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**Archiving Qualitative Data on Aging:
Experiences of the University of
Michigan Data Archives**

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This series of research reports deals with the status of the elderly in several Asian countries. It presents research that is being conducted under a broad project sponsored by the U.S. National Institute on Aging, the Comparative Study of the Elderly in Four Asian Countries (Grant No. AGO7637). The goal is to measure the social, economic and health characteristics of the older population (age 60 and above), to predict what changes may occur over the next decades, and to suggest implications for public policy. The original countries involved in the study are the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand. Reports on the elderly in other countries in Asia and on methods developed through the project using data from various countries may also be included in this report series.

Organizations collaborating in this research include: Population Studies and Training Center, Brown University; Population Institute, University of the Philippines; Department of Social Work and Psychology, National University of Singapore; Taiwan Provincial Institute of Family Planning; and Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University. For additional information about the comparative project, please contact the Principal Investigator: Albert I. Hermalin, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, 1225 South University Avenue, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2590.



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Archiving Qualitative Data on Aging: Experiences of the University of Michigan Data Archives

Abstract: The present paper describes general problems facing the archiving of qualitative data and the experience with developing a specific archive at the Population Studies Center of the University of Michigan. The Population Studies Center Focus group Archive is believed to be one of the first of its kind. It is a product of the project "Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly". Data in the archive consist of transcripts of focus group discussions held in 4 countries in Asia: Taiwan, Singapore, Philippines and Thailand. The focus groups were part of a comparative study of the elderly in Asia and were held with elderly participants and with adults who had an elderly parent in each of the collaborating countries. The guidelines encompassed a large number of topics relevant to the welfare of the elderly including living arrangement, support exchanges with children/kin, social contact with kin, economic situation, and health status.

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INTRODUCTION:

As secondary data are increasingly used in analyses in the social sciences including those dealing with issues related to aging, data archives to preserve and distribute data sets take on greater importance. Considerable progress has already been made in developing extensive archives of surveys and similar quantitative data relevant to the study of aging by various organizations (ICPSR, 1989; National Institute on Aging, 1996). In the meantime, interest has also increased in the use of qualitative data in the field of aging, both in their own right and as complementary data in analyses of quantitative data, particularly from surveys. Despite this, there has been little movement in establishing archives for the qualitative data that has been collected. The purpose of this presentation is to consider some issues that need to be faced when archiving qualitative data and to describe the archive of focus group data at the Population Studies Center, University of Michigan, based on the Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia project.

TYPE OF QUALITATIVE DATA TO BE ARCHIVED

The first question that must be faced when considering archiving qualitative data is what kind of qualitative data should be archived? Qualitative research produces a variety of types of data ranging from short unsystematic notes, more extensive field notes, audio tapes of conversations or group discussions, brief summary transcripts, and full transcripts. Not all qualitative data are equally suited to archiving or secondary analysis by other researchers. Probably the strongest candidates are data in the form of written and preferably word processed transcripts and that have some readily identifiable structure. One such approach is the focus group discussion, a method that has been employed extensively by the Comparative Study of the Elderly in Asia (Knodel, 1995).

Focus group methodology is now well known and used extensively in recent years in social science research including the area of aging (Morgan 1997; special April 1995 issue of the Journal of Cross Cultural Gerontology). The fact that the discussions are usually moderated by a

facilitator following a set of prepared guidelines imposes a generally easily identifiable structure to the data greatly enhances the ability of an outside researcher to understand the flow of the transcripts and their content despite the open-ended nature of responses to the questions raised during the session. The semi-structured yet open-ended discussions provide far more detailed information than would typical survey questionnaires and thus are of potential interest to a wide range of researchers both for analysis in their own right or to provide confirmation or elaboration of findings from other sources. For example, such data can be used in conjunction with survey analysis to provide a fuller understanding of survey responses and additionally, contribute to explanation of phenomena under study.

