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Qualitative Longitudinal Methods as a Route into the Psychosocial

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INTRODUCTION

Qualitative longitudinal (QL) research designs involve repeat data generation encounters over time. Such approaches are characterised by the accumulation of contradictory accounts of self, as well as the presence of intrapersonal dynamics within the data arising from changing relationships between researcher and researched. As a result of following subjects over time it becomes possible to explore the emotional dimensions of how discourses turn into subjectivity, as well as anchoring developmental processes within particular historical and social circumstances (Nielsen, 1996, McLeod, 2003).

The psychological depth promised by these intensive methods, and their capacity to alert us to 'things that can't be said' (Frosh 2001), is the focus of other project work within the Timescapes network and beyond, raising ethical and practical issues concerning informed consent, privacy, confidentiality (for researcher and researched) and the representation and sharing of data.

This methods guide outlines how research supported by Timescapes employed three innovative methods to explore the relationship between different temporal and emotional registers, suggesting how QL research can enable insight into psycho-social processes. It has direct connection with guide no.6 and guide no.10.

BACKGROUND

The Making Modern Motherhood study began in 2005 with a diverse sample of 62 women, expecting their first child. Women were interviewed late in their pregnancies, usually at home, and were invited to present their preparations for the arrival of the baby to the researcher to be photographed. From the initial group of 62 women a volunteer sample of 12 women were identified to form family case studies, which involved inviting their own mothers (and grandmothers if possible) to take part in interviews as well as nominating a significant other who had been an important influence on the way they understood mothering. Women were then interviewed again a year after the birth of their child[1].

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[1] This research was funded as part of the ESRC Identities programme and is reported in Thomson et al. 2011
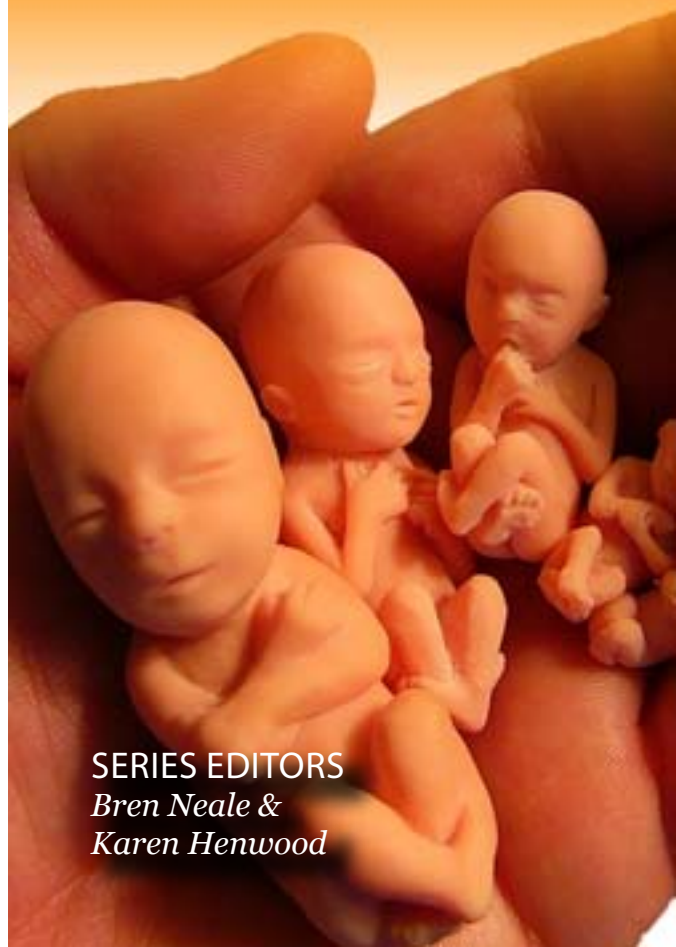
KEY POINTS

- QL research has the potential to get beneath the surface of accounts, capturing contradictions, the unsaid and the unsayable.

- As research relationships evolve over time, the reactions and reflections of researchers are important sources of insight and data, as recorded for example in field notes.

- Different methods not only capture distinct temporal registers, but also corresponding emotional registers.

- The psychological depth enabled by QL approaches amplifies the ethical complexity of this kind of research, demanding that researchers take responsibility for the impact of the methods employed and the insights generated.

