

Qualitative Longitudinal Research: Exploring ways of researching lives through time
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Issues in Qualitative Longitudinal Research

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Introduction

Qualitative longitudinal research is experiencing something of a surge of interest in the social sciences these days. In some social sciences of course it was always firmly ensconced, for example anthropology, oral history, community studies, and in the subfields of sociology, education and criminology. We can learn a lot about the issues involved and ways of dealing with them by examining experience in these fields. There is indeed a growing interest and involvement in qualitative research methods in general, in the social sciences and amongst policy makers. Policy makers can see that statistical methods can give them answers to 'what' questions, but leave them in relative darkness about 'why' and 'how'. Paradoxically, at the same time there is increasing dependence on quantitative research and statistical knowledge for socio-political planning. And *quantitative* longitudinal studies themselves initially found government and policy makers unkeen to want to invest in a type of research that would not yield immediate results. But over time government researchers have learned to use these data sets, understanding their potential as a permanent policy resource to be interrogated and tailored for future enquiry. The presence of these longitudinal resources significantly changes the relationship between research and policy making that characterises one-off studies, including most qualitative research and there is considerable investment in them now. Indeed the government is currently investing about £15m in a new UK household panel survey. There is potential for developing an equivalent presence for a Qualitative Longitudinal study, which would act both as a resource for policy makers and help educate research users as to what this kind of data can and cannot do. The Timescapes Study, of which more later, will hopefully meet that potential.

'QLL research produces a dynamic picture of people's experiences, identities and practices which may be at odds with the more static definitions and typologies employed by policymakers. Longitudinal research can highlight the range of factors that impact on people's lives, the particular contexts in which these happen and the changes over time. It can thus better inform policy-making'. [Participant in feasibility study]

So qualitative research in general, and qualitative longitudinal research in particular are becoming increasingly popular. Some of the reasons for this might be associated with:

- Holistic approaches to policy, focusing on the individual rather than the issue, and understanding the often subtle interaction of factors shaping processes such as social exclusion, resilience and risk;
- Interest in the notion of the career – in relation to traditional areas of work, or of drink, drugs, sex, mental health etc.;
- The impact of theories of individualisation and detraditionalisation that suggest an uncoupling of agency and structure that have generated renewed interest in the biographical and the self conscious process through which individuals create their own projects of self – encouraging the use of life history and biographical methods over time.

In highlighting issues in QL research I will draw on the experience of participating in

1. The *Inventing Adulthoods* study¹,

a ten year QL study of young people's transitions to adulthood, using repeat biographical interviews as one main method in a multi method approach (Henderson et al. 2007);

2. an archiving project based on that study, *Making the Long View*², testing the feasibility of producing an ethical archive of the Inventing Adulthoods data (Henderson et al. 2006)

www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods

3. a study for the ESRC investigating whether a large scale QL study was feasible, involving a literature review of QLR, and a consultation with practitioners of the art (Holland et al. 2006);

4. the production of a successful bid to the ESRC for such a large scale qualitative longitudinal study, *Timescapes: Changing relationships and identities through the life course*³.

I will discuss some definitions of QLR, and issues that emerge when pursuing this methodology. The discussion will touch on methodological models of QLR, methods, ethical issues, including informed consent and data ownership, and analysis, archiving and secondary analysis to name a few.

Definitions

As QL studies appear across the social science disciplines, definitions do vary with disciplinary, theoretical and methodological focus.

Epstein for example suggests three types of QLR that are characteristic of anthropology and community studies:

- (1) continuous research in the same small society over a number of years;

- (2) periodic restudies at regular or irregular intervals;
- (3) return after a lengthy interval of time has elapsed since the original research (2002: 64).

Others specify the amount of time, for example at least one year (Young et al. 1991); multiple waves of observations over a substantial calendar time involving months or years (Kelly and McGrath 1988: 135); or as in life course research, which involves amassing qualitative and quantitative data over several generations to describe and predict human pathways from the cradle to the grave (Ruspini 1999, Heinz and Kruger 2001).

