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6 Looking back, looking forwards: The value of qualitative longitudinal research

This introductory volume has explored the contours of QL research, from theoretical underpinnings to research design and practice. In these concluding reflections the considerable strengths of this methodology are considered alongside its challenges. QL research has many compelling attractions, not least its capacity to discern change ‘in the making’ (Mills 1959). It can shed light on the human factors that shape lives, the varied ways in which transitions and trajectories unfold and how and why these pathways converge or diverge across a panel of participants. It can uncover the subjective causes and consequences of dynamic processes: the stability or inertia of continued states, the triggers and mechanisms of change, and the creativity, resilience and/or fragility of individuals and groups in shaping or accommodating to these processes. With its recursive power, QL enquiry captures how individuals overwrite their biographies, continually adjusting the narratives of their lives to their evolving experiences. In the process, the messy, complex, subtly shifting facets of human experience are brought to light (Farrall and colleagues 2014). QL researchers are able to:

- intensively ‘walk alongside’ people, in ‘real’ time, as their lives unfold;
- extensively follow them over decades;
- explore the journey along the way, as well as the destination reached;
- uncover the interior logic of lives and the dynamics of human agency and subjectivity;
- combine a palette of creative methods to capture the intricacies of life processes and the experiential dimensions of time;

- weave back and forth through time to gain a more processual understanding;
- investigate the triggers and mechanisms of change;
- discern the place of lived experiences within a broader landscape of social, historical or structural transformations;
- mirror real-world processes;
- flexibly trace, navigate and evaluate policy developments and interventions;
- create 'real-world' impacts as an integral part of a study.

This is cutting-edge research, offering creative ways to grasp the dynamics of social processes in a fast-moving world.

Weighing the strengths and challenges

While the longitudinal frame of a QL study is a vital resource that offers many benefits and opportunities, it also brings challenges to the research process (Pollard 2007). Working with time is never straightforward, for it is a slippery and pervasive entity that can evade the precision of interrogation and defy neat, tidy, definitive categorization and explanation. The vantage point from which researchers and participants look backwards and forwards continually shifts: future time at the start of a study will have become past time by the conclusion (Krings and colleagues 2013). This requires a continual switching of the temporal gaze, placing intellectual demands on researchers. Added to this, the time frame and tempo of a QL study may not match the momentum of a participant's life, while the temporal window that a QL study affords may be a relatively modest one. Caveats may therefore be needed about the limited longitudinal reach of a study and how much it can actually reveal (Corden and Nice 2007).

The cyclical nature of the research process creates more tangible, logistical hurdles. Gaining consent, recruiting samples, generating, organizing and analysing data are not one-off tasks but recur repeatedly as the waves of fieldwork unfold. The process is intricate and the workload substantial and relentless. The cumulative nature of QL enquiry, with its forward momentum, complicates the process further. Maintaining a longitudinal panel, for example, is vital, yet this is likely to involve long-term ethical vigilance, and a commitment to sustaining relationships with panel members that may last for years. There are, too, the pressures

of seeking ongoing funding to maintain a study and its core researchers (Pollard 2007). Certainly, the repeated visits to the field makes QL research an expensive option when compared to single-visit qualitative studies.¹ Moreover, the task of managing a complex QL dataset that accumulates through time can be overwhelming, as each new generation discovers (Foster and colleagues 1979; Saldana 2003). The contemporary issue of 'data deluge' has long been recognized among QL researchers. As Van de Ven and Huber (1995: xiii) observe, 'over time, data mount astronomically and over load the information processing capacity of even a trained mind'. Similarly, Pettigrew (1995: 111) warns of the danger of 'death by data asphyxiation: the slow and inexorable sinking into the swimming pool that started so cool, clear and inviting and now has become a clinging mass of maple syrup'. A rigorous approach to data management is all the more important in this context (Neale and colleagues 2016).

Finally, trying to maintain a robust study that is clearly-specified and well-structured, with identifiable goals and guiding questions, can be a struggle when key elements of the process may lose their clarity or be subject to revision along the way. In policy-related research, funders searching for solutions in rapidly-developing policy areas may drive the introduction of new themes and the abandonment of old ones (Corden and Nice 2007). This can create instability in the whole process. Overcoming these hurdles requires a balance between flexibility and continuity, and between creativity and precision in how a project is managed. The rigour of QL research is built upon this requirement. The time and resources necessary to meet the varied challenges outlined above need to be realistically appraised and built proactively into project planning and management. In short, QL researchers need an abundance of time, resourcefulness, sound organization, commitment, stamina, good luck and a dogged faith in the value of the journey and its eventual destination.

