensitive data in line with ethical and legal requirements and lay the basis for data sharing.

Consent for data sharing

Research ethics are addressed by the project's Ethics and Security panel with representation from across the partnership. Synergies, compromises and cross country learning are developed in discussion across the three countries, since research practices, customs, data protection and ethics requirements are deeply contextualised and may differ from UK standards. For example, whilst using written consent forms is strongly encouraged in the UK, this is not always possible for research at the study sites. Participants may be illiterate. Or the risk of being identified and of repercussions or reprimands from local authorities makes people reluctant to sign any paperwork. Instead, the wording used to discuss oral consent was written out in advance of fieldwork starting. This documents the process and ensures that standard wording is used when data are collected. Researchers are encouraged to discuss consent for future reuse of information. Research activities were also discussed with governments, local authorities, community representatives or elders before data collection started.

Metadata for transparency and reuse

Capturing metadata of all data collection events such as interviews, focus groups discussions and surveys in a structured manner also ensures transparency. Unique codes are given to each data event and associated data files. Interviews are listed in metadata tables, recording date, time, basic demographic information and data files information for each interview. Once a dataset such as a collection of interviews or a survey is complete, further documentation files are produced with contextual and methodological information for the dataset and information on how data have been anonymised.

These metadata provide contextual information to facilitate future reuse of data. And if the Ethics and Security panel decides that sharing or archiving certain datasets would not be ethical, then these detailed metadata files, together with extracts or coding used, provide transparency for published findings in the form of a methodological appendix (Kapiszewski & Karcher, 2019). The study by Parada-Hernández and Marín-Jaramillo (2021) shows an example of this in the appendix.

Sharing data

Data statements in the project's research papers in this special issue already indicate which research data each paper is based on. Options for data sharing will be investigated and developed by the partnership as the project continues. Project partners developing their own data repository infrastructure is also being considered. In addition, the UK Data Service will be used as trusted data repository to share sensitive qualitative data.

Conclusion

Taking the Drugs and (dis)order project as a case, we show the practical steps that research projects can take to navigate the complexities of sharing sensitive qualitative research data and making them available as evidence of transparency and for future reuse. Based on the expertise of trusted data repositories that specialise in facilitating reuse of sensitive data, the approach taken by the project focuses on secure handling of all data during the research, providing secure systems for storage and transfer, de-identifying collected data, consent procedures that take future reuse into account and creating rich metadata. Trusted data repositories can hold the data when the project ends.

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Declarations of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. The Drugs & (dis)order project has received ethical approval from SOAS, University of London.

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