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3 Crafting qualitative longitudinal research: Design and sampling

Building on the conceptual foundations for QL research set out in Chapter 2, our discussion now turns to research design and practice. The focus here is on the temporal logic of QL research rather than its qualitative components.¹ Every dimension of the process is temporally fashioned and informed, from the construction of research questions and the longitudinal frame for a study, to issues of sampling, ethics, data generation and analysis. The aim in this chapter is to illustrate how the key dimensions of time introduced in Chapter 1 feed into design and sampling decisions.

The title of this chapter points to an important feature of QL research: it is as much a craft involving skill, dexterity and imaginative artistry as a rigorous social scientific enterprise (Mills 1959, Pettigrew 1995, Back 2007). In other words, it is a creative rather than a prescriptive process, offering endless scope for variations in design and innovation in the research process. The craft involves choosing the right design features and tools of investigation, and honing them for the enquiry at hand to maximize their descriptive and explanatory potential. The longitudinal frame for a QL study significantly increases the scope to combine varied research strategies and tools. As shown in Chapter 1, QL researchers are not wedded to one unitary approach; they are able to draw from a repertoire of approaches and blend them to produce a unique, tailor-made study (Saldana 2002). It is important to note that the creativity of QL research does not detract from

¹ There is a large literature on qualitative research design, although few general texts give more than cursory attention to QL enquiry. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) and Ritchie and colleagues (2014) are important exceptions.

the rigour that is needed to ensure a high quality study. On the contrary, it is an important dimension of methodological rigour, ensuring that a study is in tune with and able to reflect dynamic, real-world processes.

The research process as a journey

All qualitative research is dynamic (Ritchie and Lewis 2003) but for QL research this is heightened in a number of ways. Firstly, key elements of research practice (sampling, recruitment, ethics, data generation and analysis) are not discrete, one-off tasks, but recur in cycles that are tied to each visit to the field. The engagement with time at the heart of QL research is mirrored in the research process itself: both can be conceived as journeys through time (Saldana 2003; McLeod and Thomson 2009). Secondly, changing perceptions of research settings and participants, new methodological and theoretical insights and developments in the researchers' personal and collective circumstances are all likely to influence the research journey. It is for this reason that QL researchers need to be reflexive about their shifting interpretations and practices and document these as the research progresses (Ottenberg 1990; Wallace and colleagues 1998; Filer with Pollard 1998; McLeod 2003). Thirdly, working through time means that the vantage point from which researchers and participants look backwards and forwards is continually shifting (Krings and colleagues 2012). Future time at the start of the study may well have become past time by the conclusion, requiring a continual switching of the temporal gaze. Through these shifting processes, QL researchers become 'time travellers' (McLeod and Thomson 2009).

The cyclical nature of the research process increases the scope for reviewing and refining research questions, themes, samples, fieldwork methods, ethical strategies and analytical insights as a study progresses. This continual openness to creative refinement is part of the rigour of QL research. It gives the necessary flexibility needed to respond to situations of flux and change and 'allows the unexpected to reconfigure the research' as it progresses (Grandia 2015: 312; Wallace and colleagues 1998: 79). As Scudder and Colson (2002: 206) observe, 'unexpected events bedevil the planning of long-term research. ... [A] rigid research design becomes a handicap over time.' But this flexibility also creates some challenges. It adds to the intellectual demands of the process and has resource implications for the timetabling and execution of a study. Moreover, it can engender

a sense of adventurous pioneering and uncertainty in equal measure. As Saldana wryly observes, the process can take on the mammoth proportions and meanderings of Odysseus's journey to Ithaca:

Imagine you're describing a road trip you took across Arizona, a trip where your journey was determined by careful planning ('After spending two days at the Grand Canyon, I was going to drive to Flagstaff'); unexpected opportunities ('But I discovered there was to be a pow wow in Chinle, so I drove there instead'); uncontrollable forces ('The heavy snowfall closed the highway and delayed me'); detours ('I took a state road instead of the highway because of construction and drove to Jerome'); and revised plans ('When I saw the Red Mountains of Sedona I just had to drive off the interstate for a closer look'). Such is the researcher's journey through a longitudinal qualitative study. (Saldana 2003: 15)

The danger in working with this degree of flexibility and contingency is that researchers may begin to lose track of what their research is about (Saldana 2003: 31). It is all too easy for the original focus to unravel when dealing with nebulous temporal processes that flow into each other, for this creates the temptation to discern change and flux everywhere. Maintaining some clarity concerning *what* it is that people are being tracked through (alongside who is being tracked, and how and why) will help to overcome this difficulty. In other words, it helps to be clear at the planning stage about research aims, questions and strategies, and to review, take stock and re-focus at critical junctures in the research process (Saldana 2003).

Research questions and conceptual mapping

Developing a clear set of research questions at the outset can greatly help to navigate the research journey. These need to be qualitatively pertinent (Ritchie and Lewis 2003), for example, asking *how, why and where*. But they need to be framed in dynamic ways, posing questions, for example, about how temporal processes unfold; the nature, causes and consequences of change; and/or the influence of earlier events on later experiences and circumstances. Other temporal planes outlined in Chapter 2 (e.g. micro–macro or time–space) may also be interwoven here as appropriate. The *Following Young Fathers Study*,

for example, sought to address the following dynamic research questions (Neale and colleagues 2015):

- How and why do young men enter into early parenthood? How is young fatherhood constituted, practised and understood in varied socio-economic and personal circumstances?
- How is young fatherhood 'worked out' over time? What factors shape the parenting experiences of young fathers and what helps or hinders their aspirations as parents?

