Reuse of qualitative data:
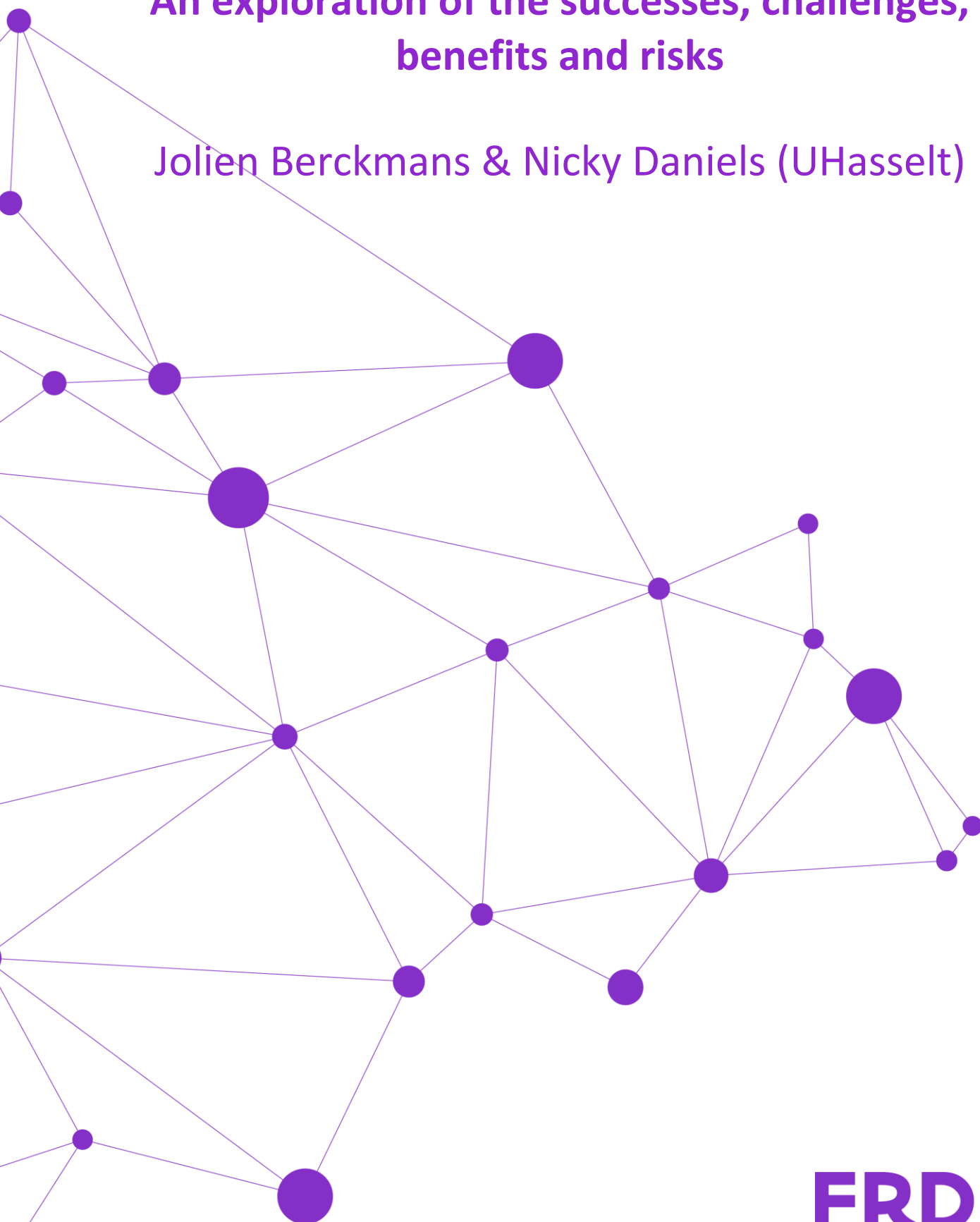
An exploration of the successes, challenges, benefits and risks

