



Fifth Meeting of the Minimum Income Network

Thematic Discussion Paper

Lived Experiences, Policy Responses:

**The Role of Qualitative Longitudinal Research in
Evaluating Schemes to Alleviate Poverty**

Online, 21-22 April 2021

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

*Bren Neale, Emeritus Professor of Life course and Family Research
School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds UK.
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Unit EMPL C.1

Contact: Katalin Szatmari

E-mail: empl-unit-c1@ec.europa.eu

Web site: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/mlp>

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Table of Content

Acknowledgments¹

1	Summary.....	1
2	Introducing Qualitative Longitudinal Research	2
2.1	Generating Dynamic Evidence: Snapshots to Movies.....	3
2.2	Policy Processes	3
2.3	Complex Causality.....	4
2.4	Broadening the Evidence Base	5
2.5	Extensive QL studies/Re-studies.....	5
2.6	Network Projects/Qualitative Panel Studies.....	6
2.7	Mixed Longitudinal Methods.....	7
2.8	Qualitative Synthesis	7
3	Researching Lived Experiences and Policy Responses	8
4	Using QL studies to Evaluate MIP Schemes in the EU	17
5	Final Reflections.....	20
6	References	21

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1 Summary

This paper seeks to facilitate and inform Minimum Income Network discussions on monitoring and evaluating MIP (Minimum Income Protection) schemes in the EU. The particular focus is on Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) methodology and its potential contribution to a complementary, tiered suite of monitoring and evaluation tools, including administrative data, expert evidence, and scientific research data generated through large-scale national and international surveys (e.g. EU-SILC), as discussed at the last meeting (ICF report 2020).

MIP schemes are safety nets of last resort, targeting those facing or living in poverty. They are broadly defined here to include:

- The **financial benefit packages** that support low-income claimants (e.g. UK *Universal Credit*), with calls on governments to ensure adequate provision by aligning levels of support with evolving minimum income standards and reference budgets (Deeming 2020);
- **Access measures** to encourage and sustain take-up and ensure equitable inclusion;
- The **enabling schemes** that accompany and are commonly a condition of benefit receipt, including *labour market participation schemes* and the provision of *quality services* for recipients with complex needs (e.g. those with disabilities or in a situation of homelessness).

The discussion begins with an overview of QL methodology, its key features, and its capacity to generate dynamic evidence about how lives unfold in relation to policy processes. The second part of the paper gives a brief overview of QL studies, both government-commissioned and independently funded, that have tracked recipients through MIP schemes. These provide valuable insights into the dynamics of poverty and disadvantage, how complex causal processes shape lives, how MIP schemes are delivered on the ground, their short to medium-term impact, and their strengths and weaknesses in meeting the complex needs of recipients. The discussion illustrates some of the useful 'know-how' knowledge that QL methodology can generate to inform MIP policy and practice developments.

The third part of the paper suggests ways in which QL methodology may be harnessed as part of a broader suite of methods to monitor and evaluate MIP schemes in the EU, including their potential as collaborative design and navigational tools that can facilitate the refinement and development of MIP schemes (Neale 2021b).

The discussion suggests that generating in-depth, grounded (real-time, real-world) evidence on the dynamic operation and impact of MIP schemes, and the evolving experiences of those who engage with, or disengage from them, is vital to any robust evaluation of the schemes. The overarching principle guiding MIP provision is that 'everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits, ensuring a life in dignity at all stages of life, and effective access to enabling goods and services' (EU Commission, *European Pillar of Social Rights, Principle 14*, 2017). Yet there is sobering evidence on the persistently patchy, poorly accessed and under resourced provision of MIP schemes in EU Member States (Frazer and Marlier 2016; Cantillon et al 2019; van der Ende et al 2020), and growing pressures on the poverty safety net as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Deeming 2020; Malgesini 2020). This suggests an urgent need to secure more timely, targeted and grounded 'know-how' knowledge that can enhance the quality and accessibility of support for the most disadvantaged people in the EU.

2 Introducing Qualitative Longitudinal Research

Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research has developed rapidly over the past 20 years as part of a widespread 'processual' turn across the social sciences. Processual thinking is hardly new, but has gained momentum in a rapidly changing world that has made instability and insecurity a part of life for many people.

Events and processes are ... complex ... Slippery, indistinct, elusive, complex, diffuse, messy ... intuitive, sliding, unpredictable. ... The world is not a structure, something we can map with our social science charts. We might think of it instead as a maelstrom or a tide-rip ... filled with currents, eddies, flows, vortices, unpredictable changes, storms, and with moments of lull and calm. ... We begin to imagine what research methods might be if they were adapted to a world that included and knew itself as tide, flux and general unpredictability.
(Law 2004: 6-7)

QL research works with the basic insight that if the world is fluid, we need fluid modes of enquiry to investigate and understand it. Like all longitudinal studies, QL research seeks to shed light on dynamic processes, but it does so in distinctive ways. Using responsive and flexible designs, QL studies operate in **real-time** and mirror and trace **real-world** processes; they are typically in-depth, small scale and targeted to trace lives through particular processes. Key features of this methodology (drawn from Neale 2021, 2021b) are set out below:

