Neale, Bren. "Walking alongside: Sustaining ethical relationships." *What is Qualitative Longitudinal Research?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 69–90. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472532992.0009>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:42 UTC.

Copyright © Bren Neale 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

4 Walking alongside: Sustaining ethical relationships

Introduction

The 'real time' nature of QL research has been likened to the process of 'walking alongside' a panel of participants (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). The imagery of walking alongside has particular resonance in the context of longitudinal ethnography, where researchers are likely to accompany participants in the everyday settings of their lives (see, for example, Corsaro and Molinari 2000; Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Green 2009). This is walking alongside in a more literal sense, as 'fellow travellers' (Gordon and Lahelma 2003).¹ However, the imagery has resonance for QL research more generally, regardless of the intensity or continuity of field encounters. It is a useful metaphor for capturing the dynamic tempo of a QL study, its responsive and relational nature, and the central concern with how lives unfold through the stream of time (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). In reflecting the sensibilities at the heart of QL research, walking alongside also provides a welcome alternative to the notion of tracking people, which has instrumental (and possibly predatory) connotations. This chapter explores the intricate process of walking alongside a panel of participants. We begin by considering methodological strategies for recruiting a panel of participants into a QL study, and maintaining their involvement. The challenges of re-tracing participants whose whereabouts are unknown after a lapse of time are then explored. As the discussion develops, the ethical terrain within which these processes are embedded begins to

¹ This is also the case for walking methodologies in qualitative research. These are mobile, experiential data gathering techniques in which the researcher accompanies a participant through a particular setting or landscape of their lives, perhaps intensively over several hours, or more intermittently over a longer phase of field enquiry (Thomson 2012; Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017).

emerge, culminating in a detailed consideration of the ethics of sustaining relationships in a QL study.

Recruiting and maintaining samples over time

QL research relies on being able to recruit and maintain a panel of participants over time. The aim is to minimize sample attrition – the process whereby panel members drop out of a study. A refusal to participate or a failure to engage may occur for a variety of reasons, most of which are beyond the control of the researcher. Panel members may lose touch if their circumstances change, for example, through relocation, changing jobs, names or telephone numbers, breaking ties with family or social networks, or suffering illness or death (Farrall and colleagues 2016). In some cases, drop out is most evident where participants are undergoing particular difficulties in their lives (Harocopos and Dennis 2003). But it may also occur where people are doing better and opt to move on in their lives and leave the past behind them (Farrall and colleagues 2016).

In larger-scale longitudinal studies, there are varied views on what constitutes an acceptable attrition rate (ranging from 5 per cent to 30 per cent; Desmond and colleagues 1995). This has to be balanced against the duration of time over which a study runs. A 75 per cent retention rate over a twenty-year period is regarded as a significant achievement (Elliott, Holland and Thomson 2008). In small-scale, relatively short-term QL studies, however, the loss of even a few participants might represent a substantial proportion of the sample and materially alter the balance of experiences under investigation (Farrall and colleagues 2016). For example, assessing the impact of a health or social care intervention requires a panel with varied experiences of and responses to the provision. The loss of panel members may skew the sample towards either positive or negative experiences, creating a bias that can impact on the robustness of the evidence (Desmond and colleagues 1995; Harocopos and Dennis 2003). One way to compensate for this is to over-sample at the baseline, although this needs to be done with care to avoid overstressing the resources of the researchers (Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis 2013). The methodological challenges associated with maintaining and revisiting samples over time are common to all longitudinal research. Particular issues may arise where researchers are working with marginalized groups, or where the aim is

to retrace a 'lost' sample after a lapse of some years (Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; O'Connor and Goodwin 2012; Miller 2015; Farrall and colleagues 2016). A further complication arises where the unit of study is a family or organization, for this requires the sustaining of collective commitment and consent over time (Taylor 2015). Some of the strategies used by researchers to overcome these challenges are outlined below.

Recruitment

Strategies for keeping in touch with participants need to be planned for and built into initial recruitment plans. Preparations for entering the field involve negotiating access to research settings and developing relationships with 'gatekeepers', as well as with potential participants. Recruitment traditionally occurs through leaflets and letters that describe the research. The process may be initiated via organizations or key workers who can broker the research with participants, or through more direct approaches (in person, by phone or via the web). As shown in Chapter 3, QL researchers may begin a study with a period of ethnographic engagement and/or set up focus groups as a precursor to in-depth interviews. These are effective ways to get to know participants, to develop trust and rapport and introduce them to a QL study before recruiting them into a panel. Such methods may also help to establish a sense of group identity and belonging to a study that can support the maintenance of a panel over time. However, recruitment into a longer-term study is not always straightforward. Recruiting family groups or organizations, for example, may take some time to negotiate with all those involved (Taylor 2015). Working with transient or marginalized groups, or in settings where verbal communication predominates, can also present challenges. In these circumstances it is worth seeking permission to keep in contact via a participant's social network: family members, friends, key workers and so on. A contact sheet can be set up to record participants' personal details (including full name and date of birth) and preferred means of contact, along with contact details for selected family members or friends (McNaughton 2008). This can be used to check and update contact details at each research encounter. Whatever the recruitment route, it is best to clarify the proposed time frames for the research, the longer-term commitment this requires and the likelihood that researchers

will re-contact participants again in future. Attrition is less likely where participants are aware of the longer-term nature of the study and can make an informed choice (Desmond and colleagues 1995).