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FRDN

Reuse of qualitative data: An exploration of the successes, challenges, benefits and risks

Reaching for the Open Science goals is not easy for a researcher working with audio/video recordings, transcripts, surveys, etc. There is no doubting this, given that approximately 90 people from far and wide attended our online workshop on the reuse of qualitative data. Although "workshop", as we intended it at the start, is not an appropriate term for how we spent those 2 fruitful afternoon hours on the last day of April. It ended up being a perfect knowledge exchange between researchers and research support staff, with presentations and discussions going together like NVivo and QDA. This blog provides a travel guide through the different topics discussed during the session. For those who like to go on an adventure without a travel guide, you can explore all the available materials from the workshop on your own via this page.
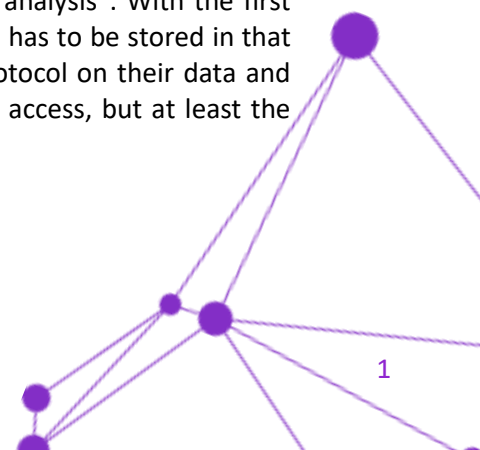
Not all those who wander are lost

For those who want the sightseeing tour, we will start by telling you about the location where it all started. Two data stewards from Hasselt University – who are also the writers of this blogpost, what are the odds? – went to the **Open Science (OS) Festival in Rotterdam in 2023**. Already in mind with the idea to develop an Open Science training for our qualitative researchers, we both attended the workshop "Practical tips for making qualitative data reusable" by DANS co-workers, among which Ricarda Braukmann. They presented their guidebook on making qualitative data reusable and accompanying decision tree. Your two writers only needed one look at each other to know that we were thinking the same thing: "this is what we want to do for our researchers." We could either reinvent the wheel and do it ourselves, or we could go for a collaboration with Ricarda, to which she (thankfully!) agreed. *If you are still reading this blogpost right now, you will also enjoy our full report on the OS festival which you can find via this link.*

The collaboration with DANS motivated us to go big – or in any case bigger than Hasselt University, so we invited all Flemish research institutions to collaborate on the development of this workshop. ITG, ILVO and KU Leuven jumped on the wagon to join our brainstorm sessions. As it would be an online session anyway, we opened up the workshop to everyone interested in the topic. The result is an epic journey toward reusable qualitative data.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

As expected, the first stop on our road is the presentation of the guidebook and decision tree by **Ricarda Braukmann**, which is available on Zenodo. This guidebook helps researchers decide which access they can grant to their qualitative data. If the data are anonymized and the participants have given their consent, they could be made available in open access. If there is no consent, it would be safer to make the anonymized data available under restricted access. Besides those standard options, there are two alternatives called "secure environment" and "decentralized analysis". With the first option, the data can be reanalyzed in a secure environment and the analysis has to be stored in that environment. With the second option, the original researchers run your protocol on their data and provide you with the results. If all else fails, the data can be kept in closed access, but at least the metadata could be made openly available.

Simple, is it not? No, it is not! When are data truly anonymous? The answer probably depends on who you are asking: the participant, the researcher, the data archive manager, the data protection officer, … The main challenge will be to define guidelines on making data anonymous, preferably institution-wide, and ideally – or rather utopianly – across the national research institutions. Have a look at our collaborative notes to find out which (other) issues are raised during the Q&A, and feel free to add questions and/or answer them. Further, we would like to draw your attention to the "Open Hour SSH", a weekly Q&A session for the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) community, hosted by the DANS data station managers. Send in all your questions!