- QL research uses panel data designs to follow the same individuals (e.g. service users, practitioners, and/or policy makers) prospectively, as lives and processes unfold. The aim is to discern change in the making. Typically, a panel of participants will be traced relatively intensively through frequent visits to the field, with the pattern of visits mirroring an unfolding process. This is finely grained *processual* enquiry, with flexible time scales and tempos that may operate over many months rather than many years.
- The method combines a prospective (forward looking) and retrospective (backward looking) lens. This enhances insights into causal processes. Gaining insights into people's unfolding biographies, their family, housing and employment histories, enhances our understanding of their journeys through time, how they have arrived at the present day and their aspirations for the future.
- Tempos and timeframes for gathering data (the number and frequency of visits to the field) are flexible and tailored to the focus of enquiry. At least two waves of fieldwork are needed to gain a processual understanding. The method is cumulative and responsive to the groups and processes under study; each wave of fieldwork informs the next. This gives QL enquiry a unique capacity to follow lives where they lead. This flexibility is central to the methodological rigour of QL research, ensuring that the research process is in tune with and able to capture real-world processes. The aim is to create a balance between flexibility and continuity, and between creativity and precision in the way projects are designed.
- Data are generated from a range of strategically chosen and targeted cases (purposive samples). The cases are representative of an appropriately defined range of experiences and circumstances (rather than attempting to be statistically representative of the wider population, see Rothman et al 2013 for the limitations of the latter approach). Insights are elicited through a mixture of in-depth, qualitative methods: life journey interviews, ethnographic (participant-observation) strategies, and participatory tools (life mapping techniques and written, audio or visual diaries). The aim is to discern how lives are lived and how they unfold, as well as how they are narrated.

- Analysis is case-based and processual (using process tracing and process mapping and combining case-depth, thematic-breadth and processual-reach). Evidence is most commonly presented through narratives, cross-case typologies of people's transitions and trajectories through particular policy landscapes, and emblematic case studies that include direct quotations from participants. This makes QL research come alive and 'speak' in ways that are accessible and engaging for policy makers (Millar 2020).

2.1 Generating Dynamic Evidence: Snapshots to Movies

Longitudinal enquiry is commonly said to turn a 'snap-shot' of the social world into a 'movie' (Leisering and Walker 1998), although there is more than one kind of movie. Large scale longitudinal studies create **epic movies**. They tend to ask the same questions of a panel at regular intervals (yearly/five-yearly), although new questions may be introduced at different waves. The overall effect is to create a sequence of snapshots in time, which measure chronological change: **what** changes, for whom, the **direction/extent** of change, **where, when,** and **how often** change occurs. This produces a valuable surface picture of social change. But there are drawbacks:

While demographic surveys show the magnitude and distribution of [migration] in entire populations ... only individual or family histories can reveal why one individual moves and another stays put. (Giele 2009: 236)

Although Quantitative Longitudinal research ... provides detailed information about individuals, what is lost ... are the narratives that people tell about their own lives ... without this element there is a danger that people are merely seen as making decisions and acting within a pre-defined and structurally determined field of social relations, rather than contributing to the maintenance and metamorphosis of [society]. (Elliott 2005: 131)

QL research, in contrast, produces an intimate or 'up-close-and personal' movie, one that works with narratives and meanings, rather than numbers and measurements. Researchers 'walk alongside' as people's lives unfold, discerning how change is created, negotiated, lived and experienced (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). It is founded on a participatory ethos: research is conducted *with* participants rather than *on* them, and they are accorded the status of *experts by experience* (Neale and Davies 2015b). Agency (the capacity to act, to interact and to shape one's life and the lives of others) and subjectivity (the meaning that events and processes hold for those who experience them) are taken seriously as rich sources of knowledge and insight. They are just as important for our verifications of the social world as any objectively defined fact or process.

2.2 Policy Processes

QL methods are perfectly suited to the study of policy processes. Understanding the causes and consequences of change is vital in policy contexts where people are required or encouraged to change their practices, or need to adapt to changing circumstances or environments, or to develop their knowledge or learn new skills. They are no less vital where the effects of policy interventions need to be monitored and evaluated (Corden and Millar 2007).

QL methodology is commonly used to track, monitor and evaluate a broad range of policy interventions: in health and education, gerontology, criminology, migration and housing, as well as in social policy and welfare (Neale 2021). The design is commonly used in European settings, for example in studies of youth and life course transitions, employment journeys, migration trajectories and social remittances, environmental change, and support for older people (du Bois-Reymond et al 2001; Gerrits 2008; Bidart 2012, 2019; Schlimbach 2015; Grabowska et al 2016; Krzyżowski 2016; Pleschberger et al 2019, Wöhrer et al 2020; Bernardi and Sanchez 2021). Some studies assemble multi-national teams to generate comparative evidence across varied countries of the EU (e.g. Krings et al 2013, Grunow and Evertsson 2019;

Tarrant 2020). On a related note, there is an established international body of process organisational research, including EU-based studies, which utilises QL methodology (Huber and Van de Ven 1995; Hassett and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2013; Langley and Tsoukas 2017). This body of evidence has potential value in uncovering the organisational aspects of policy interventions, and how they evolve over time. Wherever processes are under investigation in real-world settings, QL research can play a valuable role in their illumination.