Strategies for maintaining contact

A range of techniques may be employed to keep in touch with an existing sample. Posting letters or bulletins about the project, along with a greeting card, is a common tactic. This provides the foundation for following up informally with a text, phone call and/or house visit. Increasingly, researchers use web-based modes of communication (emails and social networking sites such as Facebook) for the same purpose. With their speed, ease and relatively low cost, these can be an invaluable means of working flexibly in the field, sustaining links with participants and containing the high costs of QL enquiry. Setting up a Facebook page for a project, or bringing people together in a group, can foster and help to sustain a sense of group identity and belonging among panel members.

However, strategies need to be tailored to the needs of participants. These standard techniques may not work where panel members are undergoing difficult transitions, or do not have stable homes or regular access to internet or mobile phone technology. In these circumstances, researchers often leave their contact details with participants, along with details of the next interview, and invite participants to get in touch whenever it suits them (Harocopos and Dennis 2003; Williamson and colleagues 2014). Setting up a drop-in centre that can be accessed by panel members when they wish is also worth considering. This might offer varied kinds of support or therapies alongside other incentives to keep people's interest or draw them back into a study (Conover and colleagues 1997). There are few limits on researcher inventiveness. Hagan and McCarthy (1997), for example, sought permission at the outset of their study to take photographs of the homeless men in their sample, and later used the photos to locate the men in their transient communities. Providing material rewards, particularly for low-income groups, can act as incentives to draw people into a study, at least in the early stages. Such payments may be regarded as a means to professionalize the relationship between researcher and participant (Harocopos and Dennis 2003). In recent studies, QL researchers have offered participants a £20 gift voucher for their time (£50 for a detailed life history interview or for keeping a daily diary), and

provided other forms of in-kind support as appropriate, for example, meals, transport costs or taxis to travel to an interview (Bytheway 2012; Neale and colleagues 2015). Such provision needs to be factored into project budgets at the planning stage.

Building ethnographic elements into fieldwork can also be very effective in developing rapport, maintaining communications and sustaining relationships (Hemmerman 2010). This might include informal visits to the home of a participant or family member. Or it may involve attending events or visiting local settings where participants or members of their social networks may be found. In these circumstances there is a need to be flexible and 'field ready', in particular to be willing to conduct an interview at short notice or on the spot, rather than making a formal arrangement for a later date that may not materialize (Williamson and colleagues 2014). Conducting fieldwork intensively, with relatively frequent visits to the field, can facilitate the process of maintaining contact with marginalized groups or those with limited access to internet or mobile technologies (Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998; Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis 2013; Williamson and colleagues 2014).

Working with gatekeepers and practitioners

Building and sustaining relationships with gatekeeper organizations or practice partners can be vital in maintaining a QL sample over time (Pollard with Filer 1996). However, a longer-term commitment from practitioners cannot necessarily be relied upon (Saldana 2003; Ward and Henderson 2003). The job mobility of professional workers and insecure, short-term funding in the public and voluntary sectors can also create constraints. A slow and painstaking process of nurturing working relationships with practitioners over months or years may be undone overnight. This then requires the researcher to switch settings, or start afresh with incoming staff who may have little interest in the research and no knowledge of the participants (Pollard with Filer 1996, Ward and Henderson 2003).

Where sustained professional support can be garnered, however, it can be of huge value. In the *Following Young Fathers Study* a specialist support worker became a practice partner in the project. He played a crucial role in helping to recruit a relatively nomadic and marginalized group of young men into the study, liaised between the researchers and the participants over the course of the study and ensured that the young men were able to participate (including, on occasion, finding them on the street and bringing

them to interview) (Neale and colleagues 2015). In this case, the specialist remit of the practitioner gave him the time and resources to make these contributions. Clarifying the nature of the research and negotiating the longer-term commitment needed from the practitioner at the outset also helped. Attrition rates for panel members recruited through this particular route were very low compared to the rates for a subsequent sample of young men, who were recruited through a range of different agencies, and whose professional support was relatively fleeting and impersonal (Neale and colleagues 2015).

Re-tracing participants over extensive time frames

Where there has been a significant lapse in time since a panel was last convened, or where the aim is to locate a sample from a legacy study carried out by earlier generations of researchers, panel members will need to be re-traced before they can be invited back into a study (Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998; O'Connor and Goodwin 2012; Miller 2015; Farrall and colleagues 2016). The practical strategies outlined above all come into play here, starting with writing to the last known address, or to named contacts, and following up with telephone calls and visits to field sites, where using personal contacts or simply 'asking around' can be very effective (Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998). But where these strategies fail, researchers can resort to a range of tracing techniques, based primarily on internet technologies and social media (Miller 2015; Farrall and colleagues 2016). Telephone directories and registers of voters are likely to be available on line (in the UK via www.192.com for the electoral roll). Google and Facebook searches can be conducted using people's names, occupations, leisure pursuits or interests; or searches can be made of company registers or the websites of particular organizations or community groups (Miller 2015, Farrall and colleagues 2016). Revisiting past interview transcripts can be helpful in identifying possible leads.