Johnny Saldana suggests that 'Longitudinal means a lonnnnnnnng time' (Saldana 2003:1), just as a participant in a the Inventing Adulthoods study gave as a reason for dropping out, 'It's along ting, man, can't do it'. Saldana identifies the three foundational principles of QLR as duration, time and change, emphasising the importance of time and change processes as contextual. He has a flexible notion of what change means: 'I feel we should be flexible and allow a definition of change to emerge as a study proceeds and its data are analysed. Ironically yet fittingly, we should permit ourselves to change our meaning of change as a study progresses' (Saldana 2003: 12).

It is a slightly scary thought, that some of the basic concepts you work with will be subject to change, but a major advantage of qualitative and QL research is flexibility. In quantitative longitudinal research innovation can become more difficult as a study progresses, and consistent measurement is at a premium. But in contrast qualitative longitudinal studies must respond to innovation in the field, in an iterative process informing the next stage of data generation. There is the potential for development and innovation to take place throughout the entire research process, and the flexibility as you progress through time can extend to sampling, methods, units of analysis and theorisation. Interviews can be adjusted and the focus of the study can shift in qualitative research in general, and even more so in QLR.

To draw on the example of anthropology, two collections provide a review of the field over time and considerable insight into an established canon of long-term anthropological enterprise. They yield a fascinating picture of the range and complexity of qualitative longitudinal research undertaken in this field (Foster et al. 1979, Kemper and Royce 2002). Such research has involved developing a necessarily flexible approach, constantly having to adapt to change. Long term anthropological studies can expect changes

- in the nature of the community under study;
- in the needs, goals, options and world-views of community members;
- in the political landscape within the community and within which it is embedded;
- and in the relationships between researchers and community members.

Kemper and Royce point out that it is impossible to take on issues of time without the research itself coming into the frame. This includes practical questions of how to organise and maintain a research team, the domestic politics of a team, funding and job security issues and intellectual fashions. Many of these issues are also relevant for quantitative longitudinal research of course. The body of anthropological research and the issues taken into consideration can provide models for other disciplines and also illustrate some differences in the concerns of different disciplines. An example here is concern about anonymity and confidentiality that emerges for many qualitative researchers, inhibiting the sharing of data, and we will be discussing this shortly. Data sharing and participatory involvement with those studied are well established in anthropology.

Methodological approaches in QLR

In reviewing the literature of QLR, we identified four methodological models, which link to the definitions given earlier:

1. Mixed method approaches, where qualitative longitudinal elements are attached to a quantitative study. This can vary from a fully integrated quantitative/qualitative approach and design, to small qualitative 'add ons' to a quantitative study.
2. Planned prospective, qualitative longitudinal studies. These can be divided into studies where the unit of analysis is the individual, and those where the unit of analysis is something other than the individual, for example the family, community, setting, or organisation.
3. Follow-up studies. Where initial samples or sub-samples have been followed up after a period of time has elapsed. These can be associated with the scholarship of individuals, where samples are revisited over the course of an academic career, or research teams, with changing personnel returning over a period of time to a sample or location.

4. Evaluation/ tracking studies. Longitudinal qualitative methods are becoming an increasingly popular approach for policy evaluation.

QLR is also a space for both methodological innovation and experimentation with methods. As studies progress they may be able to harness technological developments in data collection techniques and analysis. But there is also a disadvantage associated with this, as media used in QL studies may become redundant as the studies progress. These are issues that become extremely important in the consideration of archiving and secondary analysis.

Methods

The types of methods used to generate data in qualitative longitudinal research are those of qualitative research in general, but often combined with some methods associated with quantitative designs (for example surveys of varying sizes and types, social mapping of geographical areas). They also vary with discipline. In general the methods used in QLR will depend on the research questions, the substantive research area and the perspective, conceptual and theoretical framework of the researcher/discipline.