Once drafted, the guiding research questions are not fixed; they are likely to be refined and polished iteratively as data are generated and the analysis unfolds. But they are an important starting point in establishing the parameters for a study. Devising a *conceptual road map*, a chart that sets out the guiding research questions and sub-questions, sources of data, field methods, and a list of themes that can feed into topic guides and broad-brush analytical codes will also help to guide the process. As a study progresses this map can be an invaluable aid in moving back and forth between theoretical premises and research practice.

Designing QL research

Crafting a QL study involves working empirically with two planes of time that were first introduced in Chapter 1:

- Prospective–retrospective: looking forwards, looking back
- Intensive–extensive: time frames and tempos

The theoretical possibilities opened up by these planes were explored in Chapter 2; here we focus on how they feed into research design. The process involves a series of balancing acts across these two planes, as the discussion below will illustrate.

Prospective–retrospective: Looking forwards, looking back

As indicated in Chapter 1, dynamic data can be generated in two broad ways: prospectively (looking forwards) or retrospectively (looking backwards). A *prospective* approach is the core design associated with longitudinal research, and the prime way to build cumulative knowledge about dynamic processes

(Howell and Talle 2012). People are followed in 'real time', capturing changes and continuities as they occur, and anticipating them in the future. This gives the research a forward momentum. Since revisits are anticipated, each new wave of fieldwork is shaped in relation to the previous waves, with the aim of building an emergent, dynamic picture. Ideally, prospective studies are planned from the outset, but in practice they are often created opportunistically by building on an earlier synchronic (snap-shot) study. Since all studies reflect the historical times in which they are located, the original study becomes an important baseline upon which to build cumulative insights.

A *retrospective* approach, on the other hand, is essentially historical in nature. It explores dynamic processes through hindsight, a gaze backwards in time from the vantage point of the present day (see Chapter 1). Quantitative researchers tend to regard retrospective approaches as 'quasi-longitudinal' on the grounds that they are unreliable. Since people's memories are said to be faulty, they 'telescope' events and facts either forwards or backwards in time, so that a clear and accurate chronology cannot be generated (Scott and Alwin 1998; Ruspini 2002). However, from a qualitative perspective, perceptions of the past are not fixed, and the search for some objective truth beyond the shifting interpretations and practices of the participants will always be elusive. In a QL context, the limitations of this approach reside rather more in the direction of the temporal gaze; on its own, looking backwards limits the ability to discern the drivers and impact of changes as they occur (Leonard-Barton 1995). Nevertheless, a retrospective approach offers a valuable means of reconstructing historical and biographical processes and discerning subjective causality, often over considerable periods of time (Scott and Alwin 1998). Studies that rely on retrospective methods alone are also relatively quick and cost effective (with all data generated through a single visit to the field). It is important to note, however, that prospective and retrospective orientations are not either/or modes of enquiry; they are complementary and are often productively combined (Scott and Alwin 1998). The most effective QL designs build retrospective elements into a prospective study, creatively blending them so that the temporal gaze oscillates between past, present and future and explores their complex intersections.

Intensive–extensive: Time frames and tempos

We begin our discussion here with a consideration of the time frames and tempos of QL research, before going on to explore intensive and extensive

designs. As shown in Chapter 1, the time frame for a QL study (the overall time span of enquiry) and its tempo (the number, spacing and continuity of visits to the field) are intertwined processes. Together they constitute the longitudinal frame for a study. Researchers who are new to QL research commonly ask how many waves of data are needed to qualify as a QL study, and over what time periods (Saldana 2003: 33). At a minimum, data need to be generated at two points in time to create the basis for temporal comparisons. However, there are no rigid prescriptions or easy answers to these questions. As shown above, these uncertainties reflect one of the challenges of QL research: it is always in danger of becoming unbounded, with never-ending possibilities for stretching backwards and forwards through time:

When does a change process begin and end, especially where the unit of analysis is the continuous process in context? ... When does the fieldworker start and stop collecting data? Does one stop peeling the layers from the onion only when the vapours inhibit all further sight? There are, of course, no absolute and simple answers to such questions. (Pettigrew 1995: 98)

Time frames and tempos are usually shaped in relation to the research questions, the nature of the process under study, the characteristics of the sample, the practicalities of funding and the availability of resources. Two strategies are worth highlighting here:

- Clear baseline and closure points are needed to create the time frame for a study;
- Time frames and tempos should mirror the process under investigation.

These strategies ensure that there is a temporal logic to the research process. They are important means of anchoring a QL project in time, helping to delineate the overall duration of a study and, crucially, to contain it.

Baselines and closure points

The baseline for a QL study might be defined as a point of change in the passage of time, a key historical moment, or a temporal marker of some kind, for example, the point at which people set up a new collective, become clients of a service, begin or complete a major transition, start a new phase of life, or face a significant change in the external landscape.