In tracing people from a legacy project that had been conducted forty years earlier, O'Connor and Goodwin (2010) had some success with personal contacts in the local community, and the now defunct *Friends Reunited* website. They also advertised their re-study in local print and news media to encourage people to come forward, although this indirect approach was less effective. Where such strategies fail, birth, marriage,

death and obituary records may be checked (Farrall and colleagues 2016). Other potential sources are institutional or administrative records relating to the participants, for example, held by health, welfare, employment or educational agencies, churches or community groups, or the criminal justice system. Researchers report tracing over half of their original samples using these varied routes (Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998, Miller 2015; Farrall and colleagues 2016). Even after a lapse of forty years, O'Connor and Goodwin (2010), managed to trace 157 people from a sub-sample of 500 participants, resulting in 97 interviews. In this case, however, only ten of those interviewed were women, despite the efforts of the researchers to trace name changes through marriage registers. Tracing tools, then, can introduce further biases in a sample, but they are clearly effective in enabling researchers to extend the historical and biographical reach of an earlier study.

When to give up?

The palette of techniques available to trace and maintain a QL sample over time, and the time, resources and stamina needed for these tasks may seem daunting. Farrall and colleagues (2016), for example, spent well over two years tracing and re-contacting a sample of 199 probationers before exhausting all possible leads. The process yielded a 50 per cent success rate. A pursuit such as this requires not only earmarked budgets but skilled, flexible and dedicated researchers who are well versed in longitudinal enquiry (Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis 2013; Williamson and colleagues 2014; Farrall and colleagues 2016). Indeed, the process of maintaining or resurrecting a QL sample can require the patience, ingenuity and tenacity that are commonly associated with private detection. Some researchers offer a 'finders fee' to practitioners and friends as an incentive to help, or resort to tracing agencies such as Equifax (Molloy and Woodfield with Bacon 2002; Dempster-McClain and Moen 1998), although, as Molloy and colleagues point out, such methods may breach confidentiality. Contract researchers may even be offered bonuses if they successfully retrace a sample (Bootsmiller and colleagues 1998).

Researchers often describe themselves as amateur sleuths when engaged in these activities (Warin 2011: 24; Miller 2015). However, this can be equated with the dubious practice of 'stalking', or coercion,

implying that the researcher has turned predator. Not surprisingly, researchers may feel ambivalent about this, and, for the same reason, may eschew the very notion of ‘tracking’ participants, with its connotations of a power imbalance between the ‘tracker’ and the ‘prey’ (Williamson and colleagues 2014; Miller 2015). The language of ‘revisiting’ or ‘walking alongside’ is less contentious here. But these ethical concerns reinforce the principle that there have to be limits to how far researchers will pursue people, and the zeal with which they do so. In other words, the methodological drive to maintain or revitalize a sample has to be tempered with the ethical drive to respect people’s privacy (an issue elaborated further below). For this reason, QL researchers commonly adhere to a standard rule of thumb: no more than two requests are usually made for a follow-up interview. The second request can clarify that no further contact will be made, but invite participants to get in touch if and when they could like to re-join a study at a later date (Farrall and colleagues 2016).

Sustaining relationships

Whatever the ambivalences around these processes, and the significant commitment of time and resources that they take, it is re-assuring to know that most QL researchers report relatively low rates of attrition, even when working with marginalized groups such as drug users (Desmond and colleagues 1995). Sample maintenance is generally less of a problem in QL enquiry than in large-scale longitudinal research. This can be explained by the intrinsic nature of the research encounter. It is a sustained interpersonal process that seeks to understand people’s lives and respect their world views. This means attending to the finer details of the encounter, for example, giving participants a choice over interview settings, modes of communication and who is present; and ensuring continuity of fieldworker wherever possible (or an effective overlap and handover where not). Overall, QL research transforms the task of *maintaining samples* into one of *sustaining relationships* (Neale 2013). Upholding the principles of compassion and respect for research participants may require researchers to recognize them as people first and participants second (Williamson and colleagues 2014: 82). In applying the ethics of care and respect in their study, Williamson and colleagues maintained an interest in the lives of the homeless women whom they encountered, and provided ongoing forms

of emotional support for them that stretched beyond the time when the women dropped out of the research. In the event, the researchers were able to retain over 60 per cent of their sample over the course of a two year study.