For many of the contributors to our consultation, individual life history interviews would comprise 'the backbone' of a qualitative longitudinal study. Contributors also observed that all QLL studies will have an element of ethnography, and that as a methodology ethnography is inherently temporal, and multimethod. Contributors talked about a wide range of qualitative tools including (reconvened) focus groups, observation, diaries (both written, video and 'memory books' (Thomson and Holland 2005), lifelines, and self-mapping.

Visual methods were discussed both as a strategy for primary data collection, and as ways of streamlining other data. A potential example from the Inventing Adulthoods study is videotaping someone talking through the contents of a memory book or diary, or reflecting on lifelines completed in an earlier interview. Visual methods can also be used as a means of documenting the research process.

Several contributors spoke of the value of combining qualitative with survey methods as well as the importance of the creation of robust and extensive baseline data at the start of a prospective project against which to assess change.

Ethics

Ethical issues raised by QLR include concerns around consent, confidentiality, anonymity, the potential impact of the research on both researched and researchers (Yates and McLeod 1996). Other problems arising from prolonged contact between researcher and researched are intrusion, dependency, distortion of life experience through repeated intervention, emotional involvement and problems of closure. Escaping the field is one of the most difficult things to do after a long engagement with participants (Yates and McLeod 1996, Mauthner et al. 1998, Kemper and Royce 2002, Ward and Henderson 2003, Royce 2005).

Here again, QLLR intensifies what is the case for qualitative research. Ward and Henderson (2003) draw attention to some of the ethical concerns raised when tracking vulnerable or marginalised groups, in their case young people who had been in care, and had experienced dependent drug use. They realised that they had responsibility in deciding whom to follow up, taking into consideration the emotional and psychological situation of the young person, and the possibility for an interview triggering relapse into drug use (Ward and Henderson 2003).

We had a similar issue when selecting cases from *Inventing Adulthoods* to take part in a dvd made to accompany an OU course, having particular concern for the young people's potential vulnerability. The *Inventing Adulthoods* study adopted a participatory, processual approach to consent, which was verbally renegotiated at each interview, and we continued that approach in the archiving project *Making the Long View*. Participants were assured that all steps would be taken to preserve their anonymity in the context of data storage and management, and any public representation involving their data. Whilst written consent was now essential, we continued our commitment to involving the relevant young people, by including them in the anonymisation process.

Questions of ethics featured strongly in the *consultation* for the feasibility study, although a number of contributors emphasised that QLL methods may not raise any ethical issues that are not common to either qualitative or longitudinal methods respectively. Rather they amplify or reframe established ethical challenges. Due care must be put into the relationship between researcher and researched and into ensuring an understanding of the consequences of involvement for all those taking part.

Informed consent in the context of QLR is not a one-off event, but a process, with continuous consultation necessary throughout all phases of the research, including data analysis and final reporting (France, Bendelow and Williams 2000). In *Making the Long View*, to create an ethical archive, we had to return to our participants and gain consent all over again for this new process of archiving the mass of material we had accumulated on each of them over the research period. If starting up a prospective QL study, consent for archiving should be built in from the start if archiving is planned.

As datasets accumulate and increase in value, ownership and control of the data also becomes an increasingly urgent ethical issue that is interwoven with questions concerning confidentiality and anonymity, of both participants and researchers. Different members of the research team may not agree as to the ownership or use of the data. When data is archived, shared or passed on, researchers have to contend with the delegation of ethical responsibilities and the loss of control over a data set. We have to consider this issue when we finally bequeath our data to archives, and allow different levels of access to that data. Professional bodies provide guidelines, and in some instances there are legal requirements, particularly in relation to young people. But these issues are not easily resolved. The experience of 'passing the mantle' in long-term anthropological studies provides an important source of understanding of what is involved.

In anthropology, large scale and long term studies have moved increasingly towards a participatory and collaborative model with the participants (e.g. Vogt (2002) on the Harvard Chiapas Project) and have become intergenerational. This involves an explicit and intentional passing of the mantle (for example Cliggett talks of 'inheriting fifty years of Gwembe Tonga research' (2002: 239); Kemper remarks on his transformation 'from student to steward' (2002: 284), and Cahn comments on 'being the third generation in Tzintzuntzan' (2002: 313).

