



**Generating Data in  
Qualitative Longitudinal Research:  
A methodological review**

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## **Introduction.**

At the heart of Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research lies the process of generating data. In keeping with the nature of QL enquiry more generally, this process involves a cyclical and cumulative journey through time, a journey that culminates in the creation, management and analysis of a dataset, and its representation in the findings from a study. No less than the others phases of a QL study, this process can be seen as a craft, involving imaginative artistry (Mills 1959; Pettigrew 1995; Elder and Giele 2009). Indeed, the journey offers endless possibilities for creativity in the choice of approaches, tools and techniques (Saldana 2003; Weller 2012). But field enquiry also requires some rigour, to ensure that the process has a clear focus and is manageable, and that the resulting dataset has some internal coherence to aid comparative temporal analysis.

In this working paper, methodologies for generating QL data are introduced and explored. The discussion begins by considering four broad approaches to field enquiry, including the possibilities for using documentary and archival sources of data as a resource. The discussion goes on to consider strategies for balancing continuity and flexibility in the task of building a cumulative dataset through time. Finally, the paper provides an overview of a palette of interview techniques and participatory tools that can be combined to create a bespoke strategy for generating data in the field.

## **Approaches to generating QL data.**

Four broad approaches to generating QL data are introduced here: ethnographic, interview-based, participatory, and the re-purposing of documentary and archival data sources. These approaches can be drawn on to create a bespoke data generation strategy for a QL project.

## **Longitudinal ethnographies**

An ethnographic approach to generating data involves one or more continuous periods of immersion in the field, working with particular samples and/or in particular field settings. Ethnographers aim to insert themselves, to varying degrees, into the daily lives of

the people under study and for sustained periods of time. They are likely to participate, observe, listen, ask questions and gather multiple sources of data to discern the varied conditions under which people live and to understand the social world from their perspective. The process involves documenting in detail what people do and say in the flow of everyday activities, using recording technologies and/or note taking. This approach is rooted in the social practice of 'being there' over time, and it functions as an ongoing, joint accomplishment (Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Peters (2009: 73-5). In other words, it is bound up with the process of 'walking alongside' people as fellow travellers (Neale and Flowerdew 2003), sustaining relationships and sharing life experiences, including those of a sensitive nature that may be gradually disclosed over time.

Ethnographic interviewing is an integral part of this methodology, ranging from spontaneous, 'on the hoof' conversations in day-to-day settings, to more focused, pre-arranged conversations in confidential spaces. Combining participant observation and ethnographic interviewing within a temporal frame for research gives longitudinal ethnography a particular strength: it can yield insights into how lives are being *lived* as well as narrated, and how both lived and narrated lives change over time.

Ethnography is an inherently temporal process, a core method used by anthropologists, increasingly used by social scientists more generally, and commonly employed in QL research (see, for example, Corsaro and Molinari 2000; Pollard with Filer 1996; Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Peters 2009; O'Reilly 2012). Longitudinal ethnography can capture something of the tempo and temporal ordering of day to day lives (Zerubavel 1979), the immediacy of the historical moment, and the intricacies of change in the making – building a picture of how the past and future are refracted through the present day (Kemper and Royce 2002). With its facility for 'thick' description, illuminating 'lived' lives and fleshing out a holistic picture through varied data sources, ethnography is usually associated with a case study approach. But it is also valuable when working comparatively with larger samples. The large-scale longitudinal ethnography conducted by Burton, Purvin and Garrett-Peters (2009) is a prime example. The researchers followed the lives of 256 low income mothers, located across three cities, to discern the effects of a major change in US welfare provision. Fieldwork took place over a four to five year period, from 1999 to 2003, and involved both interviews and participant observation. The interviews focused on specific

topics relating to family lives and relationships, family economics, support networks and neighbourhood environments but were conducted flexibly to enable new topics to emerge and to gain an understanding of what was important for the women. The ethnographers engaged in extensive participant observation, for example, attending family functions and outings, accompanying the mothers to health and welfare appointments and to day-care and work places, noting both context and interactions in these varied settings. They were also present during extended conversations between the mothers and their families and friends. The ethnographers, who were ethnically matched with the participants, met each family once or twice a month over a 12 to 18 month period, followed by a more extensive tempo of visits every six months. This yielded a rich dataset comprising tape-recorded interview transcripts and detailed field notes for the participant observations. Working on this scale was a challenge in this study: the team comprised over 200 ethnographers, data analysts and research scientists whose input had to be co-ordinated. The process of 'being there' and walking alongside revealed the extent of physical and sexual abuse suffered by these women, a theme that the study had not set out to explore but which emerged over the course of the study as a significant finding.

### **Interview based studies.**

Interviewing is the most widely used approach to generating data in the social sciences. In qualitative research this typically takes the form of pre-arranged, carefully planned, in-depth interactions with individuals or small groups, although in QL research, an interview may also take place opportunistically, during a revisit to the field. A topic guide that covers relevant themes and questions is commonly used to guide the process, while the resulting narratives are documented via audio-recordings. Interview-based studies may be conducted in a variety of ways and in different settings. They range from individual to group-based encounters and from face-to-face to indirect interactions (e.g. by telephone or via the web, where they may be conducted in 'real' time or a-synchronously, with a time lapse in the conversation). They also encompass 'round-the-table' conversations in fixed locations, and 'walking' interviews, where researchers accompany participants through the landscapes of their daily lives (Bates and Rhys-Taylor 2017).

Combining some elements of ethnography with interview-based methods is a common practice for it enhances insights and helps sustain long term relationships with participants. The longitudinal frame of a study gives ample scope for utilising both approaches. Alongside walking methodologies, for example, 'day in the life' tracking (Thomson 2012), researchers may make informal visits to participants or field settings (e.g. the local pub or a support group); help out in community or service delivery settings; or attend outings or events arranged by participants or practitioners. Combining interview and ethnographic approaches yields complementary forms of data, and has particular value in giving access to unfolding lives as they are lived, as well as lives that are told and retold through time.

Researchers describe in-depth interviews in a variety of ways (collaborative, conversational, active, responsive, dialogical, narrative, open ended, and so on). But the overall aim is to gain insights into participants' subjective experiences, feelings and world views and to build up a picture of how they construct, narrate and make meaning of their lives. The idea of narration, that people will have a story to tell about their experiences through time that can be drawn out and shaped through the research process, is central to QL interviewing. Life stories, Plummer reminds us, have to power to:

... capture the continuous, lived flow of historically situated, phenomenal experiences, with all the ambiguity, , variability, malleability and even uniqueness that such experience implies. Whether this be the experience of being a nomadic hunter and gatherer, or a North American prostitute, .... a worker down a mine, ... being worried to death in a nursing home, ... a teacher or facing disability, ... of being workless, or being a man .... – whatever may be of interest to the analyst, a key perspective is the participant's account of this experience. It may not be adequate on its own. But if a study fails to get this 'intimate familiarity' with a life, then such research runs the risk of simply getting it wrong: of speculating, abstracting and theorizing at too great a remove' (Plummer 2001: 37).

While interviews are not conversations in the conventional sense (they are not reciprocal in that life stories and experiences are not swapped) they are nonetheless conversational (in its original Latin, translated as *wandering or turning about together*) (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston 2014). Through this process, researcher and participant jointly construct meaning and knowledge as the interaction unfolds, enabling the participant to find a narrative voice that explores and engages with meanings rather than simply stating facts (Guenette and Marshall 2009). The resulting accounts are

actively generated; they are not simply 'out there' in a realist sense, to be 'harvested' 'mined' or 'collected' from participants as if they are passive stores of knowledge. Hareven (1982: 373-5) eloquently makes this point in her account of oral history interviewing:

The interviewer is like a medium, conjuring memories through his or her own presence, interests and questions. ... [offering] a glimpse not only into the sequence of events in people's lives but how, in their search for a pattern, the different pieces of their lives are re-assembled and dis-assembled as in a kaleidoscope, losing meaning, changing meaning, disappearing, and reappearing in different configurations at different points in time.