Feedback from participants in QL studies reinforces the fundamental value of sustaining relationships as the key to maintaining a sample. Financial gain is much less often reported as an effective incentive. Farrall and colleagues (2016) found that when, in desperation, they offered an increased financial bonus to encourage people to re-enter their study this was markedly ineffective. Similarly, the homeless women interviewed by Williamson and colleagues reported that their initial financial motivation for taking part quickly gave way to more altruistic feelings, and the sense that they were privileged to be part of the panel (a sentiment that is often expressed among long-term research participants). A frequently reported motive for a continued engagement is the wish to give something back, and to help others in similar circumstances. Perhaps most significantly, the women interviewed by Williamson and colleagues (2014) reported an intrinsic satisfaction in being able to reflect on their journeys over time and share this with the researchers. Indeed, the commitment which participants develop to a QL study, alongside the sense of privilege and belonging that this can engender, can create challenges in bringing closure to the process (an issue considered below). In sum, whatever strategies are adopted to maintain a QL panel, the relational dimensions of the process are likely to be the crucial factors.

The ethics of walking alongside

As the discussion above shows, ethical considerations are woven into the process of walking alongside a panel of participants.² The cardinal principles of research ethics are designed to ensure that participants are fully and transparently informed and participate freely in a study, that their confidentiality is protected, and that their dignity, autonomy and privacy are respected at all times (ESRC 2016). It is commonly held that QL research amplifies existing ethical considerations rather than raising new ones (McLeod and Thomson 2009: 76). Yet researching lives through time makes us sensitive to ethical issues and responsibilities in ways that

² The discussion here draws on Neale (2013).

are impossible to grasp through single-visit studies (Peterson Royce and Kemper 2002: xvi). For long-term ethnographers, these issues may extend to the changing role of the researcher in relation to the communities under study: from observer, to active partner, to advocate, with implications for researcher 'interference' in local systems of power and influence (Peterson Royce and Kemper 2002: xxx). More generally, the fluid and enduring nature of the research process opens up new dilemmas, and brings to the fore the transformative potential of well-established ethical principles. For participants, this applies to issues of consent as a process and the changing dynamics of research relationships. It also entails treading a careful path between reciprocity and professional boundary maintenance, and finding new ways to balance confidentiality, privacy, authenticity, protection and empowerment over time. As the discussion below will show, issues of consent, confidentiality and privacy all involve an ethical balancing act that becomes more pronounced as a study progresses.

Researching through time also opens up new ways to think about the relationship between proactive and reactive ethical strategies (Neale 2013). The first are procedural or advisory, constituted through ethical frameworks laid down by funding bodies and ethics committees, and through bodies of accumulated knowledge that researchers share to encourage good practice. The second are situated or emergent ethical practices that are context specific and based on a sensitive appraisal of local circumstances (Edwards and Mauthner 2002: 27; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Warin 2011). Proactive and reactive strategies are broadly complementary, of course, and both are needed. But situated ethics has particular resonance for longitudinal enquiry, given the greater likelihood that unanticipated events, changing circumstances and fresh ethical dilemmas will emerge through time. As a study unfolds, researchers are likely to find themselves navigating through a changing ethical landscape. The needs and claims of individual panel members or different sub-samples will evolve over time and require flexible responses. Over time, too, a wider constituency of individuals and organizations (from researchers, institutions and data re-users, to family members and practitioners) may become implicated in the process. This requires new thinking about their varied needs and claims, albeit these are not of equal weight in ethical decision making. The prime 'stakeholders' in the research process, and the main focus of attention here, are the research participants themselves. In what follows, consideration is given to issues

of informed consent, confidentiality, reciprocity, privacy, the extent of participation and the ethical closure of a project.

Process consent

Informed consent in a QL study is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event (Saldana 2003: 24; Thomson and Holland 2003). Whether consent is sought in writing or is recorded verbally at the outset, this needs to be revisited over the course of the study, ideally at times when trust has developed. This may be done at each research encounter or through exploratory and flexible conversations that are held with participants at key intervals. Continuity of field researchers can be beneficial here in facilitating this process. Process consent creates some challenges: consent may be differently 'informed' when the future direction of a project may be flexible and subject to change, and a continual revisiting of consent may become a burden on participants and create instability. McLeod and Thomson (2009: 74) observe, too, that while participants may agree to each interview, they are unlikely to have a sense of the cumulative power of the data they are providing and what it may reveal about them over time.

As a study progresses care is needed to ensure that participants are free to choose whether or not to maintain their involvement. It is important that the relationship between researcher and participant does not become exploitative over time, as trust and familiarity grow, and that any subtle coercion to continue is avoided (Holland and colleagues 2006: 28). Where participants opt out, the flexible tempo of the research process is a real boon, giving people the option to re-join a study at a later date. This flexibility in the field seems to take the pressure off participants when the timing of fieldwork may not mesh well with changing circumstances in their lives. Where 'gatekeepers' such as family members or practitioners are involved in recruitment, or a study involves collectives of participants, care is needed to ensure that individuals are consenting freely and not being coerced into, or out of participation (Miller and Bell 2002; Warin 2011: 54-5). Deciding *how* consent is to be informed also requires consideration. Overall, it is good practice to be transparent from the outset about the objectives of the project, including the longer-term commitment needed from panel members; the steps taken to protect confidentiality; anticipated outcomes or impact; and plans for archiving and revisiting data. This includes the possibility that participants may be contacted after a lapse

of time by existing or new research teams seeking to conduct a re-study. Finally, in some research settings it may be necessary to allay concerns about ulterior motives, and provide ongoing clarification and re-assurances about the purposes of a study. In particular (and regardless of the principle of reciprocity, discussed below), it may be necessary to clarify how social research differs in its aims and conduct from ‘intervention’ or ‘support’, and its limited capacity to effect desired changes in local communities (best framed as ‘hoped for’ rather than ‘anticipated’ outcomes; www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk; Wiles 2013; Morrow 2013).