The studies referred to here are also distinguished by the explicit way in which practical and ethical concerns about gathering, analysing, caring for and sharing large data sets are addressed. This is directly linked to the concern that tomorrow's QL studies are being shaped today. This practice has relevance for the development of current QL studies. As Vogt points out, highlighting the advantages of changing theoretical perspectives over time:

The principal advantage of a continuous long-range project over a short-range one, or a series of revisits, is the depth, quality, and variety of understandings achieved –

understandings of the basic ethnography and of the trends and processes of change. If the long-range project also involves a sizable team of students and younger colleagues who make one or more revisits and keep abreast of all the publications, then there is the added advantage of having a variety of fieldworkers with varied training and different theoretical biases who are forced to reconcile their findings and their analyses with one another. Vogt (2002: 145)

As suggested earlier, the research relationship inevitably becomes a focus of analytic attention within QLLR (Thomson and Holland 2003). A clear record of the research process and experience needs to be generated. In the *Inventing Adulthoods* study, we interviewed the interviewers about their experiences, and throughout asked the participants to reflect not only on their own lives, but the process of the research, and the impact it had on them.

Most researchers offer anonymity and confidentiality to their participants, and this can be harder to maintain, or requires considerable effort in QLR. We discovered that anonymising a series of up to six interviews undertaken over a period of 10 years in specific communities raised complex issues of how and what to anonymise.

Changing names of people and places is arguably relatively simple in the context of one interview but these people and places may take on very different significance as the story unfolds over six interviews. Their significance to the stories of other young people in the same research site also has to be considered and weighed. The picture keeps building as other interviews from the same research site line up on either side. Here I an argument for not anonymising from the start, since you are not entirely clear what needs anonymising.

There were two different 'audiences' to consider in relation to these cross-case and cross-research site considerations: internal and external. We found our concerns about protecting anonymity within the study were greater, that is that making sure that other study participants would not be able to identify someone was more challenging than external considerations. Holding all these dimensions in the balance when making anonymisation decisions was difficult but essential to the process. In this cumulative and contingent context, attempts to standardise are limited and the work proceeds on a case-by-case basis. Revisiting and revising decisions made in earlier transcripts also becomes inevitable

There is a current debate about anonymisation, with some arguing that the least anonymisation the better, or that there should be none at all in the interests of data quality. And the contrary position is that the protection of the individual through anonymisation is paramount.

Analysis

The analysis of qualitative longitudinal data will depend on the research topic and questions, the theoretical and methodological stance, and the specific methods employed in the study. The three critical elements which QLLS brings into the frame are time, process and change, and it is equally critical that analysis can engage with and capture these elements. Wolcott (1994) suggests three stages of increasing abstraction for the analytic process: description, analysis, and interpretation. Saldana builds on this to produce specific questions to guide the analytic process, and adds framing questions to start the process. The following combines both of their suggestions.

'*Framing questions*' (63) address and manage the contexts of the particular study's data, locating them in the process'

e.g. What contextual and intervening conditions appear to influence and affect participant changes through time?

Descriptive questions involve recording, chronicling and describing what kinds of change occur, in whom or what, at what time and in what context. They generate descriptive information to help answer the framing questions and the more complex analytic and interpretive questions

e.g. What increases or emerges through time? What kinds of surges or epiphanies occur through time?

Analysis, provides an explanation of how and why the changes might have occurred. *Interpretation* involves 'Explaining the nature and meaning of those changes, or developing a theory with transferability of the study's findings to other contexts' (Saldana 2003: 63).

So *analytic and interpretive questions* integrate the descriptive information to guide the researcher to these richer levels of analysis and interpretation

(e.g. Which changes interrelate through time? What is the through-line of the study?).