A baseline can be understood conceptually rather than as a discrete chronological moment (Lewis 2007). This allows for more than one baseline to be built in for different sub-samples, or to address different dimensions of the research questions (Lewis 2007). It may be determined biographically, in relation to the changing circumstances of individuals, or historically, in relation to changing external events, or both. Patrick (2017), for example, chose a change in UK welfare legislation as the baseline for her study of the lived experience of welfare reform. She traced the introduction and effects of the change on her panel of participants from the time the British Coalition Government came into power, through to the end of its term of office (2010–15). If the start of fieldwork does not coincide exactly with a baseline, a retrospective account can help to capture the event or moment. As far as possible, baselines and closure points should be driven by the temporal logic of a study, although in practice, both may have to be determined on pragmatic, resource-related grounds, tied to the period of funding.

Mirroring the dynamic process

Applying the temporal logic of enquiry, QL researchers tend to fashion their studies in ways that ‘fit’ the dynamic process under investigation. For example, studies that track the clients of a service may tie the waves of fieldwork to the frequency and duration of contact between client and service provider. This was the case for Farrell and colleagues (2006) in their evaluation of New Labour’s *Job Retention and Rehabilitation Pilot Scheme*. The study involved six months of fieldwork (six interviews, conducted at monthly intervals) with a panel of thirty-six people who had taken part in the scheme. The tempo for the research mirrored the tempo of the pilot scheme (cf. also Corden and Nice 2007). As a further example, studies of the transition to parenthood are typically built around a ‘before and after’ model, involving three waves of fieldwork over a twelve- to eighteen-month period (the early stages of the pregnancy, around the time of the birth, and some months after the birth, for example, Miller 2005; 2015).

Flexible tempos

The mirroring process outlined above suggests the need for a flexible tempo that can be adjusted as a study unfolds. Indeed, whatever tempo is initially chosen, it may evolve over time in ways that are sensitive to the tenor of people’s unfolding lives and responsive to changing conditions.

This is one of the ways in which QL research differs from large-scale quantitative studies, where participants are more likely to be followed at regular, predetermined intervals, spaced over years (Ruspini 2002: 4). Flexibility of follow-up can enable participants to engage in a study when they are able, or for researchers to respond to critical moments as they occur. Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis (2013), for example, report that a flexible tempo would have enabled them to follow their sample of terminally ill cancer patients on a case-by-case basis, mirroring how the disease progressed for each individual. Instead, their 'blanket' schedule meant that several participants declined rapidly and died before the researchers were able to revisit them.

A flexible tempo, tailored to the needs of individual participants, may also allow researchers to return to the field opportunistically, for example, to help sustain relationships or capture important historical moments as they occur or, more pragmatically, to respond to changing circumstances in the research team (Pollard 2007). Overall, the notion that time frames and tempos should be flexible in order to mirror the process under study can be very helpful, but it also needs to be tempered by resource and project management considerations. Too much flexibility may unravel a carefully specified study and confound pre-existing work schedules. Moreover, building in extra waves of fieldwork is expensive and time consuming, and adds to the complexity and magnitude of data generation and analysis. It is all too easy to be over-ambitious and underestimate the time needed between waves of fieldwork for rest, reflection, data management, cumulative analysis, and preparations for a return to the field. Nevertheless, building provision for some flexibility in the field at the project design stage can help to ensure a good fit between the tempo of the research and the tempo of the processes under study.

Intensive–extensive designs

While there are as many time frames and tempos as there are QL studies, it is possible to identify a spectrum of approaches ranging from intensive to extensive designs. At one extreme, people may be traced *intensively* through particular transitions via frequent or continuous visits to the field. At its most intensive, QL research takes the form of ethnographic immersion. This affords a greater depth of engagement, yielding insights into the rhythms, tenor and synchronicities of daily lives, and the minutiae of change. In these contexts, rather than repeated *waves* of data generation,

which imply periodicity, the process is more akin to a *stream* or *flow* of data and insights, which are gathered in 'drops or ripples' (Saldana 2003: 33). This brings to the fore the 'journey along with way' (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). Instead of making bald comparisons between two snap-shots in time, a more intensive approach generates a cyclical, reflexive and processual understanding, 'a description *through* time' (Howell and Talle 2012: 12, 17).

Intensive styles of research are likely to be conducted over relatively modest lengths of time (several months to several years), leading Saldana (2003: 35) to describe them as 'shortitudinal'. As well as being suited to the relatively modest funding streams that are currently available, they are ideal for tracking individuals through discrete transitions (e.g. the process of getting married, retiring from work, a hospital admission), or exploring a collective event or process (e.g. the birth of a new community initiative, or a time of national celebration or mourning). Intensive designs can also support the process of staying in touch with mobile or marginalized participants, and enable the production of findings for policy in the short to medium term (Molloy and Woodfield with Bacon 2002; Corden and Nice 2007).

In health, welfare and social care settings, a relatively intensive approach is commonly used to explore the introduction of new policy interventions and their short- to medium-term impact on service users. Harocopos and Dennis (2003), for example, tracked a sample of drug users intensively over eighteen months to investigate the effectiveness of a health intervention programme. The baseline for the research was the admission of the participants to a treatment and rehabilitation centre, where intensive ethnographic methods were used over several weeks to get to know and recruit the participants into the study. Thereafter participants were revisited at a less intensive and slowly diminishing tempo (five waves of interviews, conducted at one month, four months, eight months, thirteen months and eighteen months beyond their discharge from the unit).