Similar considerations arise in relation to ‘thank you’ gifts for participants, and whether these are seen as recompense and reward, or, more dubiously, as incentives or payments that may have a coercive effect (Morrow 2009). As shown above, such gifts can be very helpful in drawing people into a study. Through repeated interviews participants may well come to anticipate such a reward, which brings a contractual element to the process. Nevertheless, given the longer-term commitment that QL research entails, and the time required for in-depth interviews, it is equally important to avoid economic exploitation. Some reward or recompense is fully justified in these circumstances, particularly for low-income participants. A gift voucher, for example, can be an important element in the reciprocal offer. Being transparent at the outset about the giving of such rewards and explaining their purpose clearly to participants helps to avoid the potential for coercion.

Confidentiality, authenticity and shared authority

It is a cardinal principle of social research, embodied in ethics protocols and the UK Data Protection Act (1998), that researchers should not divulge identifiable information about participants to third parties (Moore 2012, Wiles 2013). The commitment to safeguard confidentiality is usually built into informed consent, thereby setting the standard for how a project will unfold. Re-assurances of confidentiality at this stage can perform a vital function in enabling participants to speak freely, without fear that their ‘warts and all’ accounts, views and experiences will be divulged to others outside the research domain. This in turn can enhance the meaning and authenticity of participants’ accounts. Maintaining confidentiality, however, can be a challenge when the risk of disclosure is magnified over time. The cumulative generation of rich, biographical data creates a unique, holistic ‘finger-print’

for a participant, which is increasingly revealing of identities, localities and life circumstances (Hughes 2011). Even the simple process of re-contacting participants for a revisit needs to be handled with care (Laub and Sampson 2003, Miller 2015). Letters, Facebook messages or telephone messages may inadvertently reveal to third parties details of past or recent lives that participants may not have disclosed themselves, or may no longer wish to 'own' or be reminded of. In these circumstances, it may be best to allude to the research rather than discuss its nature (Harocopos and Dennis 2003).

Issues of confidentiality are also magnified in studies involving groups such as families, organizations and small-scale communities, for there is increased danger over time of information leaking across participants in the study, or finding its way into the public domain (Reiss 2005; Harden and colleagues 2010; MacLean and Harden 2012). Issues of *internal confidentiality* are endemic to all group-based studies (Macmillan and colleagues 2012; Taylor 2015). But for QL research they also arise where a group identity is forged across a panel of participants, for example, through shared web spaces or via focus groups or other events which bring the panel members together. These are common strategies to keep samples engaged (see above), but they require the panel to commit to internal confidentiality. A useful strategy is to issue ethical guidelines to discourage disclosures about fellow participants, which panel members can pledge to uphold (Patrick 2012).

The principle of confidentiality, however, needs to be balanced against the equally compelling drive towards authenticity and empowerment: that is, towards preserving the integrity of participants' accounts and enabling a more open identification of, and acknowledgement for their contributions. Regardless of the potential liberation that comes from speaking in confidence, participants may wish to give candid accounts in their own right, and to be acknowledged for doing so (Corden and Sainsbury 2007; Grinyer 2009). Increasingly, the imperative to anonymize data and obscure identities sits uneasily with the view that the process may strip a dataset of its integrity, diminish its intellectual meaning and scientific value and do a disservice to participants who are airbrushed out of the historical record (Moore 2012). One way of addressing the latter problem is to ensure that a full, unabridged dataset, complete with participant contact details, is carefully preserved in a 'dark' archive for eventual historical use (Neale and colleagues 2016).

While there are no easy answers to these ethical dilemmas, researchers need to tread a delicate path between confidentiality, authenticity and

empowerment. One solution is to adopt the principle of shared authority and consult carefully with panel members over how they wish to be represented in research data and outputs. Imagining the participants as part of the audience for a published work, and reading it ‘through their eyes’ may help to ensure that research evidence is presented sensitively and with regard to participants’ feelings (Ellis 1995). The need to consult about published findings or displays of data, particularly where they touch on sensitive issues, becomes all the more important where relationships between researcher and participants are built on trust and enduring commitments through time. In his longitudinal study of science teaching in a high school, Reiss (2005) gives a candid account of what might happen without such consultation. He underestimated how the identities of the teachers might unravel over the course of the study, and how easily his assigned identities could be decoded by other staff in the school. This was of great concern to the teachers, who were also upset at what they saw as an overly critical stance in the way that Reiss reported his findings. As he notes, a more respectful, consultative and collaborative approach at the close of fieldwork, prior to the publication of findings, could have averted these problems (see Chapter 6 for an example of a collaborative approach).³