Whatever the hurdles, however, the benefits of working prospectively through time are beyond doubt. QL researchers are driven by an abiding concern for the changing fortunes of their participants, and a deep curiosity about how their lives are unfolding (Warin 2010; Compton-Lilly 2017). As shown above, the flexibility to follow lives qualitatively wherever they lead, to discern changing practices, perceptions and fortunes through

¹ To put this in perspective, the costs of QL research, even for medium-scale Qualitative Panel Studies, are modest in comparison to those of large-scale cohort studies (Pearson 2016).

the stream of time, and to address new issues and themes as they arise, gives QL research unique value. One of the main benefits of this method is the enhanced opportunity to produce iterative understandings of social processes. Iteration can be understood not simply as an instrumental, repetitive task, a mechanical form of feedback, but as a reflexive process of continuous meaning-making through which new themes, insights and understandings emerge (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009; Grbich 2007). Iteration can be harnessed in varied ways to spark and ignite new thinking, and to reach new meanings. It emerges, for example, through recursive understandings of past, present and future, and in the constant interplay between synchronic and diachronic readings, micro and macro frames of reference, and between existing theories and new empirical evidence. It is centrally embedded in the oscillation between researcher and participant understandings, and in constructive exchanges and collaborative working across the research/practitioner interface. All of these processes are opened up and enhanced through the longitudinal frame of a QL study. While these multiple, iterative readings cannot produce definitive evidence, taken together they can generate plausible accounts of dynamic processes as they emerge in particular contexts of time and space.

And then what?

In his reflections about dynamic policy making, Ellwood (1998: 54) observes that ‘when you think dynamically you must confront the “and then what?” question’. This broad question lends itself to many interpretations and responses, but it prompts us to consider a key issue: the destination of a QL study, in particular, the quality and credibility of its evidence, interpretations and findings, and its capacity to make a difference in the real world. These important areas of methodological debate and development have been touched upon in various places in this volume (e.g. above and in Chapters 2 and 5). But they have been given little focused attention by QL researchers and they demand further consideration (Calman, Brunton and Molassiotis 2013). To take one pressing example, QL researchers are well aware of the inherently provisional nature of QL findings and the lack of analytical closure that working through time entails. While these traits are common to all research evidence, they are made particularly transparent through the tempo of a QL study: ‘each time you look, you see something

rather different' (Stanley, cited in Thomson and Holland 2003: 237). The lack of analytical closure can create challenges in knowing when to bring a study to a close (Thomson and Holland 2003). Yet this is rarely construed as a problem (Farrall, Hunter and colleagues 2014: 75). The transformative nature of temporal data and insights as a study unfolds is part and parcel of its power. By its very nature it confounds the search for theoretical saturation and definitive conclusions. Instead it alerts us to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of lives 'in the making', perpetually unfolding through a complex and unpredictable web of events and influences. Nevertheless, the issue of analytical closure does suggest the need for new ways to think about the quality and credibility of temporal research evidence. Opening up debates about the 'temporal fixity' of QL evidence in what is, essentially, an open-ended form of enquiry, could have profound implications for how reliability and validity are understood in QL research, and what criteria are needed to judge the quality of temporal studies more generally.

It is worth flagging up a second dimension of the 'and then what?' question that is ripe for development. It relates to the potential for QL research to make a difference in the real world, and how this might be achieved. In policy-related research, QL methodology is increasingly used to evaluate health, social care and welfare interventions. Since the approach is flexible and grounded in real time developments, the longitudinal frame gives space to develop productive collaborations with policy and/or practice partners, and with participants themselves (see Chapter 4). Practice partners may play an active role in agenda setting, mediating field enquiry, steering future directions and disseminating findings (see, for example, Neale and Morton 2012; Neale and colleagues 2015). But these processes can also be taken further. In the 1970s, the research/practice interface was conceived in terms of *knowledge transfer*, seen as a linear, one way process. This subsequently gave way to the more interactive idea of *knowledge exchange*, and, more recently, to the notion of *knowledge co-construction*, an integrated approach which fosters practitioner-informed research, and research-based practice (Neale and Morton 2012). The appeal of this approach is that it encourages a sense of investment in and local ownership of a project, and provides the optimum conditions for the take up of research findings. With its extended longitudinal frame, QL research is ideally suited to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge with policy and practice partners. Working on the principle of shared authority also

helps to avoid the ethical quagmires that, in some cases, have bedevilled the work of longitudinal ethnographers (see Chapter 4).