At the other end of the spectrum, people may be traced more *extensively* through regular, occasional or 'punctuated' revisits to the field (Burawoy 2003). These visits may be spaced over many years or even decades. As indicated in Chapter 1, such extensive tempos are commonly found in large-scale longitudinal studies, the latter stages of longitudinal ethnographies and in sociological re-studies. The longitudinal frame here is akin to a series of synchronic snap-shots, or movie 'stills' gathered at discrete historical moments, while time becomes a linear 'stretch' between

two or more points in time (Neale and Flowerdew 2003; Talle 2012). This is one of the ways in which QL researchers can engage with the micro–macro plane; the greater the historical distance between visits, the greater the likelihood of capturing broad transformations in the social fabric. In an extensive design, the distinct temporal boundary between field visits frees the researcher to look anew, with fresh eyes (Talle 2012). However, the time distance between visits diminishes the scope to discern the intricacies of dynamic processes and the ebbs, flows and detours that are continually occurring between the movie ‘stills’ (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). It also increases the challenge of maintaining a panel of participants; it may be necessary to retrace participants before they can be invited back into a study (see Chapter 4).

It is important to note here that intensive and extensive tempos and time frames are complementary. They form a spectrum of approaches that may be combined or which merge into each other at different points in the research process.² An intensive design, for example, may well evolve over time into a more extensive study or re-study, thereby capturing different flows of time. This is commonly the case for longitudinal ethnographies (Foster 1979; Gordon and Lahelma 2003; Talle 2012). It is also increasingly evident in interview-based studies. For example, working over very different time frames, Miller (2005, 2015, 2017) revisited a group of participants whom she had followed intensively through the transition into parenthood some eighteen years earlier. With follow-up funding she was able to build a longer view into her study, complementing the earlier three-wave prospective study with a retrospective reconstruction of the years of ‘active’ parenting for her sample (cf. also Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn and Morgan 1987; and Laub and Sampson 2003). Overall, securing funding

² These different tempos have long been recognized by anthropologists. Firth (1959) distinguishes between *continuous diachronic* approaches and *dual synchronic* approaches; Foster and colleagues (1979: 9–10), between *continuous studies* and *re-studies*; and Howell and Talle (2012) between *multi-temporal* studies and *re-studies*. Similar distinctions are made by QL researchers (see Holland and colleagues 2006; and Warin 2011, who characterizes her fourteen-year study of school children as intermittent ethnography). Yet as Peterson Royce and Kemper (2002: xvi) observe, within the overall time spans allotted for longitudinal ethnography, there is ‘considerable variation in length of time, in original impetus, in goals, in the time between field trips, and in the composition of research personnel’. These different tempos, then, do not represent discrete modes of longitudinal enquiry but are best understood as part of a spectrum of tempos that shade into one another.

for extensive research is likely to be a challenge for QL researchers. Most commonly, an extensive time frame evolves in piecemeal fashion through several phases of funding. But a far-sighted researcher will plan for a longer term revisit to the field and ensure, as far as possible, that samples can be maintained and data generated, documented and preserved in ways that facilitate this process.

Temporal sampling: The logic of cases, themes and time

Qualitative sampling involves identifying an appropriate range of cases or units of study as the basis for empirical investigation and analysis (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Choices need to be made about who (or what) to sample, how many cases to choose, what kind of variations to build in and when and where to sample them. These interlocking decisions constitute a sampling strategy. While samples may be drawn from a wide population of people, social events and so on, the main sampling units in a QL study are likely to be individuals or small collectives, alongside the networks, events or settings in which their lives are unfolding.

Adding time into a sampling strategy complicates the process, but also enriches it. Time has an impact on sample size, the breadth and depth of investigation, when to sample, what variations to build in, and how comparisons between cases are to be understood. A QL case is inherently dynamic and process driven. The units of study are likely to be identified not only through the varied characteristics of particular individuals or groups, or in different spatial contexts, but also in relation to temporal processes. In other words, key themes are investigated not only by sampling across cases but also by sampling through time. For example, in a longitudinal ethnography of children's school careers, set initially in one primary school, the units of study were the children, parents and teachers; the varied micro-settings of the children's lives (classroom, playground and home); and the seven school calendar years through which the children were being tracked (Pollard with Filer 1996; Pollard and Filer 1999). This became the conceptual framework for gathering, organizing and analysing data about the children's unfolding lives. Time itself became a unit of study, seen in relation to the biographies of the children and the varied micro-cultures and broader education structures that shaped and re-shaped their school careers. Overall, the logic of QL enquiry brings the complex relationship

between *cases*, *themes* and *time* into a common conceptual framework. All three must be held in mind and attended to in the design and conduct of a study. This conceptual framework determines how cases in a study are constituted and how they are analysed (a theme explored further in Chapter 5).

Purposive sampling

In the discussion below, the basics of purposive sampling and what this means for the size, breadth and depth of a QL sample are outlined. The parameters of temporal sampling are then considered, including the process of re-sampling over time and the nature and utility of longitudinal panels and cohorts. However the cases in a QL study are defined, the aim is to sample those that have explanatory power: that is, that will give insights into the study themes. Purposive sampling logic is commonly used to identify a range of cases that the researcher can then read across for the purposes of analysis. The aim may be to sample for typical, particular or extreme cases, or to work across a broad spectrum of circumstances and experiences, for example, along the axes of gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic circumstances and/or geographical setting. Quotas for each sampling criterion (e.g. numbers in each age group) may be drawn up, using a matrix that guides the selection process (Ritchie and colleagues 2014).