Reciprocity and professional boundaries

As shown above, maintaining a panel of participants over time is an important methodological issue for QL researchers. Ethically, however, the concern becomes one of sustaining and nurturing relationships (Pollard 2007). The process of walking alongside people, the sense of accompanying

³ These experiences are not uncommon among longitudinal researchers (see, for example, Ellis 1995; Scheper-Hughes 2000 and Hermanowicz 2016). Ellis (1995) and Scheper-Hughes (2000) give striking accounts of the consequences of such problems in their longitudinal ethnographies of close knit rural communities. Scheper-Hughes’ findings, which were published in the United States following a year of intensive fieldwork in an Irish community, were feted by academics but condemned by Irish commentators and local people. When she revisited the community after an absence of twenty-five years she was initially shunned by the villagers and then expelled. There was little sense of any shared authority in the way this research was conducted. As Scheper-Hughes acknowledges, it was marked by a lack of transparency about the aims and focus of the study, and the times when people were, or were not under scrutiny; a negative portrayal of the villagers and failure to write sensitively about the positive aspects of their community life; and a failure to consult over identities that were easily decoded by the villagers.

them on their life journeys, may touch the lives of both participants and researchers. Longitudinal ethnographers, for example, describe this process as a deep immersion, whereby they are, 'engaging ... with part of who they are' (O'Reilly 2012: 521; Burton, Purvin and Garratt-Peters 2009). Care is therefore needed in managing these shifting relationships over the course of a study and re-situating ethical practices where appropriate (Thomson 2007, Mauthner and Parry 2013; Taylor 2015: 283). The task involves building trust, mutual respect and reciprocity in ways that do not lead to over-dependence or involvement, intrusion or neglect, to the detriment of either researcher or participant (Pollard with Filer 1996; Birch and Miller 2002; Molloy and Woodfield with Bacon 2002, Reiss 2005; Morrow 2009). Sustaining relationships in these ways involves a balance between two ethical principles. The first is *reciprocity*, the notion of an ongoing 'gift' relationship, which is central to qualitative enquiry (Gordon and Lahelma 2003). The second is the need to maintain the *professional boundaries* of a research relationship over time, along with a clear focus on the professional nature of the researcher role (Hemmerman, 2010; Hammersley and Traianou 2012). Projects working with different field methods and with differently constituted samples are likely to balance these principles in varied ways; there is no prescriptive approach that works in all research contexts.

Giving and receiving support

The question of how much and what kind of support may be legitimately and appropriately provided – and received – as part of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship needs to be worked out in relation to local circumstances, contexts and cultures, as well as the overall time frame for a study (Morrow 2013). In an anthropological study of a Mexican community running over half a century, Foster (2002) was aware that his whole academic reputation, including the royalties from his books, had been built on the sustained research contributions of the local people. While his research benefited the villagers in non-material ways, making them feel listened to, special and valued, he explains that sustained material benefits, given indirectly rather than through direct payments, had also become an essential part of the reciprocal offer:

I contribute substantially to such things as public lighting and school funds and my name routinely is found on the list of contributors to any village function. ... Each year I leave with the village priest a

substantial sum of money to be distributed at his discretion among the village needy. Altogether my continuing contributions have far exceeded any monetary profit to me from publications. ... I believe no one is worse off for our presence, and I know that some are better off. A few, without our monetary intervention in medical crises, would almost certainly have died. (Foster 2002: 273)

The Mexican families with whom Foster stayed in the village were regularly made welcome as guests to Foster's home in the United States. However, local competition for scarce resources also engendered competition for his favours. Some jealousies were directed at these 'favoured' families, which may have affected their close knit village ties (Foster 2002: 273–4). Foster's account reveals how, over many years, the professional researcher role evolved gradually and naturally into one of enduring friendship. These are common experiences among longitudinal ethnographers (Kemper and Peterson Royce 2002).

Whatever the local context, the longer the time frame for a study, the greater the likelihood that participants will need or request some form of support, or seek to reciprocate themselves. In the *Following Young Fathers Study*, for example, the researchers were asked to provide a character reference for a participant who was facing a custodial sentence. This raised a number of dilemmas: what did the researchers know, but also not know about the young man beyond the confines of the research relationship? Could they breach confidentiality? And could they vouch for the young man's moral conduct in a legal context? Keeping within the bounds of the research relationship, the team provided a general reference for the young man that outlined the valuable contribution that he had made to the research (Neale and colleagues 2015). On another occasion, the team offered some educational advice to a young participant whose interviews revealed a persistent and unfulfilled aspiration to go to university. The methodological drawbacks of influencing the life path of the young man were outweighed by the ethics of 'giving something back'.