The second phase of the research began in 2009 and was funded again by the ESRC as part of Timescapes. A particular methodological focus for the study was to explore 'how hindsight, foresight and insight interact in the research process and in what ways does researcher subjectivity become a central source of data and knowledge?'. Six family case studies were pursued for further longitudinal investigation, involving the following methods, each of which involved attentiveness to emotional dynamics, with data generated through the voices of both the researcher and the participant (Thomson 2010b).

- 'Day-in-a-life' micro-ethnographies' with the mothers and their child (aged 2)
- Second interviews with grandmothers organised around objects that participants were asked to select that represented their past, present and future
- Final interviews with mothers (our 4th encounter over the period of the research) organised around bespoke workbooks created using thematically organised extracts of data from the previous interviews.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE
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Day in a Life
Having relied heavily on recorded interview data in the earlier part of the study we were interested in using observation as a method. Researchers negotiated with each participant the opportunity to spend an 'ordinary day' with them. The approach was inspired by techniques of work-shadowing employed in organisational research where the presence of an interested observer enables the naming and narration of mundane practices on the part of a worker.

Digital cameras were used as part of the observation, with objects and practices photographed in negotiation with participants as records of the day. On return from the observation researchers used the images as aide memoires for writing a chronological account of the day, including their own responses and reflections. Observations varied in

length from 5 to 12 hours depending on the wishes of the mother involved. The following extract, taken from the opening passage of a 'day in a life', illustrates how the observation was negotiated.

When Monica opened the door I was met by 2 and a half year old Lucien's direct eye contact. [..] Lucien immediately invited me into his play, narrating his trains. He told me that the bridge had 'collapsed' and I remarked on what a good word that was. While I played with him Monica was on her mobile to a friend and it transpired that she was setting up a visit to a drop-in group. I briefly explained what I wanted from the day – to come along with her, to see how it goes, to take pictures as we went along as aide memoires to help me write up notes later. Monica seemed comfortable with the plan and I got my camera out to show Lucien and together we took a picture of his train set.

The day-in-a-life observations generated rich data, capturing the atmosphere and practices of everyday mothering including the presence and agency of the child. These observations contribute to the rich longitudinal archives that we have for each family as well as a source of data in their own right. We have used the observations as a basis for writing about food and eating (Thomson et al. 2012) and have created an interactive website where the ethnographic accounts are animated and juxtaposed.

Object Based Interviews
We used the second interviews with the grandmothers in our case study families as an opportunity to shift from a semi-structured interview format to a more subject-centred approach; inviting participants to choose two objects, one representing their past and another their future. Our choice of objects as a prompt for discussion was inspired by research exploring how meaning and order are condensed within and expressed through the material world (Miller, 2001). In practice we were impressed by the way object based interviews allowed for a distinctly different mode of discussion, a more affectively dense interaction in which memory and emotion were very much in evidence. Previously unspoken issues in the research emerged – for example several grandmothers brought objects that evoked the significance of men in their lives – father, husbands. We subsequently discovered that objects are commonly used in therapeutic contexts as a strategy to enable group reminiscence as well as enabling previously unsymbolised affect to emerge, although we did not approach these interviews with any therapeutic intent. Conversation was recorded and objects photographed, yet researchers were aware that it was the encounter itself – the selection, sharing and recognition of the objects that gave the interactions their emotional gravity.

In the field note written after one of her interviews Sue Sharpe records her response to one of the grandmothers sharing a shoe box filled with mementos of her father including shoes, a hat and chains. Sue writes of feeling

'implicated in this emotional significance because it was through me (i.e. the project) that she had got them out and was talking, often quite emotionally, about them. But I also felt that she was pleased to be able to look at them for herself, describe each of them to me, and that someone else was interested in something that was of importance to her and her identity.'

Sue observes how the encounter got her thinking about her own father and his belongings, and how she had 'kept a few things in a haphazard way (not in a special box), but also not knowing how, if, or when I should be getting rid of them'. She reflects on the 'different kind of dynamic to this part of the interview' which 'contrasted with the far less loaded dynamic when I am asking questions and she is spontaneously answering them, and it felt much deeper - that this is something where people really care about what they present to us, because it is also very meaningful to them?'