As part of the processual turn noted above, there has been a significant growth in research that seeks to shed light on poverty dynamics (Leisering and Walker 1998). QL research is central to these developments. Part of the rationale is that QL studies are able to capture changes in the delivery of a programme over time and to discern how individual lives are dynamically intertwined with unfolding policy processes. This is a key requirement for a qualitative evaluation. Indeed, it is possible to discern the interplay between four interlocking domains of change across the micro-macro plane (Lewis 2007):

- The unfolding lives of people living in hardship (recipients);
- The schemes/services received and how they are delivered (implementers);
- The policy processes which shape and reshape services (designers; analysts);
- Structural transformations that drive policy (from government welfare reforms, to evolving perceptions of social issues, e.g. relating to disability, homelessness or unemployment) (policy drivers/makers).

While all four domains are important to an understanding of policy processes, it is the relationship between the first two domains which is most critical for investigating the effectiveness of MIP schemes, and their impact on individuals with low income levels. Drawing on evidence from claimants and service providers, as well as policy designers, makes for a rich understanding of the overall process and operation of MIP schemes from the perspectives of different stakeholders.

But an equally compelling reason for using QL methods is that 'it is impossible for a snapshot approach to provide clear evidence about causal links, and how impacts of a programme unfold over time' (Molloy et al 2002: 7). A QL design enables researchers to chart the fluid journeys of the participants, the peaks and troughs of their experiences and, most importantly, to provide explanations for these processes: 'only qualitative studies can explore in sufficient depth the context in which policies are received, enabling researchers to untangle the complex web of factors [individual, interpersonal, social, structural] which can impact on programme delivery and outcomes' (Molloy et al 2002: 19).

2.3 Complex Causality

It is worth teasing out a little more how causality is understood in QL enquiry (Neale 2021b). Large statistical studies tend to work with simple, linear models of causality, based on the inferential logic that if A is typically followed by B, then A must cause B. However, measuring change through measurement scales and multi-variate models typically detaches data from their real-world contexts, and does not allow for a holistic or depth understanding of lived experiences or subjective understandings of causal processes. QL research works with complex, non-linear understandings of causality (Neale 2021b). Complex causality is:

- **Fluid:** non-linear, recursive, flowing in many directions, unpredictable;
- **Multiple:** a complex web of interacting elements, operating across different scales of the social fabric;
- **Relational:** residing in social actions, interactions and reactions, infused with ethical sensibilities, subjectivities and affective states: the presence or absence

of dignity, respect, trust, security, confidence, hope, stigma and shame (Walker et al 2013; Dall and Danneris 2019).

Working with complex causality opens up new thinking about **what works?** for policy and for professional practice (Donmoyer 2012). 'What works?' requires a prior understanding of **how things work** (an essentially processual question) and, in relational terms, **what matters** to people, along with insights into **what helps** them and what makes a difference to their lives (Neale 2021b). Producing typologies of trajectories across a sample can give insights into how people manage daily hardships and how they rationalise their choices. It can uncover the mechanisms that shape upward or downward trajectories; the trigger and tipping points for change; how lives converge or diverge over time; why some are doing well and others badly; who is 'stuck', regressing or progressing; why some engage, others disengage, and why yet others fail to engage at all; what these patterns mean for people's welfare and social citizenship; and why these variations arise. This produces a more grounded and finely grained understanding of the causes and consequences of change, offering useful know-how knowledge for policy makers, designers and implementers.

2.4 Broadening the Evidence Base

While QL research is typically small-scale and situated, there are varied ways of creating a broader and more robust evidence base. Building greater breadth or historical reach allows for qualitative generalisations to be made, a form of generalisation that does not compromise on the depth and explanatory power of QL enquiry. Various hybrid designs, that create 'intimate epics' are set out here. The strategies may be used separately or in combination to create a broader vision.

2.5 Extensive QL studies/Re-studies

Returning to the field over the longer-term enables researchers to extend the longitudinal reach of an intensive study. This generates important insights into longer term outcomes, how trajectories unfold over the life course, and how biographical and historical processes intersect.

