TIMESCAPES METHODS GUIDES SERIES 2012
Guide No. 6

Using Case Histories in Qualitative Longitudinal Research

*Sheila Henderson,
Janet Holland,
Sheena McGrellis,
Sue Sharpe &
Rachel Thomson*

SERIES EDITORS
*Bren Neale &
Karen Henwood*

INTRODUCTION

How to write up and represent qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is one of the most important aspects of QLR methodology, yet one of the least debated. When biographical data is gathered at intervals over time, its sheer volume and detail, its multi-temporal nature, its resistance to analytical closure, all add to the complexity of the task. Ethical questions of confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, heightened by long-term research relationships, further complicate the representational process, as does the inevitable inclusion of the researcher in the data as researcher and research process become increasingly reflexive. A method for analysing and writing biographical data, case history, is concerned with capturing temporal processes in an individual life, often using repeat interviews based on memory. It seems well-suited to the task of writing Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) data, but the method has limitations since in general it involves a retrospective reconstruction of the past. The QL context can involve reflection not only on the past, but present and future, all from a moving present, bringing further interacting complexities of hindsight, foresight and insight. New forms of representation and ways of writing research that can capture this multi-temporality are required.

This guide draws on experiences from the Inventing Adulthoods study (IA) to outline a case history method-in-process developed as a means of condensing extensive volumes of intensive biographical data (generated over twelve years in seven rounds of interviews) and of distilling complex QL data in ways that capture the intersection of different timescapes (biographical, generational, historical).

KEY POINTS

- This guide describes a method of analysing, writing and representing qualitative longitudinal research data in which individual archives of accumulated data are transformed into an analytic narrative – the case history.
- The method is being developed in the context of a qualitative longitudinal study of young people's transitions to adulthood, Inventing Adulthoods (IA) .
- The study examines how biographies are shaped by structural factors (location, social class, gender and family formation), and expressed through changing subjectivities as the self is made and remade over time.
- The method builds on case study and case history methods in social science that use the individual case, located within cultural and historical context, as a key to unlock the social.
- Our approach builds on a technique used in IA to handle the data in process, the case profile, a tool for managing and condensing data, providing initial analyses and understandings.
- The method has the capacity to capture multiple temporalities where (1) participants reflect on the past, present and future serially over time, in a changing present; in a context where (2) biographical, generational, and historical timescapes coexist and intersect.
- Case history analyses are characterised by the identification of biographical motifs in the narratives, metaphors that aid representation, and multiple voices in the data.

BACKGROUND

Inventing Adulthoods (IA) has taken different forms in several funding contexts. The study has followed 121 young people growing up in five areas of England including Northern Ireland (NI) as they moved through their teens, twenties and early thirties between 1996 and 2010. This QL study generated a wealth of biographical material, providing a unique window on most aspects of growing up through an important period of social change. Throughout, we attempted to examine and reflect how biographies are shaped by structural factors such as location, social class, gender, and family formation – by analysing the data set as a whole at a point in time, by examining cases through time and by attempting to merge these analyses (Henderson *et al*, 2012).

> As Inventing Adulthoods evolved and matured, we recognised the importance of capturing something of the process through which the self is made and remade over time. In addition to thinking of participants as having mobile subjectivities, we realised that the researchers were also changing, and this dynamism became an integral part of the research that we wanted to recognize and make explicit. Researching lives as they are lived makes it difficult to draw analytic conclusions, as new data often confounds emergent interpretations. We embraced this indeterminacy, seeking to capture changes in our interpretations and making explicit the operation of hindsight (realising meaning retrospectively) and foresight (predicting meaning) (Thomson and Holland, 2003).