Other types of qualitative data may also be suitable for archiving although not necessarily to the same extent as focus group transcripts. For example, focused in-depth interviews also often produce semi-structured open-ended data following prepared guidelines (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1992). As such they can lend themselves equally well as focus groups to archiving and reanalysis. In contrast, an ethnographer's field notes are likely to be an inconvenient form for archiving and to pose more difficulties for interpretation to an outside analyst. Nevertheless, there are undoubtedly numerous qualitative data sets held by individual researchers in aging that, if systematically organized and preserved in a way that would permit easy access for future use, would provide a valuable assets for interested researchers in the field. Archiving such data would be an important step in stimulating and facilitating their use as secondary data sources for further analyses.

GENERAL ISSUES IN CREATING QUALITATIVE DATA ARCHIVES:

Before an effective archive for qualitative data in ageing can be established, there are several issues that need to be addressed. here are some of the more obvious ones.

- Topic and field of interest. Before an archive can be established it is essential for the organizers to develop a clear idea of scope of topics that are to be covered. This will have obvious consequences for

the eventual size of the operation and the resources needed to bring it about.

- Availability of data for archiving. Although qualitative research collected through focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, or other methods has been extensively undertaken, in some cases the data may not be worth archiving or may no longer be available. This is especially likely if the qualitative research was only a relatively minor part of a project and intended primarily to supplement a quantitative analysis. In such cases, the qualitative data may have been insufficiently processed, e.g. only in summary form, poorly documented, or already discarded. Thus one main challenge for any prospective qualitative archive in aging is to identify and locate the extant data sets that might be appropriate for secondary data analysis and screen them for completeness and other relevant aspect of quality.

- Restrictions on access and use. Once a valuable dat set is located it is important to determine what conditions on their use will be imposed by the original researcher or organization that produced the data. Thus before actions are undertaken to incorporate a data set into an archive, a clear set of rules governing the their release to other researchers need to be agreed upon with the provide of the data. If the restrictions are so severe that few others would be able to use the data, there is little point in proceeding further. On the other hand, it is understandable that the provider might want to set some conditions on access to the data. Moreover, the archive itself might wish to impose some rules for use. In some cases all that may be required for a potential user to obtain permission to use the data is a simple written request. In other cases, approval be require a competitive review based on submission of a detailed research use plan. There may also be charges imposed for obtaining data and related documentation.

- Condition and type of data. An archive for qualitative research could potentially include all kinds of text such as hand written notes, untranscribed tapes, typed transcripts, or word processed files. In practice, data that are hand-written or even typed (as opposed to word processed) or that are on untranscribed tapes pose greater, if not insurmountable, difficulties to effective archiving than word processed

data in computer readable files. Thus different types of data are likely to receive different priorities for inclusion in an archive.

- Documentation of data. Qualitative data like other forms of data often requires adequate documentation for meaningful use by others. An otherwise high quality data set can be rendered virtually useless if information on the study design and the research instruments used are not available. Only by studying the documentation is an outsider to the original project likely to sufficiently understand the data or even to make an adequate decision as to whether the data are suited for the purpose of the secondary analyses being planned. For example, documents and materials for data sets of focus group discussions for archiving should include not only the full transcripts but also information of the study design, the guidelines for discussion, and the background characteristics of participants.

- Language. If the archive is aimed to serve international research, the language in which the data are in has to be taken into account. In cases where the original material was conducted in a language that will not be known to most potential users, translation into some more common language, typically English, may be required. This could add considerably to the time, effort and cost for archiving the data set.

- Confidentiality. Ensuring the confidentiality of respondents, informants and other participants in a research project is of increasing concern in the social science research community. This is particularly a relevant issue for qualitative data. Thus efforts need to be taken to remove identifying information from the data sets, such as names and addresses of respondents or participants.

- Time and cost. Creating a successful data archive requires adequate support in funding and staff to permit both assembly and distribution of the data sets. The process of collecting data into archive can be time consuming and costly particularly when translation is needed or repeated follow ups are required. Changes in personnel in the organizations who provide the potential archived data can be an obstacle as well.