The QL **Family-Work** project explored the experiences of lone mothers and their children over time. The study was initially conducted through three waves of in-depth interviews that tracked the families over a four to five-year period (Ridge and Millar 2008; 2011; Millar and Ridge 2013). The baseline was the point at which the mothers left Income Support to take up paid employment. The prospective data was complemented with retrospective data on the employment histories of the mothers, and data on their future aspirations, for example, for housing, security, and pensions. By exploring the complex dynamics of work, benefits and family lives over time, and the impact of employment on family life and living standards, the researchers gained insights into the challenges of sustaining low-income employment, and of achieving income security over time. A follow up study, conducted a decade later (Millar and Ridge 2017; Millar and Ridge 2020; Millar 2020) yielded new insights into the unfolding trajectories of the families, and enabled the researchers to uncover the significant impact of income insecurity on the longer-term fortunes of lone parent families:

By the time of the final round it was continuity rather than change that was the most striking. The women had mainly stayed in work But many were still on wages at, or not much above the minimum wage. This had major implications for their futures and their capacity to help and support their children into adulthood. There is often limited capacity to effect a significant and lasting improvement in income and material circumstances over longer periods of time. For the children, the impact of financial insecurity could cast long shadows. (Millar 2020: 3, 5)

Further examples of extensive studies include Laub and Sampson's (2003) classic study of delinquent boys in the USA, who were followed up at the age of 70, and Williamson's longitudinal ethnography of the Milltown Boys, a group of impoverished teenagers in Wales, who were followed through three phases of fieldwork spanning 50 years (Williamson 2004; 2021).

2.6 Network Projects/Qualitative Panel Studies

These studies work with larger and more stratified samples, across a range of settings, over more extensive time frames, and with larger teams or networks of researchers.

For the **Welfare Conditionality** Study (Dwyer, Economic and Social Research Council, henceforth ESRC, 2013-18) a collaborative network of research teams in the UK followed the fortunes of 9 sub-samples of benefit recipients (total 480 participants) over three waves of fieldwork to discern the impact of welfare conditionality and sanctions on their lives: job-seekers, lone parents, social housing tenants, people with disabilities, offenders/ex-offenders, migrants, people in a situation of homelessness, those subject to anti-social behaviour and family interventions, and those transferring onto Universal credit. The study also carried out one-off interviews with 52 policy stakeholders, and 27 focus groups with service providers (Dwyer 2018) (see below for findings).

The national level *Timescapes Initiative* (Neale, ESRC 2007-12) was also built on a network model. It brought together seven empirical projects that explored the changing lives of over 400 families across the generations, including samples of low-income grandparents (Emmel and Hughes 2010, 2011, Hughes and Emmel 2012), and young fathers (Neale 2016; Neale and Davies 2015a, b, 2016; www.followingfathers.leeds.ac.uk). The Timescapes initiative also established a specialist archive for the preservation, sharing and re-use of QL legacy data; and ran a secondary analysis project to showcase re-use of the data (Winterton and Irwin 2012) (www.timescapes-archive.Leeds.ac.uk).

These network studies can target a broader, more comprehensive and strategically chosen range of cases across a larger sample. One of the challenges of creating a broader evidence base is to ensure harmonisation of data across the projects to enable connections and comparisons across cases and through time. Suites of common questions and continuity questions provide useful *through lines* in the data to address this requirement, while still allowing for data on the particularities of individual journeys.

2.7 Mixed Longitudinal Methods

While QL studies have independent value in their own right, they are increasingly nested within or otherwise linked to larger-scale longitudinal studies. This creates valuable iteration between complementary scales of enquiry, with harmonisation of samples, research questions and data collection to aid analysis.

Welfare Reform and Larger Families (Patrick, Reeves, Stewart and the *Child Poverty Action Group* (CPAG) www.welfarereform.largerfamilies.org.uk)

This new Nuffield-funded study is using a mixed longitudinal design to investigate how recent UK welfare reforms are impacting on larger families. The focus is on the household benefits cap, which limits the benefits households can receive, and the two-child limit, which restricts eligibility for child benefits to the first two children in a household. The rule changes are set to increase poverty for larger families, with disproportionate effects for single-parent households and for religious and ethnic groups where larger families are more commonly found. The reforms have explicitly severed the long-standing link between assessed needs and benefit entitlements in the British welfare system. The study will also examine how these reforms interact with the introduction of Universal Credit.

Large-scale data from the *Labour Force Survey*, *Family Resources Survey*, the *British Household Panel Study* and *Understanding Society* are being used to create a profile of larger families, to document the risk and depth of poverty found among them, their geographic, social and ethnic characteristics, and how these profiles are changing over time. The linked QL study is being carried out with primary care givers drawn from a targeted sample of 44 families, located in two varied settings in the UK (London and Bradford). Three waves of interviews conducted over 18 months will generate early evidence of changing family practices and develop a dynamic picture. People's expectations of how their families will manage in future will be mapped onto evidence about what actually happens for them as time passes. The two scales of enquiry will enable the larger picture to be grounded in the lived experiences of the qualitative panel members.

In a nested study, a sub-sample of participants from a large panel can be drawn into a QL panel and followed more intensively over time (e.g. Wenger's 1999 study of the vulnerabilities and support needs of older people in rural Wales; Laub and Sampson's (2003) study of criminal careers over the life course; and evaluations of the *Pathways to Work/ Work Programme* schemes, see below). Anomalies and puzzles in the large-scale dataset can be explored in-depth through the qualitative panel, and insights fed back into the next wave of the larger study. Alternatively, separate samples may be recruited and linked through data harmonisation. This creates complementary data for analysis. For example, Burton et al's (2009) five-year longitudinal ethnography of 256 low-income families, which explored the effects of US welfare reforms, was linked to a large-scale longitudinal survey of 2,402 fragile families across three states (see also Morrow 2013, Morrow and Crivello 2015, for a global study of child poverty across three continents).

