

# Qualitative Longitudinal Research: Exploring ways of researching lives through time

## Interpreting processes through QL interview data

The aim of this session is to consider the insights we might gain about real lives through time using qualitative longitudinal data. We will also consider some of the methodological challenges of using these data in research

The three fragments of transcripts reproduced below were collected in two research projects. Helen's case is drawn from research investigating children's reaction to divorce. This was a prospective study including follow up interviews. The data presented from P and C is drawn from remembering in a single life-history narrative in research to develop methodologies for accessing socially excluded groups.

- 1) What insights do we gain from each of these cases about personal change / sameness?
  - 2) Can we make links between these observations about change / sameness and wider social structures?
  - 3) What observations might we make about the rigour of the biographies produced using these two approaches?
  - 4) How might qualitative longitudinal studies be designed to increase the possibilities for generalisability / transferability of findings?
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### **Helen**

**Helen's parents separated when she was three. Initially, at her father's insistence, she was in a shared residence arrangement, split every two or three days and spending every weekend with her father. But by the time of her first interview Helen, aged eight, and her older brother were, at their own request, spending less time with their father.**

### **Interview 1**

**Helen (aged 8):**

**Bren:** What's it like for you when you're going off to dad's?

**Helen (aged 8):** I sometimes feel a bit sad, being with my mum only for weekdays cos I haven't stayed with her for the weekend. I didn't really want to go to my dad's because I didn't really want to get car sick and get even more bad in my tummy. ... Usually I feel poorly after I've been to my dad's. When I first went when I was about three, then I stayed in my bedroom and mum and dad had to pull me downstairs. ... Dad doesn't sort of help when he starts shouting at me it I get [something] wrong ... A good father shouldn't be

hard on the wife and not hard on the children, but that's what dad does and mum hasn't really got a loud voice she can't really shout so she only goes, 'stop it, stop it'. ... My mum ... doesn't really like him ... because of how he treats me and my brother Alex. ... I feel safe at my mum's house because she hasn't got a temper and my dad has. ... They really don't like me to tell somebody this [whispering], but I don't really like my dad as much as my mum because he gets in a temper with me and he is quite horrible to my brother. ... I'm glad that I see my mum more now.

**Bren:** Do you think you'd like to change it at all in the future?

**Helen:** It depends how horrible my dad gets, say he gets much more horrible, or say he gets much nicer and kinder. So it depends on that.

## **Interview 2**

### **Helen (aged 11) has decided to end the visits:**

**Helen:** 'When I used to see him first of all, it was every weekend... And then I started seeing him three weekends out of four...Then he moved [200 miles] away for work and then he moved back, six miles from here and I started seeing him more. And I didn't really like it. ... I did ask him if I could just see him three weekends out of four but then he insisted that I stay there on Fridays. ....And then I went to him last Thursday night and I left on Friday...I was meant to be staying the whole weekend.... I'm not seeing him any more.... I didn't really make the choice until that Thursday. I told my dad on Thursday night....I had to, I really didn't want to spend the rest of the weekend there. I couldn't. I had to tell him, so I could just ring mum the next day and tell her to come because [otherwise] he could have turned her away or something. Mum always said if I wanted to leave then she would always come and get me. Even if she was at work, I could ring her on her mobile. ...When he moved near us, he thought that I would like to see him more, and that the reason he didn't see me before was because he worked away....He thought that was the reason....But even if he does move, you know, like across the road from us, I wouldn't see him. ... Alex left dad... the summer before last ... because he didn't want to see him again. ... He was visiting dad hundreds of miles away, down south, and I was there, and Alex actually rang mum, 'cos he wanted to go [home] and mum came, so I kind of realized that I could leave whenever I wanted to. And then Alex came back to dad's in the winter term. And I think dad's been much nicer to him now, 'cos he's worried.

**Jennifer:** have your feelings about the divorce changed over the years?

**Helen:** Yeah definitely because I realized, I found out, you know, about my dad, because I didn't really – well, I did know, but not like, know as in completely understand, ... 'cos Dad was not treating Alex very well. That was when I started to see him less. And when I realized that I actually had the choice, if I wanted to, I didn't have to go. ...

**Jennifer:** What's it been like living in your family?

**Helen:** Sometimes I wish that I wasn't – that it could be a different life ... if I look at somebody else's family, I would rather be in their place, 'cos I would love their parents . ... I wouldn't love just mum.

**Jennifer:** If you could have one wish, what would that be?

**Helen:** Well I would probably say that I wish I had never known my dad. Because then Alex and I would never have to know what went on.

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These are excerpts from transcripts of life-history interviews with two of twenty-seven socially excluded people we interviewed in research to develop methodological strategies to recruit and research socially excluded groups. Both these excerpts are discussions about heroin addiction and attempts by the respondents to address that addiction. When we were analysing these transcripts we were particularly interested to investigate trajectories of social exclusion and the mechanisms that impacted on these trajectories. When we interviewed P he was not using heroin and had recently taken on a part-time job. C was still using heroin at the time of this interview.