Hareven observes that this constructivist, narrative understanding of data generation is part of its value. Rather than detracting from the integrity and meaning of people's accounts, these methods yield explicit interpretations and understandings of people's life events and circumstances, generating valuable insights into what matters to them and why (Hareven 1982: 374; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Ritchie op cit: 180). Tools and techniques for interview-based QL studies are explored further below.

## **Participatory Approaches**

Participatory approaches to generating data are often used within interview-based studies. Data are solicited or commissioned by the researcher and jointly constructed or self-generated by the participant in a relatively unmediated way. A variety of visual tools may be utilised, for example, graphic, pictorial, video or photographic data, which may be solicited specially for the research. Visual images include drawings, life maps or photographs (also known as photo-voice, Mannay 2015). Written or audio tools are also commonly employed, for example, written autobiographical accounts (see, for example, Shaw 1966 [1930] and Johnson 2015), or the use of diaries, memory books or imaginative descriptions of future lives (Elliott 2010b; Lyon and Crow 2012; Bytheway 2011, Thomson and Holland 2005). In a digital age, audio or video forms of diaries are increasingly popular ( Monrouxe 2009). In QL research, such data may be produced during or in-between waves of fieldwork, and, alongside their participatory potential, they provide a valuable focus for drawing out discussion with participants in interview. Selected tools are discussed further below.

## Documentary and Archival Sources of Data

The fourth approach to generating data involves re-purposing documentary and archival sources of data, described engagingly by Plummer (2001) as ‘documents of life’. As Plummer (2001: 17) notes:

The world is crammed full of human personal documents. People keep diaries, send letters, make quilts, take photos, dash off memos, compose auto/biographies, construct websites, scrawl graffiti, publish their memoirs, write letters, compose CVs, leave suicide notes, film video diaries, inscribe memorials on tombstones, shoot films, paint pictures, make tapes and try to record their personal dreams. All of these expressions of personal life are hurled out into the world by the millions, and can be of interest to anyone who cares to seek them out.

This is the ‘jackdaw’ approach to sourcing data that characterises the work of social historians and historical sociologists (Thompson 1981). These sources also include articles and reports in books, magazines and newsprint; text messages, emails and interactive websites; wills and the rich holdings of public record offices; and confidential and often revealing documents held in organisations and institutions. Thomson and colleagues (2011), for example, drew on newsprint, magazines and internet sites to flesh out a picture of motherhood in contemporary times and contextualise the data gathered from their cohort of first time mothers. As a further example, letters have long provided a rich source of insight into unfolding lives. In their classic study of Polish migration, Thomas and Znaniecki (1958 [1918-20]) analysed the letters of Polish migrants to the US (an opportunistic source, for a collection of such letters was thrown out of a Chicago window and landed at Znaniecki’s feet, Plummer 2001). Similarly Stanley’s (2013) study of the history of race and apartheid was based on an analysis of three collections of letters written by white South Africans spanning a 200 year period (1770s to 1970s).

## Archived Datasets.

As Plummer (2001) notes, among the many forms of documentary sources that may be revisited, social science and humanities datasets held in various archives and institutional repositories have significant value. The notable growth in the use of such legacy data over recent decades has been fuelled by a growing commitment among researchers to preserve and share their datasets for historical purposes, the growth of data infrastructure and



funding initiatives to support this process; and a growing literature that is documenting this approach and debating its strengths and weaknesses (e.g. Corti, Witzel and Bishop 2005; Crow and Edwards 2012; Irwin and Bornat 2013). Many qualitative datasets remain in the stewardship of the original researchers where they run the risk of being lost to posterity (or fortuitously rediscovered, see O'Connor and Goodwin 2010, 2012). However there is a growing culture of archiving and preserving legacy data through institutional, specialist or national repositories (Bishop and Kuula-Luumi 2017).

These facilities are scattered across the UK (for example, the Kirklees Sound Archive in West Yorkshire, which houses oral history interviews on the wool textile industry (Bornat 2013)). The principal collections in the UK are held at the UK Data Archive (which includes the classic 'Qualidata' collection); the British Library Sound Archive, NIQA (the Northern Ireland Qualitative Archive, including the ARK resource); the recently established Timescapes Archive, an institutional repository at the University of Leeds which specialises in QL datasets; and the Mass Observation Archive, a resource which, for many decades, has commissioned and curated accounts of daily life from a panel of volunteer recorders. International resources include the Irish Qualitative Data Archive, the Murray research Center Archive (Harvard), and a range of data facilities at varying levels of development across mainland Europe (Neale and Bishop 2010-11).

In recent years some vigorous debates have ensued about the ethical and epistemological foundations for using qualitative datasets as documentary sources. In the main, the issues have revolved around data ownership and researcher reputations, the ethics of confidentiality and consent for longer term use, the nature of disciplinary boundaries, and the tension between realist understandings of data (as something that is simply 'out there'), or a narrowly constructivist view that data are non-transferable because they are jointly produced and their meaning tied to the context of their production.

These debates are becoming less polarised over time, linked to a growing awareness that most of these issues are not unique to how datasets (or, indeed, documentary sources more generally) are re-used, but impact on how data are used by primary researchers, and indeed on how the data were generated in the first place. In particular, epistemological debates about the status and veracity of qualitative research data are beginning to shift

ground (see, for example, Mauthner et al 1998 and Mauthner and Parry 2013). Research data are by no means simply 'out there' for they are inevitably constructed and re-constructed (re-crafted, re-generated, re-purposed) in different social, spatial and historical contexts; indeed, they are transformed historically simply through the passage of time (Moore 2007). But this does not mean that the narratives they contain are 'made up' or that they have no integrity or value across different research contexts (Hammersley 2010; Bornat 2013). It does suggest, however, that data sources are capable of more than one interpretation, and that their meaning and salience emerge in the moment of their use:

There is no a-priori privileged moment in time in which we can gain a deeper, more profound, truer insight, than in any other moment. ... There is never a single authorised reading ... It is the multiple viewpoints, taken together which are the most illuminating (Brockmeier 2006, Reissman 2004, cited in Andrews 2008: 89; Andrews 2008: 90).

It is the combination of these different readings that offers additional layers of complexity and insight. Moreover, whether revisiting data involves stepping into the shoes of an earlier self, or of someone else entirely, this makes little difference to the interpretive process. From this point of view, the distinctions between *using* and *re-using* data, or between *primary* and *secondary* analysis begin to break down (Bornat 2005; Moore 2007; Neale 2013).

The status and veracity of research data, then, is not a black and white, either/or issue, but one of recognising the limitations and partial vision of all data sources, requiring researchers to appraise the degree of 'fit' and contextual understanding that can be achieved and maintained (Hammersley 2010; Duncan 2012; Irwin 2013). This, in turn, has implications for how a dataset is crafted and contextualised for future use, an issue explored further below.

The transformative potential of data is endemic in QL research practice. Since data are used and re-used over the time frame of a study, their re-generation is a continual process. The production of new data as a study progresses inevitably reconfigures and re-contextualises the dataset as a whole, creating new assemblages of data and opening up new insights from a different contextual standpoint. It is also worth noting here that longitudinal datasets tend to outlive their original research questions, requiring researchers

to ask new questions of old data, and to maximise the degree of 'fit' between them (Elder and Taylor 2009).

A decade ago, debates about the use of qualitative datasets were in danger of becoming polarised (Moore 2007). However, the preoccupations of researchers are beginning to move on. The concern with whether or not qualitative datasets **should** be used is giving way to a more productive concern with exactly **how** they should be used. Whatever approach is adopted, and whatever the form such data sources take, their use is an inherently temporal process. Overall, the 'jackdaw' approach to re-generating and re-purposing documentary and archival sources of data outlined here is the very stuff of historical sociology and of social history more generally (Kynaston 2005; Bornat 2008; McLeod and Thomson 2009), and it has huge and perhaps untapped potential in QL research.