2.8 Qualitative Synthesis

A broader evidence base can also be created by building a mosaic of evidence through a synthesis of existing data and research findings. In this way, qualitative generalisations can be made across different contexts and settings of change. Causality can be established here in new ways: through the elaboration and synthesis of multiple empirical examples, drawn from a strategically chosen range of cases. Where a meta-analysis works with strictly **comparable** statistical data, a qualitative synthesis weaves **complementary** forms of data and evidence, (qualitative/quantitative, local/global, historical/contemporary, 'grey' literature, expert/lay

knowledge) into a composite whole. With the accumulation of real-world data and evidence the picture is continually refined. Insights into patterns and processes of change are given added credence through the extent, variety and weight of the empirical evidence (Halford and Savage 2017).

This mosaic approach offers a more holistic understanding that moves away from 'thin' accounts of 'what works' (Neale 2021; Pawson 2006). It has been used recently in the analysis of welfare conditionality (Wright and Patrick 2019) energy poverty (Middlemiss et al 2019), and the lives of men living in hardship (Tarrant and Hughes 2019). It is also illustrated, in a very modest way, in the brief overview provided in Section 3 (below), which discerns patterns of complex causality across a small number of studies, and begins to chart historical changes in the ethos and operation of MIP schemes.

There is huge scope to roll out this methodology across a larger range of studies and settings. The capacity for qualitative synthesis and evidence building has been enhanced in recent years through the availability of legacy datasets for sharing and re-use. This development is underpinned by a growing ethos of data preservation and sharing, and the growth in qualitative data archiving in Europe.²

3 Researching Lived Experiences and Policy Responses

The last twenty years has seen the development of a rich body of QL research on the dynamics of low income lives, and the operation and effectiveness of MIP schemes.³ Much of this development has been UK based.⁴ Part of the impetus for this growth came from a five-year QL study of the living standards of 30 unemployed families (Ritchie 1990), which was funded by the Department of Social Security (subsequently the DWP – Department for Work and Pensions).

This led to the commissioning of a suite of QL evaluations of New Labour's *New Deal for Young People* (Legard et al 1998, 1999; O'Connor et al 1999; O'Connor et al 2000; Woodfield et al 1999; 2000). Based on a Swedish workfare model, the *New Deal* was designed to run over three six-month phases (total 18 months). The initial **Gateway** phase offered clients a Personal Advisor who could provide personalised and holistic support, offering advice, information, referrals to other agencies, and help with job-search, careers advice and preparations for the Options phase. The **Options** phase opened up varied routes for the client to follow, including full time education and training, subsidized employment, and voluntary sector work with an element of education and training. If, on completion of an option, the client had yet to find employment, they transferred onto a **Follow Through** phase, which provided one to one employment advice and guidance from their PA. This brought a soft form of conditionality to the provision of state benefits in the UK.

The evaluations sought to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the *New Deal* scheme in addressing claimant's needs and in meeting policy objectives. Each study singled out a particular aspect of the scheme for focused attention. Finely grained evidence was generated on how the schemes unfolded, how they were delivered on the ground (e.g. to what extent they were tailored and responsive to individual need);

² WISDOM (Austria); SDA/MEDARD Archive (Czech Republic); DDA (Denmark); FSD (Finland); beQuali (France); Qualiservice (Bremen, Germany); Voices of the 20th Century Archive (Hungary); IQDA (Ireland); LiDA (Lithuania); AJD (Poland); UK Data Archive and The Timescapes QL Data Archive (UK).

³ These studies build on a number of classic QL studies of the dynamics of poverty set in disadvantaged communities, which were carried out in earlier decades of the 20th century (Pember Reeves 1913, which used budget diaries to chart income, expenditure and changes in family fortunes over time; also Jahoda et al 1932; Coffield et al 1980).

⁴ In the UK there is a strong tradition of using QL methodology to explore poverty dynamics, and to evaluate MIP schemes with government funding. The review provided here draws primarily on the UK tradition, but a more focused literature review may uncover further examples across EU states.

the journeys of claimants through the schemes, how they were received and experienced, how far support was sustained through time, and how or why individuals remained engaged or became disengaged (see Molloy et al 2002 for more details). Up to three waves of interviews were carried out with the young people, which were timed to coincide with the three phases of the New Deal programme.

The QL evaluations were not the sole source of evidence. The studies ran alongside broader surveys that measured snap-shot changes in attitudes and experiences, as well as national panel studies that yield important insights on income levels and living conditions across households. These illuminate who experiences what kind of hardship over what spells of time (Leisering and Walker 1998). But the QL components were designed specifically to address questions such as '*what works well?*' and '*why?*', thereby providing valuable evidence for programme implementers and policy makers. An example of dynamic, case study evidence is set out below.

