

Chapter 49

Secondary Analysis for Digitized Data: Its Utility in Finding and Selecting Indicators of Social Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Secondary analysis for quantitative data is a social research method traditionally employed for statistical analysis of administrative data. In the new digital society, this old research method that pre-existed the emergence of the new digital environment has been digitized to carry out its valuable activity in doing science. In this chapter, the secondary analysis for digitized data is illustrated. Thanks to the growing availability of datasets digitized on the web, the scholars of social well-being use the secondary analysis to inquiry this phenomenon through a cross-national perspective. The authors present the empirical study of World Love Index, in which the utility of the secondary analysis in finding and selecting valid indicators of social well-being is experienced.

INTRODUCTION¹

In the 1990s the scholars of communication studies considered Internet to be virtual reality, something different from the real world, in which the people could take refuge to redefine own identity, community and corporeity; this idea is related to the obsolete notion of web, as theater of fake identities and deviant behaviors (Jurgenson, 2012). Recently, the idea of virtual cyberspace, according to which the internet

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exists as a separate place, detached from the reality, has been abandoned. There is no longer distinction between the real and the virtual world. The online actions performed by people have offline consequences and vice versa; nowadays, these two aspects intersect each other in everyday life (Rogers, 2009).

To study social phenomena in a society in which the digital character is perceived as an essential dimension that constitutes it from within, new research methods have been designed and employed. Methodological research programs produced, and are still producing, ad hoc research methods that can be classified into two groups: the ‘digital methods’ and the ‘digitized methods’. The digital methods are born in the digital world and therefore they are digital native (e.g., sentiment analysis); digital methods are fitted for analyzing digital data, created within the digital environment (e.g., posts on Facebook or on Twitter). Digital data are produced by spontaneous activity of people in the digital setting; digital behaviors leave digital traces that are stored and can be analyzed. Digital data are persistent and easily searchable (Natale and Airoidi, 2017).

The digitized methods, on the contrary, are traditional social research methods, imported into the digital era to which they pre-existed (e.g., the web survey); the digitized methods are fitted for analyzing digitized data, created offline, and then imported and stored online (e.g., survey responses). Digitized data are produced by digitalization process, which led to the transition from paper and pencil data to digitized data; previously recorded on paper, data have been progressively digitized, increasing the availability of digitized empirical documentation that can be analyzed by software on computer (Rogers, 2015; Natale and Airoidi, 2017). In this chapter, the digitized methods of social research are accounted; methods born in the pre-digital age and then adapted to the new digital environment. In particular, the secondary data analysis method is illustrated, a traditional research method applied to digitized data. This digitized method is selected because it is considered very useful in finding valid indicators of conceptual dimensions that are so general as not to suggest direct forms of empirical operationalization, such as the concept of social well-being.

The authors of the chapter present the World Love Index, an index based on the secondary data analyses. The World Love Index is the result of the empirical operationalization of agape (Boltanski, 1990) as Social Love concept, closely related to the concept of social well-being (Nussbaum, 2013), as an important factor of cohesiveness in contemporary society as well as a key element in promoting solidarity and recognition in pluralist societies (Iorio, 2014). This paper describes the procedure applied by the research group in finding and selecting valid indicators of Social Love conceptual dimensions; the World Love Index is a valid example of how to design a transnational index from secondary sources, using digitized data.

SECONDARY ANALYSIS FOR DIGITIZED DATA

“Secondary data analysis concerns the analysis of previously collected, available and systematically organized data, having individual or aggregate unit of analysis, coming from one or more statistical sources, with the aim of answering a defined research question regardless of the purposes for which the data are originally collected” (Biolcati-Rinaldi and Vezzoni, 2012, p. 16).

The peculiarity of this research method is analyzing already existing data which have previously been collected by an/other researcher/s (Hyman, 1972; Corbetta, 2003). This brings many advantages in doing social research: “savings in relation to resources, in terms of time, money and personnel. To begin with, using data collected by someone else means that the data is available relatively quickly. The

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