The *Following Young Fathers Study* provides an example of this approach. The focus of the study and the guiding research questions were developed in collaboration with local practitioners, who became committed partners over the six years of the project. Setting up a practitioner strategy group across a range of statutory and voluntary organizations also proved very effective, creating a forum for sharing ideas about policy and practice developments and for collaborative working. Embedding this study in a policy and practice landscape paved the way for a practitioner-led, one-year impact initiative, *Supporting Young Dads*, which followed on seamlessly from the empirical research. Co-ordinated by the research team, this initiative enabled the findings of the study to feed directly into new practice developments. Selected practitioners were able to pilot and test out new ways of working, particularly in developing sustained support for young offender fathers upon their release from custody. Practice partners also supported and trained selected young fathers as 'experts by experience' under the aegis of a new northern arm of the *Young Dads Collective*. The young men developed advocacy, mentoring and training roles, and tested their skills in training a variety of health and social care practitioners in how to engage effectively with young fathers (Tarrant and Neale 2017). This training is now being rolled out to other regions of the country.

Over the years, this grass roots developmental work has percolated 'upwards' from local and regional networks of professionals to national policy levels, helped by the engagement of the study team with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood. The sustainability of such impact work is an issue, given current funding climates. Nevertheless, this initiative made a tangible difference to a group of young fathers and a range of leading practitioners and, of central importance, it helped to foster a wider culture shift in professional understandings of and responses to young fathers (Tarrant and Neale 2017). Overall, this study demonstrates the potential for QL enquiry to be used as a navigational device, running alongside new initiatives in real time, and working collaboratively to bring people together at key moments to take stock, review developments, and plan new ways forward. In this way, it is possible to create real-world impacts as an integral part of the research process, and to circumvent the oft-cited critique that, in a fast-moving policy world, longitudinal enquiry simply takes too long to be of value.

As a final consideration, Ellwood's question prompts us to reflect on future developments in this field. As an exploratory, flexible and creative methodology, QL enquiry is continually under development, offering exciting possibilities for generating new research agendas and refining empirical enquiry. Of particular note for the future are the possibilities for advancing mixed longitudinal methodologies; the growth in arts-based methodologies; the transformative potential of digital technologies for research design and practice, and their value as emerging sites of temporal enquiry; and advances in data infrastructures and methodologies for the preservation, discovery and reuse of QL data. The longitudinal frame, in itself, offers abundant scope for methodological innovation, for example, in building collaborative research relationships and networks over time, developing and refining imaginative research tools and techniques, and bringing creative and participatory forms of outputs to fruition (e.g. exhibitions, creative writing projects, and drama and film productions, see for example, Johnson 2015; and Land and Patrick 2014).

There is huge potential, also, for theoretical advances. The study of time in all its rich variety remains an open field, with scope for new explorations at the interface of temporal theory and research practice. These new agendas for QL research are likely to grow apace as this methodology assumes a more integrated role within the canon of longitudinal and life course studies, and as its place within the established fields of qualitative temporal research becomes more widely recognized. Researching qualitatively through time undoubtedly brings challenges. But, in the view of this enthusiastic advocate, these are far outweighed by the benefits. Engaging with time requires a leap into the unknown, a capacity to see beyond the visible. QL researchers may not know exactly where their research will lead, how long it may last, or what they may find, but they are likely to uncover some compelling insights along the way. In a variety of creative ways QL research does more than investigate dynamic processes; it responds to changes in the environments under study (Vogl and colleagues 2017). Perhaps above all else, it is this capacity to walk alongside a panel of participants and respond with sensibility to the rich flux of human experience that makes for a uniquely powerful and rewarding research journey.