

Adding Time into the Mix: An introduction to Qualitative Longitudinal Research

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Overview

- Why a dynamic approach to social research?
- Micro-dynamic research: QL Research : qualitative enquiry conducted through or in relation to time
- Re-thinking time: time as method, time as a theoretical framework and substantive topic that drives enquiry
- The contours of QL research, from first principles, to design to data generation to analysis .

The Dynamics of Society

- Recognition of rapid social change under the conditions of late modernity. Societies are in a perpetual state of flux and change, biographically and historically:
- ‘At a time when social forces are making instability a way of life, researchers are developing new modes of enquiry that take account of the dynamic nature of people’s lives. Approaches to ‘thinking dynamically’ have triggered the beginning of an intellectual revolution (Leisering and Walker, preface to *The Dynamics of Modern Society*, Policy Press , 1998).

From snap shots to 'movies'

- Time is the lynchpin for understanding the relationship between biography and history, the personal and social, agency and structure, and between lived experiences and policy processes – the relationship is essentially dynamic.
- Move away from snap shot pictures of the social world to construct a moving picture that captures social processes (Richard Berthoud 2000, *Seven years in the Lives of British Families*: 15).
- Longitudinal Data offers a movie rather than snapshot (Berthoud) **But what kind of movie?**

Macro-dynamics: Epic movie

- Quantitatively driven.
- Mapping broad social trends across large populations.
- Through quantitative survey and cohort studies, measuring chronological change at regular intervals: **what** changes, for whom, the **direction and extent** of change, **where and when and how often** change occurs.
- Big, 'thin' statistical data that offers a grand vista, a birds eye view, a broad, 'surface' picture of social change
- **Creates an epic movie**
- The dominant framework

Micro-dynamics: Intimate movie

- Rich, in-depth, situated studies, tracking lives to discern the **'how and why'** of change, continuity, endurance, causality
Why life journeys are undertaken and the nature of the journey along the way (the Odyssey).
- Human subjectivity and agency – as a dynamic concept - captures *lived experiences*, the *interior logic* of lives as they unfold: how change is created, lived, experienced through the generation of reflexive narratives of the self.
- Ethnographic, interview and narrative based methods – rooted in social anthropology, community studies, oral history... **the 'up close and personal' or intimate movie**
- Poor cousin, growing in social and environmental sciences.
- Also a third movie: QPS **intimate epics**

...The life course

- Uses the organising principle of the life course (the flow of lives through time)
- Focus on the factors that shape the life course for individuals and groups – the causes and consequences of change, the transitions into and out of particular states

Conceptual tools/building blocks:

- **Turning points** – ‘taking stock’ moments, markers or mechanisms that trigger changes in perceptions or practice – epiphanies, fateful moments, critical moments (Denzin Giddens and Thomson and Holland)
- **Transitions:** change in state or life course phase e.g into/through parenthood, marriage, education, work, illness, bereavement, prison, poverty.
- **Trajectories:** pathways or lines of development over a phase of life, or the long sweep of a life: upwards, or downwards, converging or diverging, intersecting trajectories.

Building Time into QL research

- For QL research we can understand time in two ways:
- **Time as method:** simply we are charting change or continuity over time:
- Time is the 'fixed' self evident, taken for granted backdrop to our lives: the clock, the calendar.
- A moving, chronological picture of change emerges through the simple expedient of building calendar time in as the medium through which we conduct our research - the vehicle for a study.
- Common to all longitudinal research, qual and quant.
- This brings a range of methodological and ethical challenges to the way we plan and conduct our research.

Building Time into QL research

- **Time as theory /Time as substantive topic / as social construct**
- **Temporality:** The complex, multidimensional flows of time in human experience:
- Can be factored into the design of a QL study from the outset, driving research questions, framing data collection, influencing analysis & findings .
- This rich engagement with time is the hallmark of qualitative longitudinal research.