Sample size, breadth and depth

Purposive sampling has a theoretical logic that obviates the need for large or 'representative' samples. The emphasis is on understanding experiences across a range of complementary cases, rather than measuring similarities and differences across strictly comparable cases (Pawson 2006). The size, breadth and depth of a QL sample will vary from one project to the next, depending on the priority accorded to a *case-study* or *cross-case comparative approach*. Case-study approaches identify a relatively small number of cases, or even one distinctive case that can offer an in-depth, holistic understanding of social processes. Sampling across a small number of family groups or organizations, for example, offers scope for a detailed exploration and comparison of their varied pathways through time (Pettigrew 1995; Macmillan and colleagues 2011). This was the approach taken by Pollard with Filer (1996: 293) in the *Identity and Learning Programme*, a twelve-year

longitudinal ethnography of children's journeys through the education system. The researchers had initially planned to sample children from two contrasting primary school settings. While they eventually achieved this goal (Pollard 2007, see below), at the outset, this plan had to be put on hold when anticipated funding did not materialize. Instead, an opportunity arose to work with a committed head teacher in one particular school. In a prime example of opportunistic sampling, the researchers adopted an ethnographic case-study approach and recruited ten children drawn from the same year group in this one school setting. Tracing the lives of these children through the varied micro-spatial and cultural settings of their lives (classroom, home and playground), against a backdrop of shifting educational policies and school practices, revealed subtle changes in their fledgling educational trajectories over the years of their primary education (Pollard with Filer 1996; Pollard and Filer 1999; Filer and Pollard 2000; and for a similar study see Gordon and Lahelma 2003).

Alternatively, building larger samples, with greater heterogeneity across ages, generations, settings, circumstances and/or life experiences, increases the scope for cross-case analysis. Multiple samples may also be drawn into a study to aid comparison across spatial settings, or to represent different stakeholders across the micro–macro plane (see Chapter 2). Qualitative Panel Studies (also known as QPS or QPR) are prime examples of 'scaled up' studies that work with relatively large and diverse samples. Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Peters (2009), for example, traced the lives of 256 low-income mothers in their six-year longitudinal ethnography, a study nested within a large-scale longitudinal survey of 2,402 families across three US cities (for a similar mixed-methods design in the context of global poverty research, see Morrow and Crivello 2015). Similarly, the *Welfare Conditionality Study* recruited 480 cases, representing nine sub-samples of welfare recipients, who were drawn from a range of localities across England and Scotland. The sample also included welfare providers, whose perspectives were sought in one-off interviews (www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk).

However, such large samples are unusual in the canon of QL studies. Whatever the balance between a case-based and cross-case comparative strategy, there is a clear trade-off between depth and breadth of investigation. Qualitative researchers in general try to keep samples sizes to manageable proportions (averaging around fifty cases), to ensure that the necessary depth of explanation is not compromised (Ritchie and colleagues 2014). For QL research, this becomes even more of an imperative. A proliferation

of varied cases and settings and an accumulation of temporal data, often in quick succession through the cyclical waves of a study, can quickly become unmanageable. Researchers may find themselves grappling with, or sinking under the mammoth task of generating, re-generating, analysing and re-analysing an increasingly large and unwieldy dataset. Even the average sample sizes used in qualitative research (fifty cases) may become much less manageable when a sample is to be followed intensively over several waves of fieldwork, and where the drive is to build cumulative insights as a study progresses. The challenges may be all the greater for lone researchers or small teams with limited resources.

Whatever the attractions of 'scaling up' QL enquiry, depth of explanation and insight is a crucial feature of QL research and should not be compromised. In this context, the trade-off between the depth and breadth of a sample also means a trade-off between the size of a sample and the frequency and intensity with which people are followed up. In other words, the tempo of a study is an integral component of a sampling strategy. Since decisions about the nature and size of a QL sample will impact on the tempo of a study these need to be considered together, as integrated dimensions of QL design. For all these reasons, QL researchers working intensively within relatively modest time frames are likely to plan for detailed investigation across a relatively small number of cases.

Re-sampling through time

In all qualitative research, sampling is a dynamic process. The criteria for inclusion may change or be refined as fieldwork progresses (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). This is evident, for example, in grounded theorizing, where researchers continue to refine their sampling strategy and recruit new cases until they have 'saturated' a particular theoretical category (Charmaz 2006).³ However, in QL research the dynamics of sampling

³ It is worth noting here that temporal sampling is underpinned by a different logic to that of grounded theorizing. In grounded theory, sampling involves an ongoing search for *new cases* that can shed fresh light on emerging theories. The process comes to an end when categories or themes are 'saturated' that is, when new cases no longer spark new theoretical insights (Charmaz 2006: 113). Yet time cannot be 'saturated' in this way. The aim, instead, is to sample the same cases at different times, to discern whether and how they may change. Temporal understandings are under continual construction and refinement, creating fresh insights for each case with each return visit to the field. For a further discussion of these differences in relation to data analysis, see Chapter 5.

are particularly pronounced. Units of study such as couples, families, households and organizations may well shrink or grow or otherwise change shape or composition as a study progresses. Similarly, individuals initially recruited because of the relevance of their life circumstances or personal characteristics may not fit these sampling criteria over time. In a QL study this creates opportunities to investigate the nature of these transformations as the research unfolds. But there is also increased scope to purposively re-sample over successive waves of fieldwork. Sampling itself becomes part of the research journey, requiring researchers to decide how to draw a baseline sample, how to follow up the baseline and whether to recruit new sub-samples at a later date.

