Conducting Qualitative Secondary Analysis: Experiences and Lessons

Introduction. In recent decades, due to the increased accessibility of archived quantitative and qualitative data, much attention has been dedicated to secondary analysis (Heaton, 2004). Secondary analysis as “any further analysis of an existing dataset which presents interpretations, conclusions, or knowledge additional to, or different from, presented in the first report on the inquiry as a whole and its main results” (Hakim, 1982, p.2) has been actively utilized in education and social sciences. Although predominant in quantitative research, qualitative secondary analysis also allows for examination of new research questions apart from the original objective of data collection and generation new and/or additional interpretations and conclusions that were absent in the original research findings. Conducted review of the peer-refereed scholarship over the last four decades (Sherif, 2016) illustrated numerous examples reporting outcomes of qualitative secondary analysis with the little emphasis on the process of analysis, evaluation of data quality and sufficiency, and methodological challenges of the approach. Therefore, this presentation proposal aims to describe experiences with qualitative secondary analysis and outline major strengths and limitation of the method emerged as a result of a conducted dissertation study. As a cost- and time efficient and unobtrusive to participants method, qualitative secondary analysis has potentially important implications for educational and social researchers, as well as graduate students interested in obtaining additional understandings and/or generating new knowledge in a time-efficient and low-cost fashion (Mitchell, 2015; Szabo & Strang, 1997).

Method. Within the framework of the dissertation research seeking to explore the notion of youth leadership and educational pathways created to develop leadership in rural high
school youth, secondary analysis of existing qualitative data was employed. The original longitudinal case study informing school leaders and academia on youth accounts on leadership, their attitudes, and experiences in leadership development utilized several methods of data collection such as face-to-face semi-structured interviews, collection and review of documented materials, and in-field observations. The data collection process for the original study began in April of the 2013-2014 academic year after being approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board. For the two-year period, the study enrolled sixteen students and two school faculty members. The original qualitative data set selected for the secondary analysis included one hundred sixty pages of transcribed interviews, numerous observational protocols, and sixty-two documents. The data set was further assessed for quality, sufficiency, and suitability for the secondary analysis.

**Results and Discussion.** Conducted secondary analysis of existing qualitative data within the framework of the dissertation study revealed several methodological findings. Those included findings related to assessment of data quality and sufficiency, as well as advantages and limitations of utilizing an existing qualitative data set.

The process of evaluation of quality and sufficiency of data begun with conceptualization of the dissertation research study and selection of a research question that was different from the original study. The secondary research questions and the data set were selected based on the fit of topic and presence of a logical link between the two. Along with the relevance of the secondary research questions to the original data, context of the original study and its sample were taken into consideration. An important question that was asked is how well the context and the sample of the original research project
match those of the present project. Asking that question helped better understand the complexity, diversity, and contexts of the primary research and match those to the current research settings.

To determine the quality and sufficiency of the existing qualitative data set the breadth and depth of the collected data were examined. This process allowed for evaluation of data completeness, which included completed interview transcripts and documents, their accuracy, and detailed sampling and study plan. It was concluded that a data set should provide enough background information so there will be no need to seek additional information about the data from other channels furthering researcher’s understanding of examined phenomena. Specifically, data selected for re-examination must provide vivid, thick, and complete descriptions of a researched issue.

Conducting qualitative secondary analysis also revealed the importance of existing data sustainability and the possibility of further follow-up with the sample. It was found that qualitative data collected for an extensive period of time are capable of providing more in-depth meanings participants place on the events and processes. Furthermore, due to the established rapport between the primary investigator and subjects, longitudinal data can recover missing aspects of the original research context. In the case when data were outdated or missing, it appeared necessary to recontact informants. This procedure helped not only facilitate the outcomes of the secondary research, but also clarify certain meanings and expressions.

Capacity of research grounded in qualitative secondary analysis cannot be underestimated. Naturalistic qualitative secondary data can be used to construct and verify knowledge at a low or no cost, as well as unobtrusively explore phenomena related
to vulnerable populations. It can generate additional context of educational encounters, thus resolving issues associated with data underuse. Lastly, qualitative secondary analysis enables one to broaden and deepen knowledge with the minimum investment of time.

Despite its apparent advantages, conducted secondary analysis of qualitative data imposed several limitations. Specifically, identified with the nature of qualitative research, there was a threat to data reliability and validity. However, extensive background information, completeness of the existing data set, and data triangulation allowed for addressing that limitation. Correspondingly to data reliability and validity, the method introduced some concerns in respect to researcher’s reflexivity, sample representation, and anonymity.

**Conclusion.** Asking additional research questions that have not been originally asked can reveal new knowledge, question current conclusions, or support existing theories. Qualitative secondary analysis, therefore, aims to contribute to the specific body of knowledge by providing an alternative perspective on topics without any intrusion into vulnerable populations (Johnston, 2014; Roberts, 1996). Successful secondary analysis of qualitative data requires one’s ability to effectively determine the quality and sufficiency of an existing data source, as well as thoroughly consider potential limitations of the method. Despite its limitations, qualitative secondary analysis has important implications for novice and experienced educational and social researchers seeking to develop, extend, and explore the environment in a flexible and unobtrusive way. It can create an opportunity for not only cost and time effective research, but also first-hand experiences with qualitative data.

**References**