### Using Qualitative Datasets

Qualitative Datasets may be revisited for a variety of purposes beyond those for which they were originally generated. 'Stand-alone' studies of the sort conducted by Savage (2005a and b) use an existing dataset to re-construct and re-interpret social processes from a different historical, theoretical and/or methodological standpoint. Savage revisited data from the 1960s Affluent Worker study, held at the UK Data Archive, and originally conducted by Goldthorpe and Lockwood. Adopting what was then a new deductive approach to social research, the original researchers had analysed their quantifiable survey data, leaving their rich case study evidence on the cutting room floor. Some 40 years later, Savage accessed and analysed this neglected evidence to produce new insights into perceptions and practices of social class in post-war Britain. In the process he rectified the under-utilisation of an existing dataset. As each generation of researchers observes, qualitative research in general, and QL research in particular, generates substantial volumes of data that are rarely fully analysed as part of an original study (Foster et al 1979; Pettigrew 1995; McLeod and Thomson 2009).

Such datasets may also be used as the baseline for a re-study, the springboard for a new project (Tarrant 2016), or to enrich a newly emerging dataset by widening the socio-

historical context for its analysis. Datasets are also increasingly used as teaching resources. There is clearly scope for different researchers to use the same dataset with different purposes in mind. The social historian David Kynaston (2005), for example, also made use of Goldthorpe and Lockwood's Affluent Worker dataset, in this case for his social history of post war Britain. In a series of publications he created a rich tapestry of political, socio-economic and cultural insights drawn from a range of documentary sources, including datasets held in the Mass Observation and UK Data Archives. Kynaston's research demonstrates the huge potential to work across multiple datasets, enriching analysis by reading across complementary forms of data (local/global, textual/visual, qualitative/quantitative, researcher-generated/self-generated, historical/ contemporary, scholarly/popular, and so on). This creates 'big' rich data that can combine explanatory depth with greater breadth (Neale 2015).

Elder and Hareven (1992) provide a good example of the scope to combine insights from different disciplinary perspectives across varied forms of temporal data. They drew on longitudinal data from the Berkeley Guidance Study and the Oakland and Berkeley Growth studies, which had followed the lives of 500 Californian children over a period of 60 years. These were combined with data from Hareven's oral historical study of two generations of mill worker families at the Amoskeag Mill in New Hampshire. Combining data in this way yielded new insights into the impact of the Great Depression on family fortunes. The methodological challenges and rewards of such an approach have been explored more recently by Lindsey, Metcalfe and Edwards (2015) who drew on mixed longitudinal data from the Mass Observation Archive, the British Household Panel survey and the British Social Attitudes survey to explore the cultures and practices of volunteering.

In terms of QL data, the long running Mass Observation archive has proved to be a rich resource of self-generated data with relatively broad coverage - well over 500 panel members whose accounts run across significant periods of time. The many studies of these data include reconstructions of a single biography (e.g. Broad and Fleming 1981); explorations of the changing social fabric of a particular decade, generation, or period of history (the second world war, for example); and explorations of a variety of changing social and historical values and practices across cases and/or across time (e.g. Shaw 2001, Savage 2007).

The use of multiple QL datasets has also developed more recently under the Timescapes research programme. The infrastructure for this work, the Timescapes Archive, is a fledgling resource that has been in continual development since its inception in 2010 (Neale and Bishop 2012). Recently funded studies are creating new assemblages of data drawn from multiple projects in the Archive, and exploring new ways to engage with and interrogate 'big' QL data (Irwin, Bornat and Winterton 2012; Irwin and Winterton 2014; Tarrant 2016, and a current project that brings together data from across the Timescapes Archive ([www.bigqlr.ncrm.ac.uk](http://www.bigqlr.ncrm.ac.uk))). By exploring ways to maximise the potential of QL legacy data, these studies are advancing valuable new agendas for QL research.

## Generating data through time: continuity and flexibility

Building a cumulative dataset through the longitudinal frame of a study requires a balance between continuity and flexibility. Continuity is needed to ensure that an emerging dataset has some integrity and internal coherence to aid synthesis and analysis. A common strategy is to devise a set of core questions that explore key processes, themes, changes and continuities across the sample (e.g. 'then and now' or 'where next' questions, Saldana 2003; Smith 2003). These can then be revisited at each research encounter.

To paraphrase Saldana (2003), this creates a **through line** in the data, a thread that provides a synchronic link *across* cases and themes at any one point in time, and a diachronic link *within* cases and themes through time (Barley 1995; Smith 2003). These 'continuity' questions and forms of data provide the anchors for building an integrated dataset through the waves of data generation, and aiding the process of temporally-led, thematic and case-based analysis. A 'baseline' questionnaire or checklist forms a useful component of a through-line, capturing structured demographic and circumstantial information that can be updated for each case as a study progresses.

At the same time, the longitudinal frame also allows for flexibility in how data are generated, and what lines of enquiry to pursue. In QL research, sampling strategies may involve expanding or condensing a sample (sample boosting as new areas of experience emerge, or funnelling-in on particularly significant cases over time). The same logic is

applied to data generation. Over time, the researcher may funnel-in on themes of particular pertinence to a case, (Smith 2003) or boost the scope of enquiry as new areas of relevance emerge. This facility to ask new questions and introduce new themes, building on insights from earlier waves of data, is a crucial component of QL enquiry (Saldana 2003; Smith 2003). Building a cumulative picture from one wave of fieldwork to the next relies on interspersing field visits with periods of reflection and preliminary analysis. In other words, it involves iteration between data generation and analysis as a study progresses. Taken together, continuity and flexibility are important strategies in QL field enquiry that need to be balanced in the way QL data are generated.

## Temporal interviewing

Just as time provides a framework for generating data, it also shapes the nature of the data themselves. Here time comes into its own as a rich topic and theme of enquiry, feeding into particular lines of enquiry and enriching the content of a dataset. Interviews can be used to explore one or more of the planes of time outlined in Neale 2015: the flows of past, present and future; the interlocking tempos of turning points, transitions and longer-term trajectories; how the construction and reconstruction of biographies relates to changing socio-historical or structural forces; the spatial dimensions of time (and/or the temporal dimensions of space); the oscillations of daily living, the pace of change, and continuities or ruptures in life experience.

However in-depth interviews are described (conversational, responsive, dialogical, narrative, open ended and so on) the overall aim is the same: to gain insights into participants' subjective experiences, feelings and world views and to build up a picture of how they construct, narrate and make meaning of their lives. The idea of narration, that people will have a story to tell about their experiences through time that can be drawn out and shaped through the research process, is central to QL interviewing. Life stories, Plummer reminds us, have to power to:

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worried to death in a nursing home, ... a teacher, or facing disability ... whatever may be of interest to the analyst, a key perspective is the participant's account of this experience. It may not be adequate on its own. But if a study fails to get this 'intimate familiarity' with a life, then such research runs the risk of simply getting it wrong: of speculating, abstracting and theorizing at too great a remove' (Plummer 2001: 37).

While interviews are not conversations in the sense of an informal, reciprocal exchange of news and ideas between two or more people, they are nonetheless conversational (in its original Latin, translated as *wandering or turning about together*) (Ritchie, Lewis and colleagues 2014). Through this process, researchers and participants jointly construct meaning and knowledge as the interaction unfolds, enabling participants to find a narrative voice that explores and engages with meanings rather than simply stating facts (Guenette and Marshall 2009). The resulting accounts are actively *generated*; they are not simply 'out there' in a realist sense, to be 'harvested' 'mined' or 'collected' from participants as if they are passive stores of knowledge. Hareven (1982: 373-5) eloquently makes this point in her account of oral history interviewing:

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Hareven observes that this constructivist, narrative understanding of data generation is part of its value. Rather than detracting from the integrity and meaning of people's accounts, these methods yield explicit interpretations, understandings and reconstructions of people's life events and circumstances, generating valuable insights into the flow of their lives and what matters to them and why (Hareven 1982: 374; Hammersley 1995; Ritchie op cit: 180).