Not all of the baseline sample will necessarily be tracked over time. It is common for larger samples to be recruited into a panel at the outset, but for carefully selected sub-samples to be singled out for more detailed attention or more intensive tracking as a study progresses. This is part of a broader ethnographic strategy known as a *funnel* approach, or *progressive focusing* (Agar 1980: 13; Pollard 2007). The chosen sub-samples are likely to offer greater insights into the themes of the study, for example, exemplifying those in stasis or undergoing further transitions, or with particularly distinctive or diverging trajectories. The full baseline sample may then be followed up with less intensity and/or frequency (e.g. interviewing via telephone or the internet rather than in person). This is one of the ways in which the balance between breadth and depth in a QL investigation can be maintained, ensuring breadth at the baseline, but depth at follow-up. It is a sampling strategy that can save on limited budgets, and may be particularly suitable for lone researchers or small teams with limited time and resources.

Alternatively, researchers may choose to boost a baseline sample at follow-up. As shown above, in the *Identities and Learning Programme*, Pollard and Filer (1996, 1999) started out with a sample of ten children drawn from one primary school. Some years later they were able to boost the sample when they were given access to a further ten children from a contrasting primary school (Filer and Pollard 2000). Most of the twenty children were followed into the years of their secondary education, a process that involved expanding the settings for the research from two primary schools to nine high schools (Pollard 2007). Similarly, in the *Following Young Fathers Study*, the original sample comprised a group of twelve low-income young fathers

who were tracked intensively over three waves of interviews. This was an 'opportunistic' sample, recruited and revisited through the support of a particularly committed practice partner. For the second phase of funding, which followed on seamlessly from the first, the sample was boosted to thirty-one young men, including those from middle-income families, and those without specialist professional support. This gave greater insights into the varied socio-economic trajectories and support needs of the young men and how these impacted on their fatherhood journeys (Neale and colleagues 2015). Boosting the sample in this way enabled an incremental development of this study from its modest beginnings.

Longitudinal panels and cohorts

The participants in a prospective longitudinal study are commonly described as a *panel*.⁴ This implies an established group of participants, with a shared identity and the capacity for a sustained engagement with the research process. Using purposive sampling logic, a QL panel may be constructed in varied ways to enable comparisons through time. A common strategy is to build in one or more *cohorts*. These are individuals or groups whose fortunes are shaped by a shared experience, a common passage through the life course or a particular historical process, over *roughly the same period of time*. They are defined as 'aggregates of individuals who experience the same life event within the same time interval' (Ruspini 2002: 9). In other words, cohorts are anchored by shared experiences in time. This gives a great deal of flexibility in how cohorts are defined. They may be held together, for example, by their common age or generation, by a common life course experience (e.g. a concurrent migration, incarceration or retirement) or by a contemporaneous passage through an external landscape (becoming clients of a service, for example, or living through a change in policy, a war or a famine).

Perhaps the most well-known are the birth cohorts, samples born in the same year, who may be followed from birth or through a particular segment of the life course (Ruspini 2002). The times into which people are born are

⁴ This terminology has its origins in quantitative longitudinal research, where it is associated with representative samples and a relatively long time frame. But it is also commonly employed in QL research, (see for example, Saldana 2003, Farrell and colleagues 2006, Krings, and colleagues 2013).

among the most powerful influences that shape who they are: 'To be young is to be young at a particular time and place: each age cohort is unique' (Colson 1984: 4). Sampling across one or more cohorts is a productive means of engaging with the micro–macro plane of time. Since cohorts are held together by shared experiences that occur contemporaneously, they can become lynchpins for discerning the links between biographical and historical processes of change. It is important to note that a cohort is by no means homogeneous: sampling across one particular cohort enables researchers to draw into a study those with different characteristics and living in varied circumstances. Laub and Sampson (2003), for example, explored the diverging trajectories of an age cohort of delinquent 'boys' over decades of change, uncovering the complex socio-economic, family and health factors that led some to persist with criminal careers and others to desist from crime.

Sampling across cohorts

Sampling across different cohorts is a common strategy in longitudinal research, particularly in large-scale, extensive studies that seek to tease out how historical events are synchronized with life course processes (Giele and Elder 1998, and see Chapter 2). Drawing on longitudinal data from the long-running *Berkeley Guidance Study* and the *Oakland Growth Study*, Elder sampled two age cohorts of young people who were growing up at the time of the Great Depression (Elder 1974, Elder and Pellerin 1998; Shanahan and Macmillan 2008). The Oakland children experienced the Depression during their teenage years and were able to contribute to their family economies. The Berkeley children, who were eight years younger than the Oakland children, were small and dependent at the time of the Depression. As a consequence they placed extra strain on their family resources, resulting in adverse effects for them and their families. It was this strategy of sampling across two age cohorts that enabled Elder to discern the varied impact of a major historical event on people of different ages, and to produce new insights about the timing of historical events in people's lives.