New Deal Scheme Evaluation: Case Study Evidence

Helen took a place on the New Deal for Young People in 1998 at the age of 17. Her first interview in October of that year established that she had been homeless for two years, mixing with a 'bad crowd' and taking drugs. She was suffering from depression, had low confidence and little motivation to work. She had limited work experience and no qualifications. However, two weeks into joining the scheme, she had been given help with her accommodation and offered counselling to support her through her depression. Although she was unclear about her employment aims, she had begun to talk about potential job and training opportunities with her Personal Advisor. She was very positive about joining the programme, and that she was being offered help. For the first time since leaving school, she said she 'felt she was getting somewhere'.

Researchers returned to visit Helen six months later, timed to coincide with her movement onto the Options phase of the New Deal scheme. By this time she had begun an outdoor pursuits training course. Her confidence and skills had increased immensely, and she was pleased to report that she had gained a qualification in outdoor pursuits and had decided that she would like to develop a career in this field. A further six months on, Helen was visited again for the final stage of the evaluation. She revealed that she had left the course, without completing it, not long after her second interview. Her reasons related to her partner's departure from the course. He had been asked to leave and she had decided to leave with him, a decision she now regretted. She relocated with her partner, who had begun to use drugs again. This led to a further bout of depression for Helen. Her housing situation had become unstable, and her confidence had diminished again. Despite these problems Helen had made several important decisions since her departure from the New Deal scheme. She had recently left her partner, and moved back to her family home, where she found a part time cleaning job. She was still committed to a career in outdoor pursuits, and intended to start voluntary work at a local outdoor pursuits centre, to build up her experience and references. Her personal confidence continued to be low, but overall she felt that her time on the New Deal scheme has helped her to value her own skills and find a route to boosting her confidence in the future (source: Molloy et al 2002: 9-10).

As Molloy et al (2002: 10) note, even the most skilfully designed quantitative questionnaire would have been unable to elicit the complex mix of factors that led Helen to leave the scheme, or its longer term and more indirect effect on her subsequent decisions and actions. The evidence does not produce a blunt measure of outcomes, but increases our understanding of why individuals or groups experience different outcomes or go down different paths. It also reveals the circuitous, non-linear journeys of claimants as they seek employment and financial security, and the more protracted, non-linear tempos that are likely to be involved in supporting vulnerable clients such as Helen.

In the first decade of the 21st century several publications on QL methodology, including the Molloy et al (2002) report for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and a themed section of the journal *Social Policy and Society* (2007), consolidated the credentials of this methodology, and led to a rapid increase in its use (Molloy et al 2002; Thomson et al 2003; Corden and Millar eds 2007; Millar 2007; Lewis 2007). At this time, QL studies were regularly commissioned by the DWP to evaluate a variety of MIP schemes and services, or particular issues related to this provision, such as accessibility, or the needs of particular groups of claimants. These were often carried out in tandem with complementary forms of statistical studies. Examples include:

- The New Deal for Long-term Unemployed People (Molloy and Ritchie 2000);
- The New Deal for Disabled People (Corden et al 2003; Lewis et al 2005; Stafford et al 2007; Stafford 2012);
- One Stop Shops (The ONE programme) (Kelleher et al 2002);
- Earnings Top Ups for Low Income Workers (Vincent et al 2001);
- Basic Skills Training (ECOTEC 2003; Clark and Fox 2012)
- Incapacity Benefit Reforms as part of the Pathways to Work Pilot Scheme (Corden et al 2005; Corden and Nice 2006a; b; Corden and Nice 2007);
- Job Retention and Rehabilitation Pilot Scheme (Farrell et al 2006; Lewis 2007);
- The DWP Work Programme (Meager et al 2014).

These studies use intensive designs, conducted through frequent field visits over several months. Different cohorts of service users are commonly recruited and followed sequentially or at staggered times to gauge the impact of evolving service delivery, alongside changes in individual biographies (Corden and Nice 2007; Neale 2021). These early studies were often led by centres of excellence in evaluation research, with expertise in QL methodology (e.g. the *Social Policy Research Unit* (University of York), and two independent social research organisations, *NATCEN National Centre for Social Research*, London; and *ECORYS* (formerly ECOTEC, Rotterdam and London).

The evaluation of the *New Deal for Disabled People* (Corden et al 2003; Lewis et al 2005; Stafford et al 2007; Stafford 2012), carried out between 2001 and 2006, is an example of a comprehensive national evaluation that was government funded, but independently carried out by a consortium of researchers. The scheme was designed to help people with health conditions and disabilities move off benefits and into sustainable employment. As a *welfare-to-work* programme it had several notable features: it was voluntary for the clients; provision was contracted out to public, private or voluntary sector providers; and the providers (known as job brokers) were given an open remit to assist disabled people in flexible ways (Stafford 2012).