Biographical interviews may be conducted in a variety of ways (Thompson 2000; Plummer 2001; Miller 2000; Wengraf 2001; Merrill and West 2009). In a relatively unstructured approach, participants are invited to narrate their life, or segments of it in their own way and at their own pace (guided very loosely by the researcher, e.g. 'how would you describe your childhood/family life/time in ...? How did you first come to be involved with ...? What was it like for you when you were growing up /starting out/ going

through ...'?) (Plummer 2000: 140-42). The aim is to elicit a spontaneous and relatively unmediated narrative. The biographic-interpretive method, for example, begins in this minimalist fashion, with one key question posed to set the life story in train (Wengraf 2001).

However, not all participants will want or be able to respond to such a minimalist prompt (Clausen 1998; Chase 2005; Brannen 2013) and the lack of guidance and interaction may serve to close down communications and empathy (Thompson 2000; Merrill and West 2009). In some cases, a prolonged, empathic interaction may be needed to draw out a narrative (Clausen 1998), or creative tools may be needed to give tangible shape to the articulation of a narrative (Guenette and Marshall 2009; see life maps, below). In any case, spontaneous narratives are likely to present a gloss on how a life unfolds, or, at least, a highly edited, partial version (Clausen 1998: 192). For this reason, researchers usually follow these unstructured phases of an interview with semi-structured questions that dig deeper to draw out key themes or fill in missing elements that are pertinent to the research ('tell me more about...' questions). This is the strategy used in the biographic-interpretive method of data generation (Wengraf 2001; Brannen, et al 2004).

## **Cartographic interviewing**

A more gentle 'easing in' to an interview can be achieved by adopting an interactive and guided approach from the outset. A 'cartographic' strategy, for example, (adapted from Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston (2014: 190-91), begins with an exploratory, surface mapping of a particular landscape of enquiry, using a checklist of topics and themes that can be shared with participants at the start of the discussion or beforehand (Merrill and West 2009). More focused questions then follow that explore the terrain in greater detail, before digging down to excavate underlying themes, meanings and reflections (here 'cartography' shades into 'archaeology'). In this way the interview moves from concrete life events and experiences to more reflective and abstract insights and interpretations.

From the outset, this approach is grounded transparently in the themes of a study, which provide the focus for discussion. Yet this still gives participants space to construct their narratives in their own way. And it is likely to achieve the same depth of insight into



what matters to them: how salient a particular process or experience is in shaping the course of their lives and its relative significance in relation to other influences and concerns.

In QL research, a cartographic strategy can be used dynamically to map and construct a life journey, building insights into unfolding trajectories, how participants have arrived at the present day and how they envisage the future. Going beyond a simple mapping of a landscape, this approach explores the movement of people *through* a landscape, giving attention to both surface details and the depths of the journey. The starting point may be a general mapping of present day circumstances located within the passage of time (identifying where people are on their temporal map, the nature of the current terrain, an outline of the paths they are following and how far along the paths they have travelled).

This is followed by an exploration of the 'back story': how participants have arrived at the present moment and the nature of the journey along the way. A number of dimensions may be explored in capturing past time: the pace, tempo, spatial dimensions or synchronicities of the journey; whether it was straightforward (linear), circuitous, meandering, or filled with peaks and troughs; to what extent it was planned, anticipated or is living up to expectations; the opportunities and constraints (across the micro-macro plane) that have shaped the journey so far; and any mechanisms (trigger or turning points) that have provided the impetus for new directions or for reverting back to earlier paths.

Finally, the interview may move on to explore how participants see their future paths, how they envisage 'getting there' (their plans, aspirations, hopes and fears, again shaped by external opportunities and constraints), and what this means for the longer term trajectories of their lives. In this way the mapping of a participant's life is an inherently temporal process, which seeks to locate where people are on their subjectively defined life path, and explores the nature, meaning and interior logic of their journeys. Clearly, the extent to which people envisage their lives as journeys to be planned and executed varies from person to person. They may live in the moment without a strong sense of agency over past choices or future directions. But a dynamic cartographic strategy can help to shed light on these different orientations to time. Data generated in this way will enable the

researcher to construct a picture of an unfolding life or social process and gain insights into the factors that are shaping it.

### **Exploring biography and history.**

Life stories give valuable insights into the social and historical contexts within which biographies unfold. Documenting where people were born and have lived, alongside the socio-economic and cultural circumstances of their upbringing and earlier adult lives, will yield data that spans the micro-macro plane. Participants can be asked specifically about what or who has influenced the direction of their lives overall and at key moments, and what opportunities and constraints (e.g. family, school and community influences, and socio-economic, environmental, policy and legislative changes) they have faced (Plummer 2001: 39-40). In this way, the interplay of biographical and historical processes begins to emerge (Plummer 2001: 39-40; Miller 2000: 74). Since lives are rarely narrated in chronological order, the construction of a life history from life story data usually occurs in the aftermath of the interview, where it is part of the descriptive analysis of a case.

### **Recursive interviewing**

The dynamic cartographic technique outlined above is a valuable means of drawing out a life journey in an in-depth interview. In QL research, the elongated time frame for a study enables this process to be taken a stage further. People's biographies are not fixed at any one moment, but are constructed, reconstructed and updated through the recursive spiral of time (Grbich 2007; Jost 2012). Through the longitudinal frame of a study, QL research can mirror and illuminate the processes through which people over-write their biographies. Recursive interviewing involves looking both backwards and forwards in time, revisiting, re-visioning and updating a life journey at each successive interview. Participants are invited to overwrite the past (for the past is not fixed), update past understandings, and re-imagine the future through the lens of the ever-shifting present. In the process, it is possible to discern changes in subjective understandings of the journey, as well as concrete changes in circumstances and experiences, and to capture how the landscape itself is changing. This iterative approach to past, present and future offers a more nuanced and

fluid way of exploring how lives unfold. In the process, time as the medium of the research begins to merge with time as a rich theme of enquiry.

The value of this approach is that it takes into account the flux of life – the recognition that the construction of a life is inherently provisional, and that people are perpetually in an emergent state of ‘becoming’ (Worth 2009). As Plummer (2001: 40) notes, contingencies, volatilities and inconsistencies are an inevitable feature of all unfolding biographies. Our lives ‘are flooded with moments of indecision, turning points, confusions, contradictions, and ironies,’ which are likely to be reflected in the way lives are both narrated and lived.<sup>1</sup> Researchers seeking a surface, ‘factual’ account of a life history may be unable to detect the fluid intricacies of lives, or may gloss over or flatten them out (Plummer 2001), yet acknowledging them is vital if the interior logic of a life is to be understood. Recursive interviewing, then, uncovers the constant state of flux in which lives unfold and, working with this dynamic, seeks to uncover how the narrative of a life, the life as told, is continually re-adjusted to the life as lived.

Strategies for weaving back and forth through time will depend on the focus of the study, the nature of the participants and at what point important themes, gaps or anomalies arise in a narrative that need greater attention. Researchers will need to decide how far back and forwards in time they wish to explore, and at which particular moments. It may be useful to start off with relatively small time horizons (the time since last interview, the last year, or a projection over the next year) before moving on to longer time-frames that stretch into the more distant past or future. The longitudinal frame of a study can itself provide an appropriate horizon. At the outset, participants can be invited to reflect on where they envisage they will be by the end of the study, and, at the exit interview, on how far they have come over the study period (Saldana 2003). A longer-term horizon offers more scope to explore personal, family and structural influences across the micro-macro plane, and is a valuable means of contextualising the specific journey under study and discerning how it fits within the longer-term trajectories of a life.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a common occurrence in the accounts generated by QL researchers, reflecting the volatility of lives. The account of Wlodek, one of Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1958 [1918-21]: 1913) key participants, is a prime example: he changes his standpoint continually as his life and relationships fluctuate.

In using this technique, researchers need to consider how far and in what ways they will prompt participants about their past and future lives (drawing on data generated in previous interviews), and to what extent this might influence people's perceptions. For example, participants may be asked simply to reflect on where they were previously in relation to the present day, or if their views of the past or future have changed at all. It is not uncommon at this point for participants to seek clarification on where they were or what they were doing at last interview, and to be given a gentle prompt ('you were waiting to hear about ...' 'had just started / finished'... 'were hoping to go on to' ...). But taking the recursive process a step further, researchers may also share with participants transcripts of their accounts from earlier wave of interviews, and their own emerging analysis, as a way of exploring just how and why people may have moved on or shifted perspective.