Recursive 'Workbook' Interviews

An iterative relationship between data generation and analysis is a feature of qualitative traditions such as grounded theory, involving a movement backward and forward between sampling and interpretation. In QLR, the demand to revisit research participants over time offers the potential for an approach where the communication of interpretations also becomes entangled in the generation of data. This approach to meaning making goes beyond attempts to secure participant validation for our interpretations, towards a recursive model of data generation, in which successive encounters are folded into a continuous research process – with consequences for ethical practice and the quality and depth of analyses.

In earlier QL research we had asked participants in a 10 year study to reflect on fragments of data as part of a film project called Young Lives. This experience showed us how new interpretations and accounts can be generated by revisiting fragments of data from the past. Inspired by these experiences we developed a 'workbook' for our fourth interviews with mothers, bringing together images and quotations from previous encounters to generate new discussion. The workbook invited participants to reflect explicitly on temporal processes as well as allowing us to share the emergent analytic narratives that our longitudinal perspective enabled. Participants responded to this process in different ways, as captured in researcher's field notes. For example one 'barely looked at the workbook and wasn't bothered much about her quotes. She seemed happier to answer questions sitting there with her baby on her lap most of the time'. Others were interested in what they had said in previous interviews and enjoyed the process of being 'reminded'. Sometimes women confirmed the importance of the topics selected, for example: 'when I outlined the headings at the start of the interview she said 'that's it! Those are the things that I think and worry about'.

Yet the process of reading back quotes from the past could be a 'strange' experience, or even a source of hilarity.

We understand the recursive workbook interviews as giving women a chance to narrate themselves over time, highlighting continuities ('yes I still think that') and change ('I certainly don't think that any more') as well as encountering dissonant combinations of the two. Here a researcher notes the ways in which one mother responded to the workbook:

'She is taken aback by data that captures her son at different developmental stages. Discussion turns to the temporal unboundedness of the child, always changing, escaping definition and description….. She complains of being unable to remember very much, and worries that they are not recording or documenting the child. Compulsion to live in the present in order to enjoy and respond to the child, means that they are unable to capture or account for change. [..] The research plays an important role within this, documenting the family'.

Revisiting mothers with fragments of talk collected over time constituted a powerful intervention. The revelation of change and continuity could be exhilarating, exciting and painful. Taking place at the end of a longitudinal study, the workbook helped us to 'wrap up' the research – marking the end of the project, condensing a complex data set and sharing and checking our insights with research subjects (Henderson *et al*. 2012). It was a powerful method and one that focused attention on temporal processes. Yet in privileging and reproducing self narratives it could also be understood as a disciplinary, presenting women with their own contradictions and incoherencies. This is an insight that has been noted in other QL studies and suggests that the method needs to be used with care, mediated by trusting relationships and ethical sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

Different methods privilege different temporal registers, which in turn reveal particular affective registers (McLeod and Thomson, 2009). The 'day in a life' method privileged the unfolding present of maternal work, including the moment to moment demands of a small child, emotional dynamics around food and the pursuit of separation. The object based interviews provoked memory in ways that gave rise to emotionally loaded narratives about the past, and allowed material that had been marginalised within the official study to erupt into the data. The recursive 'workbook' invited women into a reflexive conversation with their recent past, revealing something of the resilience and fragility of the narrated self in ways that could be variously comic, moving and unnerving.

All methods are potentially psycho-social, revealing the relationship between conscious accounts and less conscious dynamics, as well as between biographical projects and wider social processes. Longitudinal approaches generate increasingly complex representations of subjectivity, identity and social life. The multiplication and juxtaposition of moments and accounts allows the 'unsaid' to emerge within the research narrative. Sometimes this arises through the emotional experience of the researcher, sometimes it is evoked through the reactions of participants to objects and representations. As is evident from this discussion, we as researchers maintained responsibility for our own longitudinal cases and for processing the research encounters, their effects and affects. Our practice of keeping and using field notes as a matter of course, whatever the method being employed, can be understood as characteristic of an approach in which multiple methods are employed, yet all form part of a broader ethnographic approach which is profoundly psycho-social in its methods and focus.

Finally, by innovating methodologically we opened our research design to change. Experimenting with methods enabled us to discover ways to extend and deepen insights that were emergent from other data. We were also assisted by the existence of a large and robust data set that we explored systematically, in terms of cross sectional and longitudinal case study analysis. The evocative fragments generated by these new methods became part of the analytic process, providing us with emblematic episodes and insights that allow us to express the breadth and depth of our wider data set.

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RESEARCH TEAM CONTACT DETAILS