

QUALITATIVE SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

KEY MESSAGES

- Secondary Data Analysis (SDA) unlocks new insights from existing qualitative datasets without collecting new data
- Successful SDA requires attention to study context, methodological fit, and ethical issues
- When conducted rigorously, SDA maximizes the value of existing data while saving time, resources, and participant burden

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS?

- Qualitative SDA involves revisiting and analyzing qualitative data (i.e., interview transcripts) originally collected for previous studies to answer new research questions or generate fresh insights.¹
- SDA enables researchers to explore data via new theoretical, analytical, or temporal lenses, allowing for deeper interpretations, comparisons, or methodological insights without collecting new data.²

SDA IS BASED ON TWO KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- 1** An existing, archived qualitative dataset is readily available to work from
- 2** Participants and researchers consented to use beyond the original research question

DATA ACCESS MODES

Formal Sharing

Researchers access datasets deposited in public or institutional archives

Informal Sharing

The researcher shares their data but is not involved in secondary analysis

Self Reuse

Researchers reuse their own data to investigate new or additional questions

When to use:

- Address new or previously unexplored research questions
- Reinterpret data using different theoretical or analytic lenses
- Compare across datasets, populations or time points
- Study sensitive or hard-to-reach populations without new data collection

When not to use:

- The context is critical but poorly documented
- The dataset lacks depth for the new research question
- Consent for secondary use is unclear

COMMON ANALYTICAL APPROACHES IN SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Several analytic approaches are commonly used in qualitative SDA, each offering different ways of engaging with existing qualitative datasets.

Retrospective Introspection

Involves revisiting existing datasets to explore questions or interpretations not fully developed in the original study, often using a new theoretical lens.^{1,3}



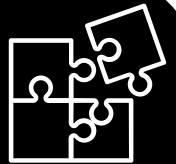
Analytic Expansion and Supra Analysis

Extending the original study by refining research questions, informing future studies, or exploring issues beyond the initial scope.^{3,4}



Assorted Analysis

Combining existing qualitative data with new or different qualitative data sources to broaden analysis.⁴ Extends the scope of the initial study.



Rejection Analysis or Unit of Analysis

Involves revisiting or re-examining excluded, overlooked, or underexplored data to identify new insights.



Subset Analysis

Focusing on a specific group or segment of the original dataset for deeper analysis and exploration of themes.³



Kinesthetic Analysis

Involves interpreting qualitative data through researchers' emotional and embodied responses and reactions. It focuses on the researcher's affective engagement rather than restructuring the dataset itself.¹



CONDUCTING SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

- 1** Assess whether the dataset is appropriate for the proposed research question and review the original study context, aims, methods and theoretical framework for fit.^{5,6}
- 2** Clarify what is known, missing, or limited within the dataset to determine suitability for secondary use and identify a suitable analytic approach based on the aims of the secondary study. Review all ethical considerations.^{4,7}
- 3** Prepare and format the data by organizing transcripts, correcting formatting issues and removing identifying information. Check transcript accuracy by comparing transcripts with audio files (if available).
- 4** Generate objectives for secondary analysis and craft an overarching research question(s) using the EPPiC framework,⁸ maintain methodological congruence to study goals, select an appropriate data analysis strategy, analyze and synthesize findings.
- 5** Maintain an audit trail by documenting analytic decisions, coding processes, collaborative discussions, and retaining materials.

STRENGTHS

- Reduces burden on research stakeholders and minimizes additional data collection from over-researched populations (e.g. Indigenous populations helping to prevent research fatigue⁹)
- Allows for more objectivity since the researchers involved may not have been involved in the primary collection and analysis
- Saves time spent on sampling and data collection processes by providing ready and available data that qualify for exempt status or expedited review by most research ethics boards
- Provides access to rich, in-depth data from hard-to-reach populations or on sensitive, controversial topics, while maximizing the value of participants' contributions
- Cost-effective, as it avoids the costs associated with participant recruitment, data collection, and transcription by reusing existing datasets¹⁰

LIMITATIONS

- Qualitative data may lose contextual relevance over time, increasing the risk of misinterpretation during SDA
- Existing data may not adequately address new research questions or may not be amenable to secondary analysis
- Secondary researchers are unable to ask follow-up questions or clarify emerging issues during analysis
- Reanalysis may inadvertently change or misrepresent the meanings of the original findings



ETHICAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Informed Consent

The secondary analysis may extend beyond the purposes originally consented to by participants.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The depth of qualitative data makes complete de-identification difficult in SDA, increasing the risk of re-identification.



Data Ownership and Co-Creation

Reusing qualitative data without participant involvement may overlook their agency and data ownership.

Researcher Exposure

Personal details shared by researchers during data collection may remain embedded in datasets and reused without their consent.

BEST PRACTICES

- Clearly report ethical procedures, including ethical approval or exemptions, consent for secondary reuse, and measures to protect participant confidentiality^{6,7}
- Engage deeply with the original study context by reviewing related publications, sampling, methods, and population characteristics²
- Use strategies to enhance rigor, such as maintaining an audit trail, practicing reflexivity, and involving (where possible) members of the original research team
- Acknowledge methodological limitations, including contextual changes over time and the extent to which the secondary research questions align with the original study aims^{7,11}
- Avoid decontextualized or selective use of quotes without grounding them within the full dataset²

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