In the Dynamics of Modern Motherhood study (a follow up to the Making of Modern Motherhood), for example, the researchers developed a recursive workbook interview which they shared with participants as a means of rounding off their study (Thomson 2012). Each workbook brought together fragments of data, images and quotations taken from the corpus of interviews for a particular case, and the emergent analytic narratives that the researchers had constructed from these data. Inviting participants to reflect on these fragments and reconstructions generated new discussion and insights about temporal processes in the lives of the participants. It highlighted where their present-day accounts converged or diverged from past accounts, opening up contradictions and incoherencies in their narratives and revealing something of the resilience and fragility of their narrated identities.

Taking recursion to this new level can be effective in capturing transformations in people's values, aspirations or identities, or their revised interpretations of the past and present. However, in this particular study, responses to this exercise varied from enjoyment to indifference, and from hilarity to disquiet (Thomson 2012; and Neale 2013 for the ethics of taking 'fixed' versions of past lives back to people). As Thomson (2012) acknowledges, creating a feedback loop between participant narratives and research data and interpretations is a powerful intervention. It needs to be carefully considered and utilised only where it is mediated by trusting relationships and ethical sensitivity.

## **Participatory tools and techniques.**

QL interviewing may be used as a stand-alone field technique. But it is commonly combined with ethnographic strategies and the use of one or more participatory tools. These forms of data may be visual (graphic, pictorial, photographic or video), written, or aural (e.g. diaries/audio diaries or autobiographical accounts). With varying levels of guidance and support from the researcher, such data can be created in ways that are participant-led. Graphic, pictorial and photographic tools that are commonly used in qualitative enquiry can be adapted to draw out continuities and changes over time. For example, relational maps (a graphic representation of the nature and significance of family, friendship or community networks) may be used to map the dynamics of relationships over time (Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012). Similarly, photographic or film data produced by participants can be used to explore temporal processes, and give compelling visual insights into changing identities, environments and local cultures through time (Pini and Walkerdine 2011; Frith 2011). Similarly, participants may bring their photo albums to an interview to jog memories and share reflections of the past (Spence and Holland 1991), while a sequence of historical photographs (e.g. of changing families, communities or localities) can be used to document or prompt reflection on social change (O'Connor and Goodwin 2012; Henwood, Shirani and Finn 2011; Henwood and Coltart 2012). Below we review a number of life-mapping and writing tools that offer powerful insights into temporal processes.

### ***Life History charts***

A small but growing literature has documented the use of life history charts (also known as life history or event history calendars, life history reviews or grids, or life grids). These capture a retrospective view of the life course in an easily accessible and standardised visual record. Participants fill in a pre-prepared chart or grid that chronicles varied facets of a past life over a specific period of time. The time periods are plotted along one axis of the chart. These are specified in advance and fashioned to fit the process under investigation (e.g. every year, five years, or decade from birth to the present day for a full life history, or

covering a discrete period of historical time for a specific process of change). Varied life trajectories (relating to family, employment, housing and so) and domains of experience that are pertinent to the study (e.g. unfolding occupational identities, or health or criminal 'careers') are plotted along the other axis. The time intervals, life trajectories and domains of experience can all be tailored to the needs of an individual study.

Alongside unfolding trajectories, key events and life transitions are recorded on the chart. This creates a chronology of a past life that graphically maps how varied life events, domains and pathways are connected through time. Del Bianco (2015), for example, used life grids with older cancer patients to draw out the connections between their health biographies, their drinking patterns and life events such as divorce or loss of a home. External reference points (wars and other world events) are also commonly documented on the chart to provide links between biographical and historical processes and to aid recall of the past (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999: 2).

These structured tools have been in use since the 1960s. They were first developed for large-scale longitudinal surveys to improve recall of past events and enhance data reliability, particularly for older participants (Scott and Alwin 1998; Giele 1998; Elliott 2005). More recently, they have been adapted and evaluated for use in a range of qualitative health and social care studies, working with participants of all ages (Parry, Thomson and Fowkes 1999; Bell 2005; Wilson, Cunningham-Burley, Bancroft, Backett-Milburn and Masters 2007; Harris and Parisi 2007; Richardson and colleagues 2009; Feldman and Howie 2009; Del Bianco 2015). In the main, their use has been confined to synchronic (one-off) interview studies that have sought a retrospective understanding of the life course.

Evaluations of these tools for qualitative enquiry reveal a mixed picture. Their ability to capture the fluid, experiential tempo of a life journey is limited. The focus tends to be on recording events as concrete, factual occurrences, rather than exploring the meaning of life course processes. The precision involved in recalling a past life chronologically does not map easily onto how people narrate their life stories, and the mental effort of pin pointing exactly when an event occurred, and its spacing and sequencing, may be fruitless or frustrating for people. The use of pre-determined external events as memory aids (football history, the shooting of John Lennon, the fall of the Berlin Wall) may misfire; these historical

moments will not necessarily be meaningful to a range of participants of different ages and socio-cultural backgrounds (Richardson and colleagues 2009). The charts are also complex in their construction and reportedly daunting for some groups of participants. They may take a considerable amount of time to construct (Del Bianco (2015) reports up to four hours for an interview using this tool), and their use may, therefore, dominate rather than facilitate an interview (Richardson, and colleagues 2009). For these reasons, they are more likely to be constructed by the researcher on behalf of the participant, so diminishing their participatory value. They are, in effect, analytical tools (with some affinities to analytical framework grids), and their use in interview may reflect the researcher's agenda rather more than the participant's.

Despite these drawbacks, researchers report their effectiveness in chronicling a life, discerning connections between different transitions and trajectories, aiding memory and drawing out past narratives. Like all participatory methods they can provide a welcome diversion from the intensity of speaking about a life, and they may open up sensitive issues in ways that give participants a measure of choice and control over such disclosures (Parry et al 1999; Wilson et al 2007). Where these tools have been adapted for qualitative use and applied flexibly, the drawbacks noted above have been less problematic. For example, some charts are constructed using a range of colours to give a sense of the flow of life processes, or to convey the different meanings of life experiences (Wilson et al 2007 and the life tapestry approach used by Feldman and Howie 2009). The recognition that these charts may not aid recall so much as aid a meaningful reconstruction of a past life is another helpful development (Richardson and colleagues 2009). Where these tools are embedded within an interview, with scope to generate reflections on their construction, then it is possible to move beyond an instrumental recall of life events to achieve a reflexive consideration of their meaning and salience.

### ***Life maps***

Life maps are also known as time maps or time lines, albeit they may not be constructed in linear fashion. They serve a similar purpose to life history charts. However the flexible manner of their production, and what they can therefore reveal, is notably different. These pictorial life mapping tools are constructed in a fluid, personalised, intuitive

and creative way, usually by participants themselves and therefore with enhanced participatory value. The simple, more open construction allows for an understanding of emotional as well as event-based journeys through time, and does not require accurate recall of the sequencing and chronology of events. Unlike life history charts, which can dominate an interview, these maps can be more effectively integrated within a biographical interview, giving ample space for discussion of their meaning. They can also be revisited at subsequent interviews and used recursively to update or modify a life narrative. They tend to be analysed alongside the narratives that they prompt; as stand-alone data they may have limited value, but as complementary forms of data they can greatly enhance field enquiry.

Participants are invited to draw a simple map of their life journeys, and to mark on the map key milestones, events, transitions and/or turning points along the way. Links between unfolding biographies and external events (in this case, chosen by participants and having personal significance for them) can also be represented on the map. These drawings are not limited to retrospective reconstructions; they may range over a whole life or varied segments of it, and may explore the future as well as the past (Thomson and Holland 2002; Gordon, Holland, Lahelma and Thomson 2005; Neale and Lau Clayton 2011; Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012). Thomson and Holland (2002), for example, invited teenagers to map out their future lives at different points in their biographies, at age 25 and 35. Life maps may also span past, present and future in the same construction (Worth 2011), reflecting the interlocking nature of these zones of time. Beyond an introductory brief, researcher guidance tends to be minimal, giving participants leeway to represent their lives as they choose.

