

## INTRODUCTION

Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research is concerned with how researchers might capture changes or continuities in the lives of their participants over time (Emmel and Hughes, 2009). Researchers do this by looking at their data from a range of 'distances' (Mason, 2007) which are afforded by time. This may include a reflexive distance that is facilitated through the passage of time during the research, allowing the researcher to reconsider and refine their understandings of the research data. It may also include the analytical distance that is afforded specifically through QL methods, where the researcher is able to observe variation in participants' accounts of their 'present lives', generated at different times in the study. This longer view allows us to reflect on how participants' narratives generated over the course of the research may reflect continuities or the repetition of significant events or experiences in their lifetimes.

This affordance also gives rise to a number of questions concerning the sorts of times we are interested in analysing and theorising. In this guide we draw on a study of grandparents in a low-income community to show the usefulness of analytical distance to consider how our participants spoke about the times and tempos of their lives, and how they were situated in and shaped by, broader formal timescapes of health and social care services. In this way, by examining the ever changing 'present time' of our participants that were captured at intervals during the research, we are able to bring a more sociological perspective on their meanings and experiences of different sorts of time. Through the use of reflexive distance we add to this by bringing the timings of research into our analytical frame, and suggest that in doing so we are able to enrich our understanding of participants' meanings and experiences of time.

## KEY POINTS

- QL research allows us to take a range of 'distances' in our analyses and interpretation of the temporal meanings and experiences of our participants; in particular, analytical and reflexive distance.
- While exploring the timescapes of people's lives through accounts generated in qualitative interviewing is important, it is not the only means of discerning how individuals relate to or use time;
- For people experiencing deprivation, their accounts of the often fraught process of knitting together one's personal timescapes with those of formal services can be reflected quite strikingly in interactions between participants and researchers, particularly in the process of setting up and gaining access to interviewees
- In understanding these negotiation processes in gaining access and interviewing, we are required to see our research methods as emergent and relational, shaped through the possibilities for particular relationships between researchers and participants;
- It is important to understand that methodological and empirical aspects of the research process are inseparable.

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# TIMESCAPES METHODS GUIDES SERIES 2012

## Guide No. 9

### Analysing Time: Times and Timing in the Lives of Low-Income Grandparents

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## BACKGROUND

Our QL study (1999 and ongoing) is conducted in a geographically bounded low-income social housing estate where there are high rates of young motherhood and closely spaced generations are a common experience. Our focus is the poorest and most vulnerable families living on the estate (Emmel and Hughes, 2010). Our QL research investigates and interprets their accounts of the texture of poverty in various aspects of their lives—growing up, relationships with service providers and others on the estate, access to health services, and their relationship to wider social, economic, and political events and processes. Our latest research project (2008 and ongoing), Intergenerational Exchange, is an investigation of how grandparents experiencing poverty care for and support their grandchildren over time. Specifically, how the grandparents in the study talk about their experience of grand parenting, and how these change and stay the same relative to dynamic contextual processes, like changes in policy or family relationships for instance, are the focus of our enquiry.

Our participants' accounts describe considerable difficulties accessing essential services. They feel powerless in effecting even modest change in their lives, experience constrained choice, and have enormous difficulties building trustful relationships with service providers. In our research (Emmel, Hughes & Greenhalgh 2003; Emmel, *et al*, 2007; Emmel & Hughes 2010) we observe that these poorest families experience high rates of formal and informal service intervention and provision. Such service provision, where it is comprehensive and addresses the expressed needs of our participants, is crucial in their daily struggle to make ends meet. However, where the efforts of service providers are compromised by organisational demands, this frequently exacerbates the participants' vulnerability (Hughes *et al*, 2009).



## RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

The analytic distance afforded through QL research enables us to reflect on how participants' narratives generated over the course of our research may reflect continuities or the repetition of significant events or experiences over time. We are able to situate these accounts alongside representations of policy context as described by service providers. The focus of our enquiry is understanding the dynamic and contingent nature of our grandparents' experiences in this broader context.

### Times in their Lives

In Intergenerational Exchange, we broadly found that the types of care the grandparents in our sample provide for their grandchildren can be placed on a continuum. The continuum ranges from 'supplemental' care, where grandparents intervene and support the care of grandchildren whilst they remain resident with their own parents, to 'parental' care, where grandchildren reside full-time with their grandparents. While supplemental care required a high degree of involvement in the lives of adult children and grandchildren, the grandparent was nevertheless able to maintain a degree of independence from their needs. However, where grandparents assumed parental care of grandchildren, they described how they were intimately involved in reshaping the lives of their grandchildren and, in particular, re-integrating them into particular timescapes (Adam, 1998).