The researchers utilised a range of methods, including surveys of the eligible populations, employers, job brokers and scheme recipients, and a QL tracking study that explored the organisation, operation and impact of the service from the perspective of service users and providers. Two waves of fieldwork were conducted across 15 areas of the UK (Corden et al 2003 and Lewis et al 2007). In addition, survey and administrative data were used in the impact and cost-benefit analysis of the new scheme, drawing on the DWP's administrative NDDP evaluation database (Stafford 2011). Benefit and employment outcomes for recipients of the scheme were compared with outcomes for disabled people who were not part of the scheme. A key feature of the design was that many of the data collection components had a longitudinal dimension that enabled an understanding of changes as they evolved, including changes in the delivery of the scheme, and the introduction of government

targets that job brokers were encouraged to meet in getting people into work (Stafford 2011; 2012).

Alongside the government-funded evaluations outlined above, UK-based QL studies of poverty dynamics, which trace lived experiences of poverty in relation to policy responses, have continued to flourish, with independent funding from the ESRC (UKRI), the Joseph Rowntree and Nuffield Foundations, and from charities such as the Children's Society and SCOPE (Disability Equality). Some of these studies follow in the tradition of the classic community studies of the 20th century (see footnote 3). The larger scale *Family Futures* project, for example, set in four low income communities in varied parts of the UK, used a repeat cross-sectional design to visit 200 UK families on a yearly basis from 1999 to 2006 (Power et al 2011; see also Tunstall and Coulter 2006). But most QL studies take a more focused approach, targeting specific groups of recipients, many in receipt of specialist support, for more intensive tracking over time. These include:

- *Lone mothers/children* (Ridge and Millar 2008; 2011, Millar and Ridge 2017, 2020; Patrick 2017; Mahoney et al 2017);
- *Care leavers* (Cashmore and Paxman 2007);
- *Parents with large families* (Patrick et al, see above);
- *Young fathers* (Neale and Davies 2015; 2016);
- *Job seekers/Young job seekers* (Patrick 2017; Stewart and Wright 2018),
- *People with disabilities* (Patrick 2017; McNeill et al 2017; Hastwell and Moss 2019);
- *Ethnic Minority outreach support* (Barnes et al 2005)
- *Vulnerable people with mental health impairments* (Dwyer et al 2019; Danneris 2019)
- *Offenders/ex-offenders* (Farrall et al 2014; Neale and Ladlow 2015; Ladlow and Neale 2016; Batty and Fletcher 2018; Batty 2020; also Laub and Sampson 2003, a study based in the US)
- *Military veterans* (Scullion et al 2021)
- *Social housing tenants* (Fitzpatrick and Watts 2018)
- *Homeless/resettled people* (Dant and Deacon 1989; Vincent et al 1995; Cloke et al 2003; Hodgetts et al 2011; Williamson et al 2014; Cameron et al 2016, Davidson et al 2021)

The finely grained and grounded nature of QL research facilitates a targeted approach to sampling people living on low-incomes, including those with experiences shaped by gender, generation, ethnicity and locality. This approach ensures the inclusion of marginalised populations, who commonly fall under the radar of larger longitudinal surveys, and about whom there are significant gaps in knowledge. Such populations are sometimes labelled (pejoratively) as 'hard to reach', although the research evidence turns this on its head to suggest that services and support are hard to access (Neale 2016). QL methodology affords an opportunity to gain a more holistic understanding of the circumstances of such groups, their lived experiences of vulnerability and disadvantage, and the distinctive tenor of their lives.

Whether such studies are commissioned directly by policy makers or conducted independently, they commonly have an evaluative focus; they are likely to assess the worth or value of one or more MIP schemes and to monitor and gauge their impact over time, particularly the impact on recipients. The longitudinal design is eminently suitable to a monitoring function, providing a steady flow of information about how a scheme is being delivered and received over time, which provides the necessary

evidence base upon which the value and effectiveness of a scheme can be gauged. Even when such evaluations are conducted 'at a distance', they commonly involve collaborations with policy and/or practice partners, drawn from the voluntary and/or statutory sectors, and maintain a practical focus on monitoring the effectiveness of poverty reduction schemes and related support services.

Selected examples of QL studies and the dynamic insights generated are set out below.

Credit and Debt, Biographical Disruptions and Day to Day Survival

Dearden et al (2010) carried out a QL study of credit and debt in low-income families, conducted through regular visits to 60 families over the space of a year. They found that problematic debt was most often due to a gradual accumulation of circumstances over time, followed by tipping points (the arrival of a bill, or Christmas, or a broken boiler), that would tip people into acting rashly and running up debts (particularly arrears on utilities and rent). People's levels of income were inadequate to offset their debt or to allow any kind of saving. Churning in and out of low paid work, delays in the processing of benefit payments, the easy availability of credit cards, harsh creditor practices, and instalment buying could disrupt attempts to budget sensibly. Longer term strategic thinking about budgets and spending, a capacity to plan and save for the future, was not possible or achievable for these individuals. Instead, an overriding pre-occupation with survival in the here-and-now could lead to a loss of care and concern for the past (burning bridges), and for the future (risky behaviour, a lack of aspiration, the loss of hope). The study also reveals how over-indebtedness can lead to deteriorating mental health over time, and engender a sense of **liminality** (time-out-of-time, betwixt and between) that places people on the margins of 'normal' life (Neale 2021). The researchers identified sustained, tailored and impartial money advice as the most effective means to support people in managing their finances over time.