The resulting life maps vary not only from project to project but from person to person. They may be drawn as mind maps; horizontal or vertical lines; parallel lines representing different and overlapping pathways (particularly where researchers invite reflection on varied trajectories); or zig zag, criss-crossing, circular, spiral, or flowing paths that denote varied ups and downs, historical loops, cul-de-sacs or wandering journeys, or that reflect the process of growing up or growing old (cf. Iantaffi's rivers of experience 2011) and Zerubavel's (2003: 1-36) discussion on the multiple ways of structuring time and social memory in human experience).



Even where researchers suggest a straight line as the basic drawing tool (and, by implication, a linear and sequential vision of the life course), participants may well deviate from this or add embellishments to map their lives in their own ways (Worth 2011). For example, they may use symbols (smiley or sad faces, snakes and ladders, or flowing streams (Iantaffi 2011)), branch lines, drawings, explanatory comments, or sketch their maps in colour to provide further context and denote the emotional tone of life experiences (for a range of examples, see Guenette and Marshall 2009, and Worth 2011).<sup>2</sup> The creative possibilities are boundless.

Life maps may be introduced flexibly into a biographical interview. They are a valuable means of revitalising a flagging conversation when participants begin to tire from the intensity of the discussion, or are otherwise struggling with sensitive topics or the task of verbalising nebulous life processes (Guenette and Marshall 2009; Worth 2011). In the following young fathers study, for example, the young men disclosed circumstances (e.g. parental drug addiction) via the maps that they may have found difficult to verbalise (Neale et al 2015). Where the maps are introduced early in the interview process, they can provide a tangible representation of a life, an external reference point as the focus for discussion. During the interview, participants can return to, refine or elaborate their drawings as they further reflect on events and processes and the connections between them (Worth 2009; 2011). Indeed, they are generally positive about the opportunity to step back and consider their life in a different way, and often intrigued by the visual connections that begin to emerge (van Houte 2017: 200).

Life maps have particular value in reflecting the fluidity of temporal processes. In the very nature of their construction they can convey a great deal about subjective understandings of the life course, while the running commentaries that accompany them offer rich insights into how participants discern the flow of time and the salience of particular events and processes. The participants in Worth's (2011) study, for example, drew their maps in ways that expanded important and eventful periods of their lives while

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<sup>2</sup> In a more complex construction, built on a graphic platform, Van Houte (2017) invited her participants to draw a time line on the horizontal axis of a graph, and to denote positive and negative times by adding upward or downward-facing arrows on its vertical axis. This represents something of a hybrid between structured life history charts and the more fluid life map.

truncating or omitting others. In the Following Young Fathers study, the maps revealed the compressed childhoods of the young men, their assumption of ‘adult’ life patterns (sexual practices, parenthood and independent living) at an early age, and how the arrival of a child could open up a new future, filled with new aspirations and a renewed sense of purpose (Neale and Lau Clayton 2011; Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012).

Overall, then, these are good tools to ‘think with’ (Neale 2012), simplifying complex ideas, opening up sensitive life experiences, encouraging self-reflection, and giving tangible, visual shape to an emerging biography in ways that would not be possible through a verbal exchange alone (Worth 2011). For these reasons, they are commonly used in QL interviews, where they complement, enrich and deepen oral accounts of temporal processes (Worth 2011). They also dovetail particularly well with a dynamic, cartographic approach to QL interviewing (described above).<sup>3</sup>

### ***Writing tools***

Following a long-established tradition, QL participants may also be asked to produce written accounts of their lives. These most commonly take the form of diaries that capture the flow of day-to-day life. Less often, researchers solicit autobiographical writings in the form of memoirs<sup>4</sup>, or short accounts of the future. Future accounts are usually relatively brief, and therefore suitable for construction within an interview. Diaries, on the other hand, are usually generated between waves of fieldwork and their content used to draw out reflection in subsequent encounters. The self-generated nature of these tools can create challenges in their production. Not everyone will have the skills or confidence to complete a creative writing task, and even where they do, participants may lack the time or motivation to generate them independently, outside the interview context. Nevertheless, where they are produced they can provide compelling evidence that can enrich the findings of a study.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, they formed a core part of the tool kit for the projects in the Timescapes programme (Hanna and Lau Clayton 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The Chicago school tradition of commissioning autobiographical accounts (e.g. Thomas and Znaniecki 1958 [1918-20]) is less commonly used today, perhaps because of the skill and sustained commitment needed for their production beyond the interview. However, such tools are still in use as a means of disseminating as well as generating data. For example, the engaging account authored by Johnson (2015), and published in a collection edited by the Following young Fathers team (Neale and Davies 2015), was a solicited piece of writing with minimal guidance provided by the researchers.

## ***Diaries.***

The process of soliciting or commissioning diaries has a long history in qualitative temporal research (Pember Reeves 2008 [2013]; Shaw 1966 [1930]). Over the past thirty years these documents of life have grown in popularity as a research tool and are regularly solicited for the Mass Observation Archive (Plummer 2001; Alaszewski 2006; Bytheway 2011; Bartlett and Milligan 2015). In their very construction, diaries are temporal records, capturing the immediacy and intimacy of life as it is lived. Interior thoughts and feelings, alongside events and circumstances of significance to the diarist are recorded in the stream of time, as they occur, providing a record of an ever-changing present (Plummer 2001: 48; Fincher 2013). In contrast to autobiographies (one-off, retrospective accounts that reconstruct and explain a life through a backward gaze), diaries are prospective, fixing time in the present moment, oriented to the future and documenting an unfolding life in an incremental and episodic way (Watson 2013: 107). Given their inherent temporality, diaries constitute a powerful form of longitudinal data. They derive their value from their intimacy, their seriality and their close proximity to the events they describe (Watson 2013). Since they are structured through time, they provide a lynchpin between past and future, following up on previous events, anticipating what is to follow, illuminating transitions and trajectories and offering a cumulative picture of change and continuity. Capturing the processual nature of experience in this way provides valuable continuity between waves of QL interviews, and gives access to the minutiae of change that could not be gleaned in any other way (Bytheway 2012; Lewthwaite and Bartlett 2017).

In QL research diaries are commissioned or solicited over a specified period of time, usually mirroring the process under study and/or tied to the longitudinal frame of the research. Participants are given diary booklets to complete, with dates allocated to each page and clear guide-lines on themes of interest to the researcher. The entries may take a variety of forms, from structured tick box charts to free flowing hand written narratives (Bytheway 2012). In the former case, diaries are used instrumentally to chart or log specific events (for example, food, health, financial or time budget diaries that record eating patterns, disease management, household budgets, or the time allotted to daily tasks, see, for example Pember Reeves 2008 [1913]; Jahoda et al 1972 [1932]). Daily entries for these

data logs may be divided into discrete periods of the day, sometimes by the hour, requiring some precision in their production. But diaries can also be produced in a more discursive and interpretive way, as highly personal or ‘confessional’ documents that both record and reflect on the experiential nature of events and circumstances.

In recent years, diaries as daily life records have increasingly taken the form of multi-media (audio, video) or web-based accounts (e.g. blogs or Facebook entries) (Monrouxe 2009; Pini and Walkerdine 2011; Fincher 2013; Robards and Lincoln 2017). There is a growth, too, in pictorial formats that can be used with young children or participants with limited writing skills (Wiseman et al 2005). This suggests the need to appraise formats that are likely to work best with different groups of participants. As an example of the creativity at the heart of QL research, researchers in the *Inventing Adulthoods* study distributed scrap-book diaries to their young participants, along with disposable cameras for creating visual records; glue to attach memorabilia (postcards, flyers, magazine cuttings, email exchanges and so on); and sticky labels with thematic prompts (sex, relationships, love, career and so on) to help trigger the documentation (Thomson and Holland 2005) These were subsequently adapted for the Timescapes Siblings and Friends project.