As the study became longitudinal we developed a tool to track the evolving case, 'the narrative analysis' (see website). This was completed by the interviewer soon after the interview, capturing changes in individual narratives over time, researchers' personal reflections and their hopes, fears and predictions for the young person. After three interviews, overwhelmed by the accumulating scale of individual archives, including transcripts, fieldnotes, questionnaire data, memory books, and lifelines, we shifted from an approach that sought to track the evolving case to one that sought to condense the case. This could provide a shorthand overview of how circumstances and life events changed over time as well as abstracting key analytic themes from the different interviews, and summarising researchers' reflections and interpretations in relation to our research questions (Thomson and Holland, 2003). We called this tool for managing and condensing data the case profile (http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods/capturing/research_time/inventing_adulthoods/adulthoods_18.shtml). Case profiles provided us with a key into the data archive for each individual, and became an important basis for developing written case histories – where individual archives are transformed into a single analytic narrative. The rest of this methods guide focuses on the case history method.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Case Histories: A Method in Process

Sociological approaches to case study and case history are widely used, variously defined, and involve different theoretical perspectives, disciplines and traditions. 'Case study' methods draw on phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (Byrne and Ragin, 2009), whilst 'case history' methods are informed by oral and life history approaches. In both, the object of study can vary: an individual, a group, an institution, or wider reference, with importance placed on defining the borders of the case (Chadderton and Torrance, 2011). Debates about the utility of these methods in wider socio-historical explanation revolve around whether generalisations can be made from intense study of the particular. Stake (1994), for example, argues that, 'the purpose of the case study is not to represent the world but to represent the case'; others suggest that theoretical and scientific development often turns on case study evidence and theorizing (Flyvbjerg, 2007). For us, individual cases can be used in a way that locates subjectivity in a cultural and historical context so that the individual provides a key to unlock the social (Thomson, 2009).

The starting point for our approach to case histories was established by Rachel Thomson who drew on cases from Inventing Adulthoods to create thick descriptions that synthesised theory and data in an exploration of gender and social change (Thomson, 2009). These case histories formed distinct chapters of a book and synthesised and interpreted the data archive for four individuals from the study. The conceptual lens of 'biographical fields' was employed as a way of revealing the unfolding and multi-dimensional character of lives. Salient biographical fields were identified that could connect successive data sources – for example work, play, education, and family – forming the basis for a series of analytic narratives. By bringing these component parts together in a storied whole, it was possible to maintain a sense of chronological order, in the life as lived and in the life as told within the analysis.

Our latest thinking on the case history method adopted a more experimental approach, with the research team exploring a range of styles before reflecting on common features and lessons. This work formed part of a project to explore how the Inventing Adulthoods data set could reveal historical changes in one of our research sites – Northern Ireland. With support from the Timescapes initiative and the Joseph Rowntree foundation, researchers returned to participants with another round of interviews, and updated archived data, transforming the data into storied case histories. In most cases these case histories were undertaken by researchers who had not been responsible for the primary data collection and writing of case profiles. As such they constitute a form of secondary analysis – although one that takes place within the primary research team.

We began by immersing ourselves in the individual data archive in order to get a 'fresh' perspective on the life before consulting the original researcher's analysis and interpretation in the case profile. Refined over time, our case history 'template' currently includes a front sheet with basic information about the participant, themes and motifs emerging from the interviews, a narrative for each interview, followed by analytic summaries under headings drawn from our methodological and theoretical concerns: biographical time, historical time, generational time, methodological/ research time; policy; process (of undertaking the case history); what else we would like to know about the young person; any useful contextual detail not otherwise covered; and a synopsis of the case history. 'Template' suggests an ease of writing that is unrealistic in the QL context. The complexities involved are highlighted by focusing on three key methodological issues: sequence, motif and voice.

Sequence:

Shifting temporalities are integral to QL data, with participants reflecting on what has happened in the past, what is happening now and what may happen in the future serially over time. In a QL context, present, past and future are dynamic and different timescapes co-exist – biographical, historical, generational. As analysts and writers we must decide how to begin the story, which 'present' comes first and which 'pasts' and 'futures' should follow? Our strategy was to write about each interview chronologically, situating our writing voice in the present for that interview –with the researcher's voice making explicit an awareness of prior and later data and insights. But while chronological time can give the story a structure, dates and time sequence alone cannot carry its weight.