Don't call it a dream, call it a plan

With one hour left in our travel schedule, we hand over the wheel to 4 qualitative researchers "who have been there". Starting with **Dragana Radanović**, a doctoral researcher at KU Leuven, who made the **interview transcripts** from her project "You draw like a child!" available via the institutional repository RDR. She goes into detail about the informed consent that she asked from her participants and how she handled the pseudonymization of the transcripts. However, she raises an important question of whether participants really understand what it means to share their data openly. This ethical issue is again stressed in the collaborative notes: "Even if there is consent and you are allowed to share it openly, you might have to consider to still protect the data (e.g. making it available in restricted access)" (quote taken over with minor changes).

We set forth with our travel guide **Mira Schneiders**, a socio-ecological health researcher at the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITG). She collaborated on a qualitative research study in 2022, where they did in-depth interviews with qualitative researchers in various positions (e.g. PhD, PIs, early career, …) from different low- and middle- income countries (Thailand, Vietnam, Kenia, …). They wanted to know **how the researchers perceived the benefits and opportunities, but also the risks and challenges of sharing qualitative data**. You can learn about all their findings in Mira's presentation. An interesting discussion follows whether you would be inclined to reuse data not having been involved in the data collection, especially for "old" datasets. "How many years can we consider for the re-use of archived qualitative data?" (quote from collaborative notes).

The third captain to sail us through the qualitative data storm is **Noémie Aubert Bonn**, a postdoctoral researcher at UHasselt. She shows us the **6-steps approach that she followed to share the qualitative data** from her PhD research project. Essential steps that have been mentioned by our previous speakers as well are a clear statement in the informed consent, maximum deidentification and a double-check with the research participants. You can find all the lessons learned and new challenges and questions via this link. Additionally, she preregistered her project on OSF and uploaded the templates and procedures (consent forms, information sheets, demographic questionnaires) to facilitate reuse and reproducibility.

We reach the end of our journey in the **Community of Practice 4 Open Naturally Occurring Data** (COP 4 ONOD), guided by Bogdana-Raluca Huma, assistant professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Naturally occurring data (e.g. real-life conversations) are commonly used by qualitative researchers and are valuable for reuse, but – as we noticed today – difficult to share. Huma and her team provide support to researchers and research support staff by means of **advice, guidelines, templates, trainings, use cases, etc.** They want to "establish a Community of Practice that will "outlive" the project and address future challenges concerning sharing and re-using naturally occurring data" (quote from presentation slides). See the collaborative notes for more information, and get involved by contacting open.naturally.ocurring.data@gmail.com.

Adventure is out there!

At the end of the road, we conclude that the Open Science struggle for qualitative researchers is real, but it is a feasible journey when you have companions on your trip, being either institutional data stewards or fellow researchers. We need unified guidelines on anonymization and pseudonymization as well as on appropriate ways to inform participants about the consequences of sharing their personal data. Also, we should not morally pressure our researchers into sharing all their qualitative data, but we should discuss which paths to take and the benefits it has for their research domain, society and themselves. Luckily, there are already initiatives to help us deal with these questions, like the guidebook and the Open Hour SSH by DANS and the CoP 4 ONOD at VUA. And of course, there are pioneer researchers in the field making efforts to share their qualitative data and communicating their best practices to the science community. This story is only beginning!

Want to continue this journey with us? If you want to discuss these issues further, have ideas on how to tackle them, want to stay informed about our plans and initiatives, … please contact us via jolien.berckmans@uhasselt.be and/or nicky.daniels@uhasselt.be.

The subtitles contain quotes taken from:
- *J.R.R. Tolkien ("Not all those who wander are lost")*
- *Lao Tzu ("A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step")*
- *Charles Muntz (voiced by Christopher Plummer) in Up (2009) ("Adventure is out there!")*