Diaries have some drawbacks as data generation tools. They are often unfinished or incomplete, with gaps in the record or entries that are undated, out of sequence or heavily amended (Bytheway 2011). They may range from short, factual snippets of data to lengthy, reflective narratives, and the content may be highly selective or serendipitous. The entries may be recorded in retrospect rather than on the day in question. While the temporal distance between events and their recording is much reduced, it is not eliminated; the problem of recall can still persist in what is, in any case, a highly personalised, interpretive monologue of a life (Bytheway 2012; Watson 2013). Bytheway (2012) notes also that diarists may produce sanitised versions of a life or quickly lose faith that their mundane existence has any value for the researcher.

Privacy is a key issue: the intimate way in which diaries are produced invites personal or ‘confessional’ accounts, but diarists may then decide they have revealed too much and opt not to share their writings or place restrictions on their use (Thomson and Holland

2005<sup>5</sup>; Pini and Walkerdine 2011). Perhaps the biggest drawback is participant fatigue; keeping a diary, particularly on a daily basis, requires a significant level of time, commitment and motivation that participants may not be able to sustain, especially for reflective diaries. Even a week of regular writing can lead to fatigue (Bartlett and Milligan 2015). However, diarists also comment on the intrinsic value of this creative form of self-expression, including its cathartic power (Thomson and Holland 2005; Bartlett and Milligan 2015).

The frequency of entries and the time span for keeping a diary are important considerations for the researcher. Given the challenges noted above, continuous daily entries, particularly of a reflexive kind, are not usually requested for more than a week or two (several weeks at most). Or they may be organised around one entry per week or month that can be sustained over a twelve to eighteen-month period (e.g. Monrouxe 2009; Fincher 2013). Whatever frequency and time span is established, participants may well deviate from it. In acknowledging this, some researchers give their diarists a choice about when and how often to create an entry (while still encouraging them to record events and experiences as soon as possible after they occur) (Thomson and Holland 2005; Monrouxe 2009).

Despite the challenges, it is possible to secure a sustained commitment from diarists on a regular and frequent basis, particularly where participants have the time and inclination to write, where incentives are offered, and where ongoing support and encouragement is provided by the researcher (Bartlett and Milligan 2015). Where diaries are used within an interview-based study this can greatly help: having a clear sense of the researcher as audience, who can provide interactive dialogue and feedback, is an important element in sustaining the process (Monrouxe 2009).

The Oldest Generation study, for example, conducted under the Timescapes QL programme, commissioned a series of diaries (each covering a full month) from a close relative of the older person. They were designed to be completed on a daily basis and to cover an 18 month period. Each diary booklet was dated for the month at hand, and

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<sup>5</sup> The way the scrap book diaries were introduced and the remit given to participants in this study may have exacerbated this problem. The researchers assured the participants that the diaries were personal documents that they would own and retain, while also requesting that they be brought along for discussion at the follow up interview. The researchers sought permission to copy selected extracts from the diaries but this entailed careful negotiations with participants at the interview stage.

included sixty A5-size pages, allowing for the daily entries to run over to a second page. Participants received a £50 shopping voucher for each diary that was returned to the research team. Several of the diarists fell behind schedule and stopped returning their booklets within the first year (in some cases, the team elicited some limited data by email instead). In two further cases the older person died, creating a rupture in the diary writing process. But full sets of diaries, covering the whole 18 month period, were received for seven of the twelve families in the study. These documented in great detail the daily lives of the older person and the flow of their family relationships and support needs during the study. In the two cases where the older person died during the course of the research, the diaries created unique records of their last months of life. The diaries were subsequently deposited in the Timescapes Archive as a valuable component of the Oldest Generation dataset (Bytheway 2011; 2012).

### ***Future Essay Writing.***

The future is a key dimension of temporal enquiry. Exploring participants' aspirations, plans, hopes and fears for the future enables insights into how the unfolding life course is perceived, while revisiting imagined futures over time sheds light on how and why people overwrite their biographies, and how far expectations for the future mesh with what actually happens. As shown above, future explorations are integral to QL interviewing and commonly drawn out using flexible life maps. However, along with other forms of autobiographical writing, future essay writing has not been widely utilised in longitudinal research. The National Child Development Study (1958 cohort) and Timescapes programme are exceptions. In a digital age, where conventional writing is increasingly regarded as an outmoded form of communication (Lyon and Crow 2012), their use may continue to be limited.

Future essays are usually short accounts, with essay-writers tasked to produce a page or so of script over the space of thirty or forty minutes. Veness (1962) was an early pioneer of this technique. In 1956, with the help of teachers in a school setting, she conducted a qualitative study to explore the fledgling identities, aspirations and expectations of school leavers, then aged fourteen and fifteen. They were asked to imagine they were looking back at their lives from the vantage point of old age, and write a life story

that would span the intervening years. In all, 1,300 essays were generated, 600 of which were written by young women. This technique was combined with 'best moment' essays, questionnaires and short (15 minute) structured interviews with the young people. A sub-sample of the young people was followed up two years later to find out what occupations they had eventually taken up (Veness 1962: 219). Contextualising the essays by interweaving them with these different sources of data greatly enriched the reported findings.

Similar tasks were set in a number of subsequent studies, most notably in 1969 for the National Child Development Study (NCDS) (1958 cohort), (Elliott and Morrow 2007; Elliott 2010b); and in 1978 and 2010 for the Isle of Sheppey study and re-study (Pahl 1978; Crow and Lyon 2011; Lyon and Crow 2012). More recently, they have been used to explore the construction of young people's identities, their projections for family, home and working lives, and the influence of structural determinants (class, gender and family background) on these processes (Hallden 1994, 1999; O'Connor 2006; Sanders and Munford 2008; Patterson, Forbes and Peace 2009; McDonald and colleagues 2011; Winterton and Irwin 2011). Essay-writers may be invited to look back from an imaginary older life, as in the Veness (1962) study, or to project forward a number of years from the present day. The young people in the NCDS 1958 cohort and the Timescapes projects, for example, were invited to imagine that they were twenty-five years old, and to write about the life they envisaged they would be leading, their interests, their home life and their work at that age.

Future accounts serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are a reflection of the historical times in which they are produced (Sanders and Munford 2008). In Veness's (1962) study, for example, young people's understandings of unfolding work and family trajectories were examined against a backdrop of post-war optimism and economic growth. The Isle of Sheppey essays, in contrast, were written in the late 1970s at a time of recession. They reflect a more unpredictable world, one diverging from prescribed pathways, with divorce, unemployment, bereavement and step family life all featuring as common themes (Crow and Lyon 2011). As well as analysing the earlier essays, Crow and Lyon generated a fresh batch of essays from a new generation of school leavers, and explored how imagined futures were re-scripted against a backdrop of three decades of socio-economic change in the community (Lyon and Crow 2012).

As well as reflecting the times in which they were written, future essays can provide insights into how life course trajectories are envisioned, the mechanisms and turning points through which future paths are chosen, sustained or abandoned, and how past and future time are interwoven. While imagined futures are not predictive of future paths, their very construction can give shape to a range of possible selves and the pathways that may lead to their realisation (Worth 2009; Lyon and Crow 2012; Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015). These accounts may, therefore, offer insights into the seeds of change, particularly where they are generated as part of a prospective longitudinal study.

In most cases, future essays have been generated as part of a synchronic (one-off) study. But given their inherent temporality they can still reveal much about dynamic life course processes and the fluidity of time. Interesting insights have been reported on turning points (O'Connor 2006<sup>6</sup>; Crow and Lyon 2011); the extent to which young people plan out their future lives or live with shortened time horizons in an extended present (O'Connor 2006); and how young people understand the process of ageing in later life (Patterson, Forbes and Peace 2009). Future essays can reveal how aspirations and priorities for the future shift through varied tempos and horizons of time. For example, in a study exploring how New Zealand girls envisage their lives at one, five and ten years into the future, Sanders and Munford (2008) found that relationships took centre stage in the short-term, but gave way to employment and self-reliance as more concrete and enduring priorities for the longer term.