QUALITATIVE DATA ARCHIVE AT THE POPULATION STUDIES CENTER

As part of the larger Comparative Study of Asian Elderly Project (now called Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly), a series of focus group discussions were held during 1990-91 in each of the 4 collaborating countries (Taiwan, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) with elderly participants (defined as being age 60 or over) and with adults who had an elderly parent. Altogether 86 sessions were completed producing complete transcripts for each (21 in Singapore, 21 in Taiwan, 18 in Philippines and 26 in Thailand). All were conducted in the native languages (which in some cases in Singapore involved English mixed with the native language).

Table 1 indicates the basic parameters of the study design for each country in terms of the criteria used to form groups. In addition, to holding separate groups according to their generation of the participant (elderly versus adult children), in all but Singapore (which is a city state), separate groups were held according to residence (rural versus urban). In all but Taiwan, groups were also organized separately by overall socioeconomic status (higher versus lower) while in Taiwan, education alone was used instead to divide groups. In the Philippines and for most groups in Taiwan, groups were separated by sex. Finally, separate sessions were held for major ethnic groups in Singapore (Chinese, Malay and Indian) and Taiwan (Mainlander, Fukienese, and Hakanese). Table 2 summarizes the number of groups according to both country and criteria used for selection.

The major objectives of the overall project were to measure the social, economic and health characteristics of elderly, to predict what changes may occur over the next decades, and to suggest implications for public policy. As part of the broader project, the focus group component aimed to collect a systematic qualitative data on views and opinions of the elderly and their adult children. The inclusion of a qualitative component was based on the conviction that such data are essential for gaining insights into the meaning of the newly emerging of quantitative results. In each country, a local collaborating organization was responsible for carrying out a focus group component to the overall project. Although the focus group research was coordinated by the University of Michigan, each collaborating organization had a

fair amount of autonomy in conducting and processing the focus group discussions (Knodel 1994). In line with the overall project goals, however, and in the interest of permitting comparative analysis, all four countries attempted to incorporate a number of similar topics in their focus group discussion guidelines in addition to pursuing any other topics of interest to the specific country research team. Table 3 shows the various topics included in each country as well indicating whether the topic was a main one or only covered in a very limited way.

In order to preserve the focus group data and appropriate documentation and to make them available to the general community of scholars interested in aging, the Population Studies Center of the University of Michigan has established an archive for these purposes. Given that the collection and processing of data was done locally by separate research teams in each of the four collaborating countries, their cooperation was essential for this effort. A fair amount time was required to communicate the various details to each organization in order to obtain the data in the appropriate form and to clarify the conditions of use. Data in this case meant original language transcripts of each focus group session and any English translations that had been done.

Even though there had been a fair degree of coordination since the inception of the project, considerable effort was still required to systematically assemble and standardize certain features of the transcripts. Since the archiving effort began after a time lapse of several years following the original field work and transcription, the transcript files or appropriate documentation were not always easy to locate by the collaborating organization, especially when different persons in the organization were in charge of different aspects of the project. Moreover, not all transcripts had been translated by the collaborating organization. In these case the archive had to take on this job which proved costly and difficult because of a shortage of appropriate translators in Ann Arbor, where the Archive is located.

Now, as indicated in Table 4, the full set of transcripts, both in original language and English translation, have been archived at the Population Studies Center Data Archives at the University of Michigan with the exception 5 original language transcripts from the Philippines,

which appear to have been lost by the local research team. All English transcripts are in text (ASCII) form and formatted for use with the Ethnograph software for assisting analysis of qualitative data (Seidel, 1994), although they can be easily reformatted to fit other specifications. Original language versions are based on various word processing programs appropriate to the language. With some exceptions, the transcripts indicate relevant characteristics of the area where they took place, date of data and characteristics of the focus group participants: sex, place of residence (urban or rural), socioeconomic status (high or low), ethnicity (in the case of Singapore and Taiwan) type of participants (elderly or adult). No full names or addresses of participants are indicated for the purpose of confidentiality.