On gaining parental responsibility, grandparents described how they were involved in 'rescue and repair', where the grandparent rescues the child from a difficult situation, and repairs the damage that has been done. Such repair often involves re-feeding their grandchildren, re-clothing them, and re-integrating them into waking and sleeping routines. The 'repair' is not only to meet the needs of the child within the family. All these activities are essential for the re-integration of their grandchildren into clock-based, or institutional times, such as school times. In this way, grandparents feel they are safe-guarding their children from future 'damage' or vulnerability. This re-integration is additionally important where there are high levels of formal service involvement, such as with health and social care workers. Grandparents describe how they have to organise their daily lives, and the lives of their grandchildren, so that their 'timescapes' are able to intersect with those of the service providers. These activities of re-feeding, re-clothing, and re-integrating into bedtimes are seemingly very simple, but in the accounts of our participants are infused with significance for their 'future orientations' on behalf of their grandchildren. For example, grandparents worried that if their grandchildren were unable to mesh with institutional times (e.g., go to school, attend social work appointments) this was likely to incur punitive formal service intervention ('the social' might take the children away). Knitting together these different timescapes often proves a struggle for some grandparents. Successful re-integration of their



grandchildren into these institutional times, however, allows for more positive future orientations; if, for example, they ensure their grandchild/ren get a good education, they will get a good job, and so improve their life chances. Thus, the grandparents' efforts on behalf of their grandchildren in the present will hopefully sustain the 'repair' in the grandchild's future.

In this way, our analyses of times in QL accounts of grandparenting and poverty allows us to analytically penetrate some of the complexity of caring for grandchildren in circumstances of poverty where there is greater dependency on successful integration with formal services.

### Timing in the Research

In previous research we identified that people experiencing poverty were best accessed through gatekeepers, most notably comprehensive service providers (e.g, health visitors) who developed relationships of trust with participants, through addressing their expressed needs even if these fell outside their service remit (Emmel *et al*, 2007). Access through these gatekeepers conferred a (limited) degree of trust on the researchers; we had been vouched for and were unlikely to lead to punitive outcomes (as often happens with 'officialdom'). Developing relationships with participants, and entering their relational networks emerged as part of an access process (rather than an event or research stage) which inevitably required ongoing negotiation and time.

In Intergenerational Exchange, we brought these insights into a longitudinal investigation of participants' future orientations, analysing how far ahead participants were able to plan for and arrange an interview. For our participants it was difficult to arrange something more than a week ahead, because they felt their lives were so open to disruption.

Through telephone conversations with participants, and gatekeepers, we tracked failed interviews (where the participant wasn't there), and recorded incidents when the participant's situation on the day of interview was too difficult to allow an interview to take place. Through these analyses we concluded that, the more vulnerable (and less resourced) a participant was, the more chaotic their life was likely to be; for example, events such as a TV licence bill might be financially devastating and prove to be a 'tipping point' into chaos. Even maintaining contact through telephones is difficult as phone numbers change constantly as participants' financial ability to afford payments fluctuates, and our participants do not answer letters. The only way to re-connect with participants is to call round to their house, or enquire about them through informal service providers (mainly third sector organisations). Ethical consideration is necessary around how often visits can be made, because they can be intrusive and might increase participants' stress. Finally, except for one of our participants

who had deliberately moved away from her family, interviews throughout Intergenerational Exchange were always interrupted by a telephone call or text from a close family member, or a family member calling in.

Through these constant communications, and disruptions to interviews and informal chats with the fieldworker, we were able to observe close and frequent interactions and involvement across these families that participants went on to describe in interview.

In summary, our reflexive analyses highlighted how our methods of access and interviewing were emergent, situated and negotiated, and required an understanding of the complex timescapes of our participants' lives. The empirical insights we gained in consequence, allowed us to theorise how their timescapes meshed, or were discordant, with other more distant timescapes such as those of formal service provision, and how these impacted on participants' lived experience.



## CONCLUSION

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From Intergenerational Exchange we can see that it is fruitful for QL analyses of time to consider 'time' as described by participants, and 'timing' of the research in understanding participants' temporal meanings and social contexts.

Furthermore, lengthy access processes require researchers to understand and integrate with the relational networks comprising the social contexts of participants. In this way, temporal analyses of the timings of research simultaneously engage researchers with their ongoing consideration of how, and what, they conceive to be their research field.

Additionally, analysis of the limitations, difficulties and moderations required for standard methodological techniques of contacting and maintaining a sample over time provided opportunities for us to theorise the fragility of any stability in participants' lives. In turn, these analyses shaped interview questions on subsequent waves of data collection, that were directed towards developing a temporal understanding of 'tipping points' into crisis for our participants. Such questions explored which events might be most disruptive to their lives and why, and how and with whom were these events managed. In conclusion, we suggest that understandings generated through methodological negotiation in the field are as important for theory-building as data generated through interviews.

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