A number of considerations arise in using future essays as data-generation tools. Firstly it is worth giving careful thought to how and when to employ them, with what groups, in which settings, and how best to introduce the task. Because this tool requires skills and familiarity with creative writing and the time to engage in the task, it has been used predominantly with school-age children, ranging in age from eight to eighteen. How far they can be used effectively with adults is unclear. In their study of first time fathers, conducted under the Timescapes programme, Henwood and Sharani (2012) found that reflections on and plans for the future were readily shared in interview, but requests for written accounts were less favourably received. Asked to write in response to the question,

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<sup>6</sup> O'Connor (2006) elicited a mixture of prospective and retrospective life stories and future aspirations from millennial school children across Ireland. Alongside themes of family, class and gender, she explores fateful moments such as transitions out of school, key sporting events or the deaths of friends or family members.



‘Where do you see yourselves in ten years’ time?’, several fathers expressed dislike of the task, while others reported it was too challenging to project into the future or that they did not have specific plans to write about.

Related to this, in most existing studies future essays have been written in school settings and mediated through teachers (not without considerable challenges in some cases, e.g. Patterson, Forbes and Peace 2009; Lyon and Crow 2012). While this can work effectively and yield large datasets across classrooms of students, it also raises questions about the impact of the setting on the presentation and content of the data (Veness 1962; O’Connor 2006; Elliott and Morrow 2007). Veness (1962: 16) stresses the importance of clarifying the research context in which the essays are being produced, and the need to assure young people that their accounts are confidential and will not be read (let alone marked) by their teachers.

There has also been a tendency in some school-based studies to hive off the essays, and to analyse them as stand-alone data, divorced from the wider study of which they are a part. This reduces the ability to build a contextual understanding of the characteristics of the essay-writers and the circumstances of their lives. In the Isle of Sheppey study, for example, Pahl (1978) wrote one short article on his school-based essay data, but did not interview the essayists as part of his community-based research or refer to their accounts in his subsequent findings (Crow and Lyon 2011). As Pahl acknowledged, this left the next generation of researchers without any insights into the social characteristics, gender or class backgrounds of the essay-writers (Crow and Lyon 2011; Lyon and Crow 2012). This same neglect was evident for the 13,000 plus essays gathered in 1969 from the 1958 cohort of the NCDS.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The original researchers had intended to compare the imagined futures of the cohort with the actualities of their lives during their adult years, but the momentum was lost. The essays were not used to draw out reflections in subsequent interviews, although in a longitudinal study this would have been of great value. In part this was because cohort members were not interviewed in their own right until they were 16 years of age, and because the focus was on the analysis of the survey data. Initial interest in the essays was confined to a preliminary analysis of the children’s occupational aspirations and their linguistic competences (Elliott and Morrow 2007). However, in both this research and the Isle of Sheppey study, the essays were archived, enabling them to be revisited for systematic analysis and placed in the context of the wider study findings some decades later (Elliott and Morrow 2007; Elliott 2010b; Crow and Lyon 2011; Lyon and Crow 2012).

However, for QL researchers, with an elongated time frame at their disposal, using schools as intermediaries is not the only option. In the Timescapes QL projects, future essays were solicited directly by the researchers. These ranged from short note-form accounts produced during an interview, to more extensive scripts that young people produced at home, in their own time. The latter were then emailed to the study team or brought along to the next interview where they were used to draw out further reflections. In this way, the researchers were able to embed the essay data more effectively within the overall dataset. In their analyses of these data, Winterton and Irwin (2011, also 2012) located these essays within the context of the young people's social characteristics and class background, and drew on both essay data and interview data to enhance their interpretations. They explored how young people's aspirations for higher education shifted over time, and uncovered the 'ebb and flow' of family, peer and school influences on pioneering youngsters who aspired to be the first generation in their families to go to university.

As a final consideration, the way this task is presented to essay-writers requires care, for it can influence how far the accounts reflect thoughtful and relatively realistic expectations, or shade into flights of fancy. The very wording of the instructions can make a difference (Winterton and Irwin 2011). Future essays are, of course, inherently creative, as essay-writers themselves point out (Crow and Lyon 2011: 23). Since they are self-generated, it is important to encourage spontaneity and give participants licence to write in their own style about matters of their own choosing (McDonald et al 2011). In some studies, the creative, 'dream-like' elements of the task take centre stage (Bulbeck 2005). Hallden (1994), for example, invited eight-year olds in school settings to write fictional accounts of a make-believe family. These were developed with the help of teachers over a two-month period and in some cases ran to over sixty pages. But most researchers, from Veness (1962) onwards, have guided participants to write realistically about the future, using their personal experiences to imagine how they see their own lives unfolding. This generally works well, with researchers acknowledging the powerful and compelling insights that such essays can reveal (Pahl 1978; Crow and Lyon 2011).

## Developing a bespoke strategy for field enquiry

The broad approaches to generating data outlined above, and the techniques and tools that can be used in the field, form a rich palette of complementary methods. In QL research the longitudinal frame offers scope for them to be combined in creative ways, and for new tools to be introduced or techniques refined as a study progresses (Saldana 2003). Some researchers offer a menu of creative tools to engage the interest of participants and give them a choice of activities (Weller 2011). As shown above, interview methods are most commonly combined with life maps and/or written or audio diaries (e.g. Smith 1999; Gordon et al 2005; Monrouxe 2009; Worth 2011; Bytheway 2012; Neale et al 2015). This can enrich temporal insights and help sustain participant involvement and interest. The varied data sources give access to different temporalities, in particular the interweaving of past and future, and of varied horizons and tempos of time. As a prime example, Bornat and Bytheway (2010) combined life history interviews with diary techniques in their study of the Oldest Generation. This enabled them to capture the long sweep of older lives lived over decades of change, alongside the tempos and contingencies of every-day existence.

A caveat arises at this point. Data generation techniques and tools need to be carefully chosen in relation to the design and sampling decisions that shape a study.<sup>8</sup> The number and combination of tools needs careful thought to ensure that participants (and researchers) are not over-loaded by a plethora of different activities that complicate field enquiry and present extra challenges for analysis. Similarly, where new tools are introduced in subsequent waves, this can result in a loss of continuity and reduce the capacity for comparative data analysis over time. To avoid these pitfalls, most QL studies work with a core interview or ethnographic approach that may be combined with a limited range of participatory techniques. Indeed, life mapping, writing and other participatory tools are rarely generated or analysed in isolation from a biographical interview (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977). Plummer (2001: chapter 3) aptly describes them as accessories to a life story. In other words, using biographical interviewing as a core data generation technique ensures

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<sup>8</sup> Worth (2011) combined biographical interviews with audio-diaries and adapted life maps for her study with visually impaired youngsters. The Following Young Fathers team opted for life maps rather than future essays in a context where some of the participants had limited literacy skills (Neale et al 2015). As a final example, the Welfare Conditionality Qualitative Panel Study involved working with a sample of 480 participants, drawn from varied sub-groups across a range of comparative settings. In order to keep the study to manageable proportions, biographical interviews were chosen as the sole method for generating data.

that participatory sources of data can be integrated and contextualised within a larger dataset and used as a springboard to further discussion and reflection.

## Summary

This working paper has explored the process of generating QL research data. A review has been provided of a number of broad approaches to this enterprise: ethnographic, interview-based, participatory and the use of documentary and archival sources. As in all dimensions of QL enquiry, the process of working through the longitudinal frame of a study can be a challenge. Strategies to balance continuity and flexibility in the process of generating data are needed and suggestions are made here. The paper then focuses on interview-based approaches, outlining the basic tenets of biographical interviewing, and introducing cartographic and recursive strategies that are particularly pertinent for QL researchers. Finally a range of participatory field tools have been reviewed and their potential in QL enquiry considered.

QL research offers rich potential to combine elements from different traditions and to draw on new tools as a study progresses. At the same time, there is the ever-present danger that a field enquiry will unravel, leading to the creation of an incoherent dataset. Whatever data generation tools and techniques are utilised, a clear rationale is needed for their use, and they need to be piloted and chosen with care. While QL research is an inherently creative process, the discussion here reveals the importance of working with a carefully crafted data generation strategy, one that is tailored to the aims of a study, and based on a careful choice of field tools and techniques.

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