Much of our understanding of social science methodology is based on cross sectional approaches to data. A longitudinal data set complicates this process, and effectively triples the analytic burden by demanding cross sectional analysis, longitudinal analysis and an articulation of the two. In the *Inventing Adulthood* study for example, cross-sectional analysis captures a moment in time in the life of the sample (at each interview or data generation point), with the

data coded descriptively and conceptually (in this case using NUD.IST). This allows us to compare across the sample on the basis of a range of factors, e.g. age, gender, social class, location etc. These analyses then form a repeat cross sectional study on the same sample and these analyses can be compared with each other across time for change. The longitudinal analysis consists of narrative analyses of each case built over the course of the study, following individual trajectories, and identifying critical moments and change (Thomson and Holland 2003). I do not want to duck out of the issue of the articulation of the two, but this is one of the greatest challenges in the work, and we will be working hard on this in *Timescapes*. QLL studies produce complex and multi-dimensional data sets, which in turn demand innovative strategies for data analysis and display.

Several contributors to our consultation made practical suggestions on how to facilitate comparability in a large QL study involving a number of projects, to enable linkage between projects. These include the use of a flexible common core coding frame, and compatible software. For comparability over time and between projects the use of common data collection tools and reproducible modes of analysis were suggested. Yet while there are obvious attractions in standardising methods of analysis, contributors also commented on the exciting potential of bringing a range of analytic frameworks and analysts to bear on the same data. So for example a single longitudinal case study could be analysed from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives and the outcomes compared. This could be designed into the QLL study from the outset (as part of the function of multi-disciplinary teams), or could come about as a result of data sharing. In *Timescapes*, having a multi-disciplinary team in play, we expect different approaches and modes of analysis, and are seeking various method of integrating the data.

Archiving, re-use and representation of QL data

Social science methodology for archiving and re-use of QL data

As we have seen, there is a tradition of data re-use in the field of anthropology and a long established tradition of archiving and re-use of QL data in the field of oral history (Sheridan, 2000; Web, 1996). This has been attributed to a different approach to data from that of the social sciences (Parry and Mauthner, 2004:148). Where oral history data is viewed as an end in itself, as an historical record for current and future use and, therefore, a communal resource or property, social science data is viewed as a means to an end, a potential resource for

generating new hypotheses, findings and theories and, therefore, an individual resource / personal 'property'

Archiving and re-use of qualitative data: the state of play

Archiving and re-use of data is also assumed to be relatively unproblematic in the context of quantitative research although conversations with quantitative researchers seem to indicate that many of the issues affecting qualitative data also affect the archiving of quantitative data. For example, preserving anonymity becomes more of a problem as techniques for linking data sets become more sophisticated. And data are often protected by giving different levels of access to users. So perhaps some of the methods and procedures employed there can be of use for archiving qualitative data. But it is the case that methods for the use of archived qualitative data for substantive and theoretical re-enquiry, and experience of such use, are relatively limited in much social science. And proposals for the development of such re-use or secondary use have provoked a mixed reaction (Parry and Mauthner, 2004:139).

Three ESRC reports in 2003 and 2004 (Boddy 2004, Fielding 2003, Henwood and Lang 2003) highlighted the low levels of sharing and re-use of qualitative data, and noted some resistance in the field to depositing qualitative data in national archives. They suggested that ethical, practical and methodological issues lay behind this situation. The iterative, processual nature of qualitative research and consequent re-formulation and refinement of research questions over time also makes clear definitions of secondary, as opposed to primary, analysis difficult and this may, to some extent, explain the relative lack of secondary analysis of qualitative data (Heaton 1998; Hinds et al. 1997). A recent review of secondary analyses of qualitative data in health and social care research found that in a majority of cases, researchers were reanalysing their own data from previous work (Heaton 2000).

The three ESRC reports drew some conclusions in relation to qualitative archiving in general, which are highly relevant to QLR:

- that archiving should necessarily be more selective and access more conditional;
- original researchers' views on the value or practicality of archiving for re-use are particularly important;
- issues of verification and accountability, and of replication, do not apply in the same way with qualitative as with quantitative data;

- qualitative data should be subsumed within general archiving policy and practice alongside quantitative data. And in the case of longitudinal data there are now some qualitative researchers on the UK Longitudinal Strategy Committee.
- and there should be a shift towards a 'mixed economy' of archiving, involving Qualidata and a range of other, more focused initiatives and alternative models of research archiving, collaborative work and methodological innovation.

Again this debate is moving on, with archiving of qualitative data becoming seen as much more possible, although all the issues raised so far become important in archiving. The process has been helped by the ESRC Quads demonstrator initiative, in which 5 projects (of which our archiving project was one) worked through the various ethical, practical, and technological issues raised by archiving qualitative data. Information about these projects and their substantive foci can be found on their website <http://quads.esds.ac.uk>

Conclusions

A wide range of studies could come within a definition of QLR and we have outlined some possible classifications that emerge from the published literature. Ideally, QL research:

- is open-ended and intentional (i.e. to keep on looking is the key concern);
- relates to the number of waves rather than a period of time;
- is grounded on a dynamic research process. i.e. the separation between research design and research process decreases.
- One of the features of this kind of QLR is that the research process is historicised, and comes within the frame of what is recorded and analysed.
- QLR also tends to be linked to personal/collective scholarship. In many cases it is driven by the intellectual projects and ongoing relationships between the researcher and the researched, and researchers have often had to struggle to draw together short term funding solutions. The impetus towards maintaining funding and/or designing prospective studies from scratch brings with it a different set of politics and demands.

Qualitative longitudinal research can reach the areas that quantitative research cannot reach, producing high quality, in-depth data, and providing great explanatory value. It can offer a realistic understanding of causality, how and why things happen as they do, how aspects of social, cultural and contextual processes interact to produce different individual outcomes (Molloy and Ritchie 2000, Thomson, Henderson and Holland 2003). It is generative of theory,

although it can also be used to investigate hypotheses, and it brings the additional dimension of time, process and change to the centre of the research (Pettigrew 1995).

The development of an explicit QL methodology that might be interdisciplinary, and which might constitute a resource to be shared across the social sciences is a new and exciting development. It is vital that in the process of forging a new generation of QL studies that the insights already generated within specific disciplines are recognised and built on.

¹ This consisted of three studies: (1) Youth Values: A study of identity, diversity and social change, funded by the ESRC as part of the *Children 5-16 programme: Growing up in the 21st century* (L129251020) (McGrellis 2000); (2) Inventing Adulthoods: Young people's strategies for transition, also funded by the ESRC on their research programme *Youth Citizenship and Social Change* (L134251008) Thomson, Henderson and Holland 2003); and (3) Youth Transitions funded as part of the *Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group* at London South Bank University (Edwards, Gillies and Holland, 2003, Holland, Weeks and Gillies, 2003). The Inventing Adulthood core team is Sheila Henderson, Janet Holland, Sheena McGrellis, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson.

² Core team joined by Jorge Camacho and Deborah Holder.

³ *Timescapes: Changing relationships and identities through the life course* started in February 2007. The five-year study will explore the changing nature of personal and family relationships and identities through the life course, and from different generational perspectives. The study will shed light on the links between three timescapes: biographical time, generational time and historical time and will generate data of relevance for policy, particularly in the areas of well being and the long term resourcing and sustainability of families. It will be carried out by a consortium of researchers from five universities: Director: Dr. Bren Neale (Leeds); Co-Director: Professor Janet Holland (London South Bank); Prof. Kathryn Backett Milburn (Edinburgh); Prof. Joanna Bornat (Open); Prof. Ros Edwards (London South Bank); Dr. N. Emmel (Leeds); Sheila Henderson (London South Bank); Dr. Karen Henwood (Cardiff); Dr. Kahryn Hughes (Leeds); Dr. Sarah Irwin (Leeds); Prof. Rachel Thomson (Open).

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