More broadly, services and schemes to support people living in poverty are more likely to be effective where they understand and can work with the distinctive tenor of low-income lives. In a range of QL studies, researchers have traced the lives of people living through challenging biographical disruptions (bereavement, chronic or terminal illness, forced relocation or migration, entrenched poverty, addiction, survival crime and 'doing time' in prison, job loss/long-term unemployment, and homelessness). Such studies commonly uncover the distinctive 'here and now' tenor of lives marked by hardship, and the sheer hard work that people face every day in simply keeping afloat, the overwhelming preoccupation with securing affordable food, clothing and shelter, and a sense of stigma and shame that constrains community participation, or engagement in leisure pursuits. It often takes high levels of commitment and ingenuity to get through each day.

Studies highlight the discontinuities that may arise between disrupted lives and mainstream practices and experiences, and how people manage, re-align or reconcile values and practices that are increasingly at odds with orthodox pathways and practices (Neale 2021). For people undergoing such experiences, time may seem to shrink, creating a sense of disorientation or dislocation from the mainstream. People commonly talk of 'taking each day as it comes' or 'living in the moment' (Neale 2021: 89). Living 'out of time' means shortened time horizons, which can make future planning and organisation impossible and lead to risky practices.

These patterns of living can take their toll over time and lead to a marked deterioration in the quality of daily life (Ridge and Millar 2008; Dearden et al 2010; Patrick 2017). Lifting people out of entrenched poverty, with its associated impact on social identities and mental health, can be particularly difficult, suggesting the need for early interventions where possible.

Work Programmes

The relational and fluid elements of complex causality have been explored in a **two-year QL study of a Danish welfare-to-work programme and its impact on vulnerable clients** (Danneris 2018; Danneris and Caswell 2019; Dall and Danneris 2019). The scheme is based on *Active Labour Market Policies* (ALMP), which reflect a hardening in welfare conditionality and sanctions since the days of the New Deal scheme (outlined above). The researchers followed the clients' journeys through the programme, documenting how it was delivered 'on the ground', and discerning its effects, including the mental health effects on vulnerable claimants. The researchers developed a typology of client trajectories: progressing, deteriorating, stagnating and derailing (which, in some cases, included suicide or attempted suicide). These different journeys were fluid and unpredictable (rather than linear or straightforward), marked by fits and starts, zigzag paths between different trajectories, and recurring spirals of hope and despair (Danneris and Caswell 2019). It was not possible to predict when a client might enter into a downward spiral, or reach a tipping point into derailment. But these patterns were most often linked to the punitive sanctions of the programme, or the 'quick fix', 'one-size-fits-all' nature of the work placements, which were commonly tenuous, unsuitable, unsustainable and demoralising (Dall and Danneris 2019). The authors also tease out the intertwining of individual and structural factors in these unfolding processes, showing how clients and service providers may be pushed down particular streams by external forces beyond their control.

Retrospective evidence on what led to sustained employment for these clients revealed that programme strategies (structured activities, a rule-bound system and sanctions to enforce compliance) were less effective than the empathetic, relational elements that some practitioners managed to build into the programme: sustained and flexible support, and tailored, responsive provision based on the values of respect, encouragement, and a sense of partnership in a collaborative project (Danneris and Caswell 2019). Similar findings on relational causality have been reported in a range of QL studies that explore the lived experiences of service users (Ridge and Millar 2011; Neale and Davies 2015a; Patrick 2017; Dwyer 2018; Dwyer et al 1919; Ferguson et al 2020).

Re-Settling People in a Situation of Homelessness

QL evaluations of resettlement schemes (both statutory and voluntary) for people in a situation of homelessness, have provided striking accounts of the daily lives and cultures of rough sleepers, and vital evidence on the protracted and circuitous routes that they take into re-settlement, and what happens in the aftermath (Dant and Deacon 1989; Vincent et al 1995; Cloke et al 2003; Hodgetts et al 2011). The distinctive experiences of homeless women over time have also been elicited (Williamson et al 2014; Cameron et al 2016). The studies use a range of designs and data collection methods, including photo diaries, walking interviews, participant observation, and harmonisation with larger survey data. Hodgetts et al (2011) used powerful visual diaries, constructed through walking interviews over a 12 month period. The diaries showed the street scenes and hidden places where people gathered, along with their transitions into a resettlement scheme, and (in the majority of cases) their journeys back onto the streets again. The diaries give vivid insights into the entrenched homeless identities of the participants, their attachment to the street communities where they felt they belonged, and the reasons why a well-meaning resettlement scheme was liable to fail.

In more recent QL evaluations of voluntary sector resettlement schemes in Scotland (Davidson et al 2021), service users were interviewed and their paths charted every six months over a 2 to 3 year period. The basic ethos of provision in these newer schemes is to support rough sleepers through a long and measured journey through several stages of re-settlement