Sampling across cohorts is also used in the more intensive designs of QL research. The strategy is most commonly employed in evaluation studies that seek to assess the delivery and effectiveness of social or health care programmes. By sampling two or more cohorts who may enter a programme sequentially, or at staggered (overlapping) times, it is possible to discern changes in programme delivery and how these impact

on service users. For example, in their evaluation of the *Job Retention and Rehabilitation Pilot Scheme*, Farrell and colleagues (2006) interviewed three cohorts of service users (twelve cases in each). The study was conducted in three phases, each lasting six months and involving six waves of interviews. Each of these phases was devoted to a separate cohort of service users, whose experiences of the pilot were compared. In total, eighteen waves of fieldwork were conducted over an eighteen-month period, an intensive schedule that was facilitated by the small sample size.

A similar approach was taken in an evaluation of New Labour's *Pathway to Work Pilot Scheme* (Corden and Nice 2007), although here the cohorts of service users were staggered rather than sequential, and followed through overlapping time frames. The overall time frame was twenty-one months and involved nine waves of fieldwork, three for each cohort. This intensive design and sampling strategy yielded a relatively large sample size (over 100 people) and a steady stream of data and findings that were fed directly back into the development of the pilot scheme. Using staggered or successive cohorts within a QL panel design is a valuable means of exploring changes in individual experiences (the 'panel' elements), in relation to changes in service delivery (the 'cohort' elements). The approach is well suited to evaluation research, where a broader sample that offers greater scope for comparison may be needed, and where policy funders require quick results over the short to medium term (Corden and Nice 2007). However, as these researchers note, such sampling strategies can be complex to manage and involve particularly demanding schedules of fieldwork.

Generational cohorts and family chains

Sampling within or across generational cohorts, or across inter-generational chains of family members, facilitates an exploration of the interplay between generational and historical processes of change. Generational cohorts are convoys of individual who are born and grow up within the same historical period. They are held together 'horizontally' through a shared cultural inheritance and contemporaneous experience of historical circumstances and transformations. When Mannheim (1952 [1927]) first identified generational cohorts, he stressed that they are not defined solely by age; indeed on this criterion alone generations would have no clear definition, given the seamless continuum of daily births and deaths. The temporal boundaries of a generational cohort are fluid and ill defined, and,

unless those at the margins are 'sucked into the vortex of social change' (Mannheim 1952 ([1927]: 303), they may be inert, or passively orient themselves to those who are born either before or after them (Pilcher 1994; McLeod and Thomson 2009: 111). But the core members of a generational cohort will share a common sense of destiny that is forged through the shared times of their lives: historical, political and environmental processes, national events, technological advances, the rise of new cultural practices, shifting values and so on. Such processes may gradually coalesce to create a discernible shift in the social fabric, and the forging of a distinct generational identity (the 'war' generation, the post-war baby boomers, the millennial generation etc.).

Like all cohorts, generational cohorts are far from homogeneous in their life circumstances and experiences. They are likely to comprise varied sub-units that are defined along the axes of gender, class, ethnicity or community, and these too may develop distinctive identities that emerge in contrast or opposition to others (e.g. the 'mods' and 'rockers' of the post-war era). In *Growing Up Girl*, Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) followed the lives of a sample of young women from their early childhoods through to the cusp of maturity. The researchers used a multiple sampling strategy, drawing together cases that were being tracked prospectively; a second group, designed to boost the sample, who were interviewed retrospectively; and a third group who were sampled from an earlier study and the data re-purposed. The composite sample formed a classic generational cohort in the sense proposed by Mannheim. Of mixed class, ethnic and educational backgrounds, the young women were born within a decade of each other, and were forging their adult identities in a specific cultural milieu and at a time of structural inequalities and historical and social transformations leading up to the millennium (for a similar generational sampling strategy see Henderson and colleagues 2007).

Sampling across generational cohorts and family chains

Drawing different generational cohorts into a study can serve two purposes. It affords access to the dynamics of inter-generational relationships and, depending on the number of generations included and how they are spaced, it can open a window onto broader historical processes of change. Bertaux and Delcroix (2000) suggest that a minimum of three generations is needed to create the necessary historical reach. In their study of disability across the life course, for example, Shah and Priestley (2011) sampled three

generational cohorts of disabled people, those born in the 1940s, 1960s and 1980s. They were able to compare the experiences of each cohort as they grew up under very different regimes of health, educational and social care provision, and to chart changing experiences of disability that spanned half a century of change. This was a single-visit study that did not follow people through time. But the researchers were able to build a retrospective understanding of historical developments through this approach. Relatively few QL researchers have utilized this sampling strategy to date, although Hermanowicz (2016) provides a good example. He sampled three generational cohorts of academic science teachers (early career, mid-career and late career), basing his criteria on the year in which they received their doctorates. The fifty-five academics were drawn from different kinds of higher education institution in the United States. The longitudinal frame for this study was an extensive one, involving two waves of interviews separated by a decade. At follow-up, his sample of academics had moved into different stages of their careers (mid-career, late career and retired). At each wave, the researcher was able to explore generational and historical differences across the three cohorts. But the design also offered scope to explore the biographical transformations that had occurred for the sample as they moved from one generational position to another and, over a decade of change, to discern the institutional and social factors that had shaped their careers trajectories over time.