Similarly, in a study of welfare reform, Patrick (2012) gave some rudimentary welfare advice to her participants. This was seen as a central part of the reciprocal offer: it would have felt unethical to refrain from providing advice that would materially benefit the participants, although in the process she was influencing their welfare journeys. On another occasion, a participant presented Patrick with a small gift for her new

baby. To decline the gift would have been disrespectful and may have damaged the relationship. At the same time Patrick made clear her limited capacity to provide further support or to maintain contact beyond the end of her project. She also clarified the limits of her ability to influence welfare policies as an outcome of the project – something that had initially motivated some of the participants to take part in the study.

As these examples show, the balancing act between reciprocity and professional boundary maintenance requires some finesse, and it may become a challenging process in particular field settings. In a community study of low-income, disadvantaged families, for example, Hemmerman (2010) reports that maintaining the sample required frequent informal visits to the community, which ran the risk of intrusion and over familiarity. Reciprocity in this scenario meant supporting the households with basic chores and food shopping prior to conducting an interview. A sustained engagement of this nature can be emotionally challenging, particularly when researching sensitive topics. Hemmerman was affected by the precarious lives of her participants and the traumatic events that they shared with her. Similar experiences were reported by Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis (2013) in their study of terminally ill cancer patients, many of whom died during the study. In such circumstances, walking alongside participants can be stressful. This suggests the need for ongoing support for researchers, for example through a buddy system (Williamson and colleagues 2014: 86). More broadly, these experiences raise questions about the nature and extent of researcher involvement in the daily lives of participants. Whatever strategies and solutions are adopted, steering a path through over-dependence, intrusion, neglect and emotional entanglement will be eased where the boundaries of reciprocity and professional research relationships are considered at the outset of a study.

Privacy

The privacy principle is closely allied to the need for confidentiality. It requires researchers to consider whether they are intruding into the lives of participants, and to what extent participants are being asked to disclose sensitive information about their lives that they may not feel comfortable with. The usual protocols of qualitative research enable participants to say as much or as little as they choose. Even so, privacy can quickly unravel over successive waves of a QL study, where building relationships of trust

may invite greater intimacy. Moreover, what comes under the spotlight is not just the 'life as told' in the moment, but the 'life as lived', and how and why it is unfolding in particular ways. This requires some congruence between how a life is narrated to the researcher, and how it is unfolding. It is an inherently deeper, more reflexive and open process, which requires a greater level of commitment, integrity and willingness to disclose on the part of the participant. While some participants may welcome this and find it enriching, others will avoid it or find themselves unable to engage in this way, particularly at difficult times in their lives, or when they are not (yet) ready to share sensitive issues with a researcher (McLeod 2003: 206). Time can be a good resource here, giving some flexibility about when to touch on sensitive issues, and allowing them to be opened up retrospectively, when the dust has settled and relations of trust have developed further (Macmillan and colleagues 2012). In the *Following Young Fathers Study*, for example, issues relating to illiteracy, anger management, domestic violence and illegal activities were disclosed over substantial periods of time rather than at the outset, and often when participants could reflect on them retrospectively, as experiences that they could put behind them (Neale and colleagues 2015; Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Peters 2009).

The extent of participation

The extended time frames for QL research open up the potential for participants to play a role in a project that goes beyond their conventional 'informant' role. For example, panel members may be invited to generate data themselves, to read and verify interview transcripts or case materials; to offer reflections on their past accounts from the standpoint of the present day; to act as consultants in the representation or the interpretation of data about their lives; and to contribute to dissemination and impact activities. In some cases, selected participants may opt to become spokespeople for the project and its findings, as part of which their identification in the research process may become explicit, requiring their confidentiality to be waived or re-negotiated. Overall, playing a more active role in a project can have a transformative effect on the confidentiality and privacy afforded to participants. In these ways, QL research shares some affinities with participatory and action modes of research, which are founded on the principles of empowerment, shared authority and the co-production of knowledge (Wiles 2012).

These extended forms of consultation and participation would seem to be commendable. As shown earlier, too little consultation runs the risk of breaching the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, with potentially damaging consequences for researchers and participants. On the other hand, too much consultation may also be problematic. The extended forms of participation outlined above raise questions about how far they should be taken, for which groups of participants, and in what specific contexts; there may be costs involved and unintended consequences. For example, involving participants in the production of written, video or audio diaries can be rewarding and interesting. But the process may also be too revealing, crystallizing aspects of a life that participants may not wish to share or would rather disown (Pini and Walkerdine 2011). The idea that such participatory approaches are necessarily empowering may be too idealistic. Researchers who commission such activities remain the prime audience for their production, and, in the process, their scrutiny extends beyond the interview into the realms of a participant's daily life (Pini and Walkerdine 2011). Similarly, where participants are invited to revisit their earlier interview transcripts this may carry emotional risks, for it involves a level of introspection that people may find uncomfortable (Miller 2000: 104). In this context, too, participants may find themselves confronted with seemingly 'fixed' versions of their past lives that they may no longer wish to identify with. In the ongoing flow of a life, past events and circumstances are continually open to interpretation as people selectively remember, change plans, modify aspirations, acquire new identities and overwrite their life stories (cf. Miller 2000; Thomson 2012). Being confronted with an earlier version of oneself may mean re-living old hurts or traumas, or it may reveal unfavourable comparisons between how a participant envisaged their future and what has actually transpired.