P But, your Probation Officer is there to help you, you know, they are fucking there to help you, and they do, whatever they.....em.....on your probation report for court whatever they.....em.....think you should get, they write to the courts and tell the courts a suitable sentence for you and usually it's a rehabilitation order and the courts will usually go with the Probation Officer, so if you make a good impression with the Probation Officer, you're fucking scott free away from jail usually, and so Probation Officer helped me a lot. I've had my Probation Officer ten year, and she were fantastic and err supported housing after the er.....after the bail hostel – fantastic – S Housing, er, K Lodge it is, er.....you get your own key worker, em.....you don't have to see her if you don't want to, although you've gotta have two monthly sessions, em.....half an hour sessions, just to let her know how you're going on, how its developing, etc. etc.....how you're progressing. I think they supported me a lot and .....em.....do you know summat, since I've got off heroin, I've never had so many fucking friends to be honest with you Adam, who actually.....I've never had so many people who want to know me now than you know, back then, you know, I'd meet people who I knew in Gruston.....er.....and I'd struggle to get fucking a pound out of them, but now..... you know, I've got friends calling me up to go out, fucking, you know, so I've never had so many fucking friends (A: mmm), but.....sorry Adam

A No, no, no, that's really interesting, that's really interesting, em.....so you you basically build build up again, I mean as a heroin addict you've don't, that's not necessary

P You get a lot of fucking respect for er.....you see people in Gruston – I've seen so many fucking people die of heroin overdoses and when

they're from big families in Gruston and they've died of a heroin overdose, there's usually all the community comes together and goes to the funeral, and.....to die of a heroin overdose, its not a fucking.....its not a respectable way to die is it? You know, heroin overdose, you know, pushed under the carpet.....so when you fight heroin addiction and you do manage to make, you know, you do manage to er.....er, get some sort of maintenance off it, you get a fucking hell of a lot of respect from a lot of people in your own community to know that you've made that transition period of, well you know, one minute you could have been dead in a gutter, o'deed in a gutter, but em.....now you've actually managed to beat that, like, not many.....like...other people in the community haven't managed to beat that and I have.....you know.....(A: No and I am so glad) .well yes, and usually, you know, you end up in a gutter. There's not much fucking respect to dying from an overdose is there? (A: No) You know, its not a nice fucking thing .....er.....its.....what respectful way is there to die? Expect maybe fucking dying for your country or for your family. You know what I mean though.....fucking a warrior or a fucking soildier

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C: It were a good doctor that I had. But with us like moving up this end, we wasn't in his catchment area so he had to take us off his register...that's and then we went down to the doctor down there and he said no, can't help you. If he'd have just carried on giving me what my doctor would have given me, I wouldn't be on it now. It's like, in a way, I blame the doctors in a way for me going back to it because if he had carried on giving me the help I was getting off the other doctor, I wouldn't have gone back to it because I was, like, not bothering. You know it's like with the other doctor, he were giving me DS and sleepers (A: right). Because that's like, when you come off heroin (A: yeah), they give you methodone, they'll listen to what you want right then, give you methodone, then they weaned you off the methodone. From that they give ya DS and sleepers.

A Right, DS is what?

C DS, dehydrocodeine's. That's what I was getting off him, me doctor on the Lane. And when we moved up here, he says like will you register with another doctor, we've got to do all these tests and what have you. So through that I started using again.

A And I mean, why, the other doctor was prescribing DS, how did you get on with him? What was the relationship like?

C With my other doctor that were giving me medication?

A Yeah.

- C He were a nice doctor, he was a good doctor (A: right). That's what I was saying, once we'd moved from down there to up here and we changed to this doctors over here, I don't know what the difference is between the doctors or what. When you take your medical records from one doctor to another, they've got to still give you the prescribed drugs what you've been getting. But not this one down here said, but they don't do that. And I would have had to go through a referral again from Sp Mt for them to give them the okay to give me DS and sleepers.
- A And you...you weren't into doing that?
- C No, because it's like if there were a waiting list then as well, there was a six month waiting list then to get into Sp Mt. That's before you even got a letter off Sp Mt to say actually go down to see them and then to give to, sort of like listen to what your problems and this what, for them give the doctor the okay to give it to you. So by the time that I'd have got me..... by the time I'd have gotten my letter off Sp Mt, it would have been too late anyway because six months then, I was now back on the gear by then so. So DS then after that wouldn't have been no good (A: right). So, like if I had been away.....if he would have carried on giving me the prescribed things that I was getting off my doctor on Lane, I don't think, I would be touching it as well this way
- A I mean, yeah, and how does that make you feel? You know, once you knew that you needed a referral, you knew that you had to go through all of that, so what did you think?
- C I thought it was a waste time, even trying to go for help because, I'm going to go for help but I'm just getting knocked back for it and everywhere I go, it doesn't matter who I see, I'm just getting knocked back for help, so the only way that I can do is get the gear that I need so that I'm not going to be poorly, so.....that's why, as I say, them doctors down there, I blame them doctors for most, for sum of it.