Motif:

QL data allows insight into the flux and flow of lives, and how these are mediated by circumstances, critical moments, choices, or key people. Specific elements may emerge as central and recurrent within an individual's story, acting as a base colour for the picture that unfolds over the years. Finding a way to represent these biographical motifs (Thomson, 2009) alongside the other persuasive story lines, backdrops and side lines is the task. One way of capturing motifs sprang from the participants when given an opportunity to reflect back on their lives and to respond to our interpretations in various ways. Employing a hook or a metaphor to frame some aspect of the story allows the reader (and writer) to weave these motifs into the life story tapestry across time, as well as embellishing some sections of the picture in more depth within a specific moment. The use of simple metaphors, such as a 'jigsaw' or 'map', for example, allows the writer to conjure the richness, confusion and interrelatedness of what is sometimes voiced in the data, while also providing more concise ways of structuring these themes for the reader.

Voice:

The nature of our data made us highly aware of all the voices to be woven into the accounts - the participant, the interviewer/researcher and the other analysts within the team and their changing reflections and interpretations over time. Aiming for 'thick descriptions' that drew directly on the participants' own words and style of speaking, we experimented with ways of making all these voices explicit (Henderson *et al*, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Our approach to QL case history writing has its roots in our methods for capturing the biographical depth, developmental process and social and historical specificity of the lives we have been 'walking alongside' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). It has produced ten lengthy case history documents (each of around 25 pages condensed from an individual archive of anything from 175 pages) that are too long to share but provide rich material that can be layered into our future published work on young lives in Northern Ireland. Edited and anonymised versions have already engaged policy makers in Northern Ireland in developing policy based on these holistic and dynamic accounts of unfolding young lives. The case histories form an analytically derived data source for writing, and further use in as yet unknown contexts for the research team. Concern with issues of confidentiality and privacy were consciously abandoned in order to write freely, but clearly the possibility of anonymising and archiving such data remains. The nature of the data and our desire to conjure it imaginatively and responsibly requires a continual openness to further development. QLR both increases the ethical commitment and responsibility for giving voice to participants whilst protecting them from unlooked-for exposure and requires a more nuanced approach to representing all voices involved in the research process. The case history method we are still in the process of developing is ideally suited to this task.

REFERENCES

Byrne, D. & Ragin, C. (eds). (2009). *The Sage Handbook of Case-Based Methods*. London: Sage

Chadderton, C and Torrance, H. (2011). Case study. In Somekh, B and Lewin, C (eds). *Theory and methods in social research* (second edition). London: Sage

Flyvbjerg, B. (2007). 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research'. In Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J. F. and Silverman, D. (eds). *Qualitative Research Practice.* London: Sage

Henderson, S, Holland. J, McGrellis. S, Sharpe. S and Thomson. R. (2007). *Inventing Adulthoods: A biographical approach to youth transitions*. London: Sage

Henderson, S. Holland, J. McGrellis, S. Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R. (2012). 'Storying Qualitative Longitudinal Research: sequence, voice and motif', *Qualitative Research*. Special Issue on Timescapes,12 (1): 16-34

McLeod, J. & Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching social change: Qualitative approaches*. London: Sage

Stake, R. E. (1994). Case Studies. In Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (eds). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage

Thomson, R. (2009). *Unfolding lives: Youth, gender and change*. Bristol: Policy Press

Thomson, R. and Holland J. (2003). 'Hindsight, foresight and insight: the challenges of longitudinal qualitative research'. *International Journal of Social Research Methods* – Special issue on Longitudinal Qualitative Methods. 6 (3): 233-244.

Thomson, R. Kehily, M.J. Hadfield, L. and Sharpe, S. (2011). *Making modern mothers*. Bristol: Policy Press.

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACT DETAILS

Inventing Adulthoods/Making the Long View, Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London, SE1 0AA
(www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods).

Sheila Henderson, shehenderson@hotmail.com | Janet Holland, hollanj@lsbu.ac.uk
Sheena McGrellis, s.mcgrellis@ulster.ac.uk | Sue Sharpe, Suesharpe@btopenworld.com
Rachel Thomson, r.thomson@sussex.ac.uk