In the *Inventing Adulthoods Study*, for example, participants were invited to reflect on transcripts and video data from earlier interviews and analytical case histories that the researchers had subsequently generated. While some engaged happily in this activity, others expressed disquiet at the way they were represented or regretted their disclosures, feeling they were made to look stupid or otherwise exposed (although this was far from the intention of the researchers, McLeod and Thomson 2009: 75–6). In similar vein, Warin (2010, 2011) recounts how one of the teenage participants in her study of children's changing identities decided to drop out after he was shown earlier video footage of himself as a pre-schooler. He emphasized his maturity

at the follow-up interview, and explained that he felt the study was 'too babyish'. Given the small sample size (ten young people), this was a serious loss to the study. Presenting people with a transcript or visual reminder of their past, or otherwise reminding them of what they previously said needs careful handling, for it may intrude on the internal process of 'reworking' the past. While QL researchers need to build cumulative understandings by comparing past and present day accounts, this does not obviate the need to respect the privacy of people's past lives, and to accept whatever version of the past is currently being conveyed.

Overall, it is possible that relatively few participants may wish to engage in the additional activities outlined above. Such extended roles may create additional burdens for them, taking them reluctantly into a process of reflexive interpretation of their lives – a quasi-researcher role – that they may find uncomfortable (Birch and Miller 2002; McLeod and Thomson 2009). Great care is needed to discern where participants stand on these issues. It has to be acknowledged that seeking to make the research process more democratic by sharing the analytical authority that researchers hold may be 'an ethical sleight of hand, even somewhat delusional' (Back 2007).

Balanced against such sensibilities, however, are the very real benefits for some participants in becoming ambassadors for a study, particularly when fieldwork is completed and they are able to move beyond their role as 'informant'. In the *Following Young Fathers Study*, for example, selected young men took part in a national practitioner conference towards the end of the study, where they contributed to workshops and formed a question and answer panel at the close of the day. This was a powerful means of giving the young men an audience as well as a voice. Their contributions were greatly valued by delegates and a matter of pride for the young men themselves. Using their own voices was immensely powerful and, arguably, carried more weight than the researchers' attempts to speak for them (Neale and colleagues 2015; Tarrant and Neale 2017). Their capacity to engage with practitioners was a significant finding of the study, but here it was not simply documented but actively demonstrated to a practice audience. Similarly, as part of a collaborative writing project, one participant produced an autobiographical account of his journey into fatherhood (Johnson 2015). In a subsequent impact initiative (Tarrant and Neale 2017) selected panel members went on to develop mentoring, advocacy and training roles under the aegis of a newly formed Young Dads Collective for the North of England (see Chapter 6). Such engagement clearly has the

potential to empower and enrich the lives of selected participants, and it was also seen by the researchers as another way to 'give something back' to them for their significant contributions. Overall, however, such forms of engagement are not likely to suit all participants and are best seen as optional extras.

Ethical closure

The time and effort needed to sustain ethical relationships over time are clearly substantial. At the same time they create extra challenges for bringing the research to a satisfactory conclusion (Reiss 2005). Marking the closure of a project, or the current phase where there may be a follow-up, is vital where participants have had a long-term commitment to a study. They may have a professional investment in the outcomes, or developed relationships and a research identity that they have come to value. A clear exit strategy is needed that goes beyond a formal letter or certificate of participation (Morrow 2009). Possibilities include a sociable event or a public gathering, exhibition or other form of dissemination event that participants can attend or contribute to (Neale and colleagues 2015; see Chapter 6 for an example). Or it may involve creative forms of output, produced in collaboration with selected panel members, and distributed to all as a fitting memento of their contribution (e.g. an anthology of participants' reflections or a collaborative film, Neale and Flowerdew 2004, Land and Patrick 2014). Such events and outputs, however, take foresight, time, effort and funding; a proactive strategy can help to build these resources into a study at the design stage.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has focused on a central practice within QL research: that of walking alongside a panel of participants to discern how their lives unfold. The discussion has explored how participants are recruited into a study and how their involvement is best maintained. Strategies for re-tracing people if they become 'lost' to a study have been detailed, along with the need to temper the zeal of private detection with respect for people's privacy. The discussion illustrates how QL researchers are not simply maintaining samples: they become fellow travellers engaged in the crucial task of building and sustaining relationships. More than any other research strategy, this is the key to maintaining a sample. How this process is managed is

the cornerstone of ethical practice in a QL study. For QL research, ethical literacy is an inherent part of the temporal landscape, a moral compass that helps to set a project on its course and navigate it as it unfolds. It relies on a mixture of proactive and reactive ethical strategies, drawing on pre-existing ethical protocols and shared knowledge, and creatively re-working them to address unanticipated ethical dilemmas as they arise. The domain of applied ethics is about making difficult choices in situations where no unambiguous options exist (Bishop 2009). While the longer time frames for QL enquiry magnify these challenges, time also operates as a resource in the resolution of ethical issues, and it may uncover and offer new insights into the moral terrain of participants' lives.