A related approach is to sample inter-generational chains of family members who are held together 'vertically' by their genealogical ties. This gives access to the inter-connecting lives, influences, legacies and internal dynamics of those who are linked through the bonds of kinship. Their unfolding trajectories are interlocking, with the fortunes of each generation (changes in relationships, employment, housing, health etc.) impacting on the lives of both older and younger generations in the chain (Elder 1985: 39). By working across a number of inter-generational family chains, insights also emerge into broader patterns of social change (Bertaux and Delcroix 2000: 71). An 'anchor' generation is usually identified for a study, from whom the chain can be built. It is worth noting that members of different family chains are not generational *cohorts* in the sense described above. They will not necessarily experience the same life events at the same historical time, for each family chain will have a unique historical range, depending on the ages of the generations, the spacing of their births and how many generations are sampled. Nevertheless, family chains are likely

to offer valuable insights into macro-dynamic processes, alongside insights into the flow of family lives and influences across the generations.

To give one example, in a study of patterns of care within four-generation families (Brannen, Moss and Mooney 2004; Brannen 2006), the researchers sampled twelve inter-generational chains, each comprising between five and eight family members, giving a total of seventy-one family members in the study as a whole. The generational design gave significant historical reach to this study, from the 1930s Depression, to the post-war reconstruction and growth of the welfare state, to the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s (Thatcherism). The researchers were able to explore how family support is shaped by life course position, family cultures and wider historical contexts.

Much like sampling across generational cohorts, sampling across family chains has been utilized, in the main, by researchers who wish to achieve historical depth retrospectively, through a single visit to the field (e.g. Bertaux and Delcroix 2000; Brannen, Moss and Mooney 2004; Brannen 2006). But there is ample scope to utilize this sampling strategy within a prospective QL design, as the following example shows. The *Making of Modern Motherhood Study* (Thomson and colleagues 2011; Thomson 2011) was designed around a critical moment of biographical and family change: the arrival of a new generation. Baseline interviews were conducted with a cohort of sixty-two women who were about to enter motherhood for the first time. Variations in age, social class, ethnicity, working status, living situation and proximity of family support were built into the baseline cohort. The age variation was particularly broad: the women were aged between fifteen and forty-eight at the time of their pregnancies. The researchers also sampled a variety of documentary sources that gave insights into popular cultures of motherhood at the time these women were giving birth, thereby situating the study in a particular socio-historical context.

For their follow-up interviews, the researchers funnelled in on twelve of the mothers from the baseline sample. These became the anchors for recruiting twelve inter-generational chains of family members into the study. These chains included grandparents, great grandparents and significant others. In a subsequent phase of the research, funded under the *Timescapes Study*, the researchers sampled six of these twelve chains, who were then followed up for two further waves of interviews. In this way, the researchers reconfigured their sample as the study progressed. While the number of family chains was too limited to permit an analysis of wider

historical processes of change, the researchers were able to explore the 'gestalt' of modern day motherhood through the broad baseline sample, and develop insights into changing configurations of family relationships through the prospective inter-generational sample.

Overall, the examples given above demonstrate the flexibility and creativity of temporal sampling in QL research. Time clearly complicates the sampling process, but can also enrich it. Time influences the balance between depth and breadth of investigation and impacts on how and when variations may be built into a sample. It also shapes the way comparison and synthesis of evidence is to be understood (a theme developed further in Chapter 5). The facility to sample and re-sample though biographical, generational and historical time creates a wealth of flexible QL designs. It allows for different sub-samples to be followed over varied time frames and at different tempos. It offers scope to engage creatively with the micro–macro plane of time outlined in Chapter 2, to draw upon and read across data that is gathered prospectively or retrospectively, or that is generated for comparative breadth or case-study depth. Temporal sampling and re-sampling are complex processes that deserve careful thought and planning, for they are the crucial foundation upon which to build the generation and analysis of QL data.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has given an overview of the craft of QL research, with a particular focus on design and sampling. The creativity and flexibility of this process has been stressed; for QL researchers this is part of the rigour needed to engage effectively with temporal processes. The research process itself becomes a journey that must be navigated and documented as a study unfolds. The overall process is guided through the construction of temporally-led research questions and a conceptual roadmap. Particular attention has been given to the temporal logic of QL design, including the balance between prospective and retrospective designs, and between intensive and extensive time frames and tempos. The value of a flexible tempo that mirrors the process under investigation has been explored, along with the need for clear baseline and closure points that can help to anchor and contain the scope of a study.

Sampling through time is underpinned by the temporal logic of working across cases, themes and time, and finding different ways to balance breadth and depth of investigation. The discussion has explored the basics of purposive sampling and what this means for the size, breadth and depth of a QL sample. The parameters of temporal sampling have been considered, including the process of purposively re-sampling over time to either 'grow' or 'condense' a study. Finally, the nature and utility of longitudinal panels and cohorts has been considered, and the potential to sample across generational cohorts or family chains has been explored. The importance of attending to these basic design and sampling issues, and thinking through their temporal dimensions is highlighted here, for they are the foundations upon which QL research practice is fashioned and refined over time.