As part of establishing the archive, a set of conditions for use were developed in consultation with the research teams in all of the collaborating countries. These conditions, shown the Appendix, are intended to make the transcripts available to scholars or researchers who are interested in qualitative analysis for such purposes as research papers or dissertations on aging issues but at the same time to ensure responsible use and adequate feed back to the original researchers.

In conclusion, the Population Studies Center has made quite an effort in creating qualitative data archive. It was more complicated than originally anticipated but nevertheless doable. The experience at the Population Studies Center's archive suggests that chances of success in qualitative data archiving requires significant funding, good cooperation from researchers or organizations providing the data, and considerable management effort to see the whole process through. There is tedious work involved to keep track and follow up at each stage. An important question not yet answered but that has bearing for future attempts is 'How much demand will there be for use of the archived material?'. We believe the data have considerable potential both for comparative analysis across countries and for country level analysis and that they should be of interest to scholars involved in research on a range of aging issues. So far, however, the archive has received only a very modest number of requests for data use. Is it because of the archives have not been publicized enough? Or is it because researchers who want to use qualitative data are not interested in aging issues or

researchers who are specialized in aging issues do not have much interest in using qualitative data? Presenting this paper at this conference provides a good opportunity to help answer these questions. We welcome this opportunity to introduce the archive to the wider audience at this congress. We hope this presentation will stimulate interest among researchers and scholars in using qualitative data archive in their future research.

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Table 1. Criteria for Selection of Focus Group Participants

	Taiwan	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
Generation (E,A)	x	x	x	x
Residence (U,R)	x	x	-	x
SES (H,L)	-	x	x	x
Sex (M,F)	x	x	-	-
Education (H,L)	x	-	-	-
Ethnicity	x	-	x	-

Key: Generation -- E=elderly; A=adult children
 Residence -- R=rural; U=urban
 SES, Education -- H=high; L=low

Table 2. Number of Focus Groups by Countries and Criteria

	Taiwan	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand
Total	21	18	21	26
Generation				
Elderly	16	10	13	13
Adult	5	8	8	13
Residence				
Urban	12	10	21	8
Rural	9	8	-	18
SES				
High	-	4	11	12
Low	-	14	10	14*
Sex				
Male	8	9	-	-
Female	6	9	-	-
Both	7	-	21	26
Education				
High	6	-	-	-
Low	9	-	-	-
Both	6	-	-	-
Ethnicity				
Chinese	-	-	8	-
Malay	-	-	7	-
Indian	-	-	6	-
Fukeinese	13	-	-	-
Hakanese	3	-	-	-
Mainlander	5	-	-	-

Note: * includes 2 mixed SES

Table 3. Topics included in the focus group discussion guidelines

	Philippines	Singapore	Taiwan	Thailand
Living arrangement	*	*	*	*
Support exchanges with children/kin	*	*	*	*
Social contact with kin/others	*	**	-	**
Economic situation income/assets work	* *	** *	- **	** *
Health status	*	-	*	-
Program utilization	**	*	**	**
Respect	*	*	*	*
Change over time	*	*	*	*
Role of elderly in community	**	*	*	**
Family size and support	*	*	**	*
Emotional support	*	*	**	-

Key: * = as main topic
 ** = to limited extent
 - = not included

Table 4. Number of Potentially Available and Archived Transcripts at the Population Studies Center (PSC), University of Michigan

	Original language		English translation	
	Potentially available	at PSC	Potentially available	at PSC
Singapore	-	-	21	21
Taiwan	21	21	21	21
Philippines	18	13	18	18
Thailand	26	26	26	26

Appendix. Conditions for use of focus group discussion transcripts from the Population Studies Center Archive

Anyone proposing to use the archive must agree to the following:

- a. Submit a statement of their research interests and objectives to the director of the project, "Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly".
- b. Provide copies of any final reports or papers to the project director.
- c. Acknowledge the Population Studies Center Data Archives, the project, and the specific country host organizations and principal investigators as the source of the data.
- d. Not distribute copies of the transcripts in any form to anyone else without written permission of the project director.