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Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data

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Also called *qualitative secondary analysis*, secondary analysis of qualitative data is the reexamination of one or more existing qualitatively derived data sets in order to pursue research questions that are distinct from those of the original inquiries. Because qualitative inquiries often involve intensive data collection using methods such as semistructured interviews, participant observation, and fieldwork approaches, they typically create data sets that contain a wealth of information beyond that which can be included in a primary research report. Furthermore, with the fullness of time, new questions often arise for which existing data sets may be an efficient and appropriate source of grounded knowledge.

Secondary analysis also provides a mechanism by which researchers working in similar fields can combine data sets in order to answer questions of a comparative nature or to examine themes whose meaning is obscured in the context of smaller samples. When data sets from different populations, geographical locations, periods of time, or situational contexts are subjected to a secondary inquiry, it becomes possible to more accurately represent a phenomenon of interest in a manner that accounts for the implications of the original inquiry approaches. For example, Angst and Deatrick (1996) were able to draw our attention to discrepancies between chronically ill children's involvement in everyday as opposed to major treatment decisions by conducting a comparative secondary analysis on data sets from their respective prior studies of children living with cystic fibrosis and those about to undergo surgery for scoliosis.

Although qualitative researchers have often created multiple reports on the basis of a single data set, the articulation of secondary analysis as a distinctive qualitative research approach is a relatively recent phenomenon (Heaton, 1998). Methodological precision and transparency are critically important to the epistemological coherence and credibility of a secondary analysis in order to account for the implications of the theoretical and methodological frame of reference by which the qualitative researcher entered primary study (Thorne, 1994). Regardless of the number of data sets and the level of involvement the secondary researcher may have had in creating them, a secondary analysis inherently involves distinct approaches to conceptualizing sampling, data collection procedures, and interaction between data collection and analysis (Hinds, Vogel, & Clarke-Steffen, 1997).

Qualitative secondary analysis can be an efficient and effective way to pose questions that extend beyond the scope of any individual research team, examine phenomena that would not have been considered relevant at the original time of inquiry, or explore themes whose theoretical potential emerges only when researchers within a field of study examine each others' findings.

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