'Slicing' Time

Intersecting Dimensions of Time

- The **Passage** of Time: **Past–Present–Future**
- The **Magnitude** of Time: **Micro-Meso-Macro**
- The **Geographies** of Time: **Time –Space**
- The **Tempo** of Time: **Intensive- Extensive**
- The **Synchronicity** of Time: **Continuous – Discontinuous**

QL research design

- **Prospective tracking** of lives, in real time, as lives unfold. Walking alongside people, with each wave of fieldwork informing the next – the method is flexible and creative: the no of waves and timespans vary with the research questions. Intensive tracking through particular transition or policy landscapes, or extensive tracking over decades.
- **Retrospective methods** – life histories, revisiting studies, to understand lives ‘backwards’ from the vantage point of the present day.
- **Combining prospective and retrospective methods**, past and future revisited at each research encounter and reconstructed through the lens of the ever shifting present

Generating Temporal Data

- **Life history interviews** for past lives
- Engage with **turning points** and **transitions**
- **Time maps** for mapping life journeys
- **Future essays** for capturing the imaginary future and the extent of life planning
- **Diaries** for day to day living
- **Recursive interviewing** – revisiting the past and future at each research encounter to discern how the past may be over written and reinterpreted, how the future is re-imagined over time in relation to a changing landscape of opportunities and constraints.
- Scope for combining methods e.g life histories and diaries

1993
I was born

1994
Recovered from cancer

1995
Brother was born

1996

1997
Sister was born

1998
Started school

1999
moved house

2000
The millenium!

2001
Started horse-riding

2002
Granny died

2003
Aunt got married

Twintowers knocked down
The war started

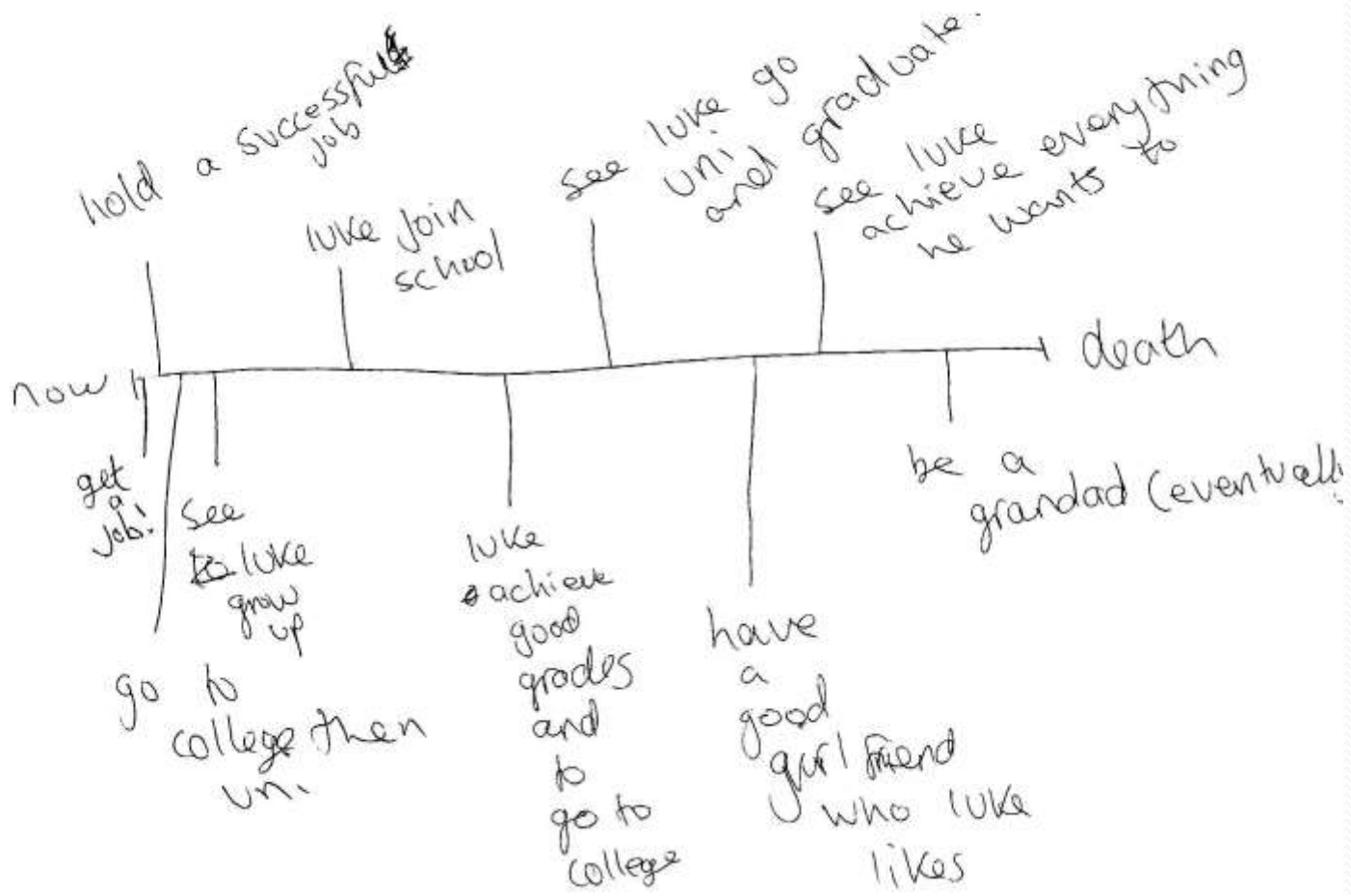
The war begins to stop

2004
Started High School

2005
cousin born

2006
one of my best friends left the country.

2007



I have finished my medicine course at Edinburgh University, and am now training to be a forensic pathologist. I have a little green car, which I use to get around. I live in a small flat with a good friend. In the evenings, I read, do work related to my training, and take Catalan classes. Occasionally, when my friend is out, I play my clarinet. Eventually, I will finish my course and move to Barcelona. I email old school friends every now and then, and they update me with their lives. I am still writing stories, in spiral bound notebooks, which litter the floor and the desk. The flat is quite clean, as we keep it in good condition. I take the train down to Leeds during the holidays, and visit my family.

EMILIA (YLT, age 15)

At the age of 25 I am now a key stage 1
in year one class. I really enjoy it + I enjoyed university
when I was 18 I went to Australia for a year
+ it really matured me, I am now married with one
child + want more than one child, my husband + I
live in a regular house + earn enough money to
go abroad + buy our child ~~and~~ toys to keep her/him
happy and content. I enjoy life + love the family aspect.
I love spending time with my family + am lucky
enough to have still kept in touch with lots of
my friends, after I come back from Australia me +
Mollie got a flat together, I met my husband when
I was 20 + we married at 22. I want 3 or 4 children
I'm still in touch with most of my family + see my
mum alot. That's it really.

SOPHIE (YLT, age 15)

Data management and analysis.

- Generates huge, unwieldy datasets that need good management for longitudinal analysis and for archiving
- Analysis in three dimensions:
 - **thematic** data: across the sample;
 - **case data**: that accumulates for individuals or groups over time-building a case histories.
 - **Temporal data**: capturing how lives unfold.
- Complex analysis: by **theme**, by **case**, and by **time** (data waves).
- Tools to **condense** data:
 - **Case history** files for each case that are built up over time: descriptive analysis .
 - **Framework** for capturing transitions and trajectories over the life course.

Framework Grids: Housing

Participant	Pre-interview	Wave one	Wave two	Wave three
Jimmy	Living with his mum and brother	Lived with partner at her mum's house for a while, now returned to live at his mum's house.	Jimmy, his partner and their child are now living between his mum's house and his partner's mum's house.	Now lives with a friend from college after a fall out with his mum.
Tarrell	Living with his mum (father is deceased)	Still living with mum	Unable to contact participant	Now living with partner and two of his four children at partner's house
Jason	Living alone after moving out of foster care	Still living alone	In prison	Unable to contact participant

Framework Grids: Jimmy Case data

Theme	Pre-interview	Wave one	Wave two	Wave three
Housing	Living with his mum and brother	Lived with partner at her mum's house for a while, now returned to live at his mum's house.	Jimmy, his partner and their child are now living between his mum's house and his partner's mum's house.	Now lives with a friend from college after a fall out with his mum.
School employment	In school when became an expectant dad	Had left school and without a job	Temporary job but was sacked. Looking at training schemes.	Joined a college course
Relationships	In relationship with mother at age of 15	Volatile but still in relationship during pregnancy	Now living across households with partner and child	Relationship with partner highly volatile

The importance of Time

- A powerful tool for understanding the interior logic of lives, discovering the unimaginable
- A paradigm shift– engaging with the fourth dimension creates a new way of knowing and understanding the social world, that can be built into any form of enquiry, in any substantive field.
- Can address some of the grand challenges of social science in a world of rapid social change.
- Seeing things qualitatively through the lens of time ‘quite simply changes everything’ (Barbara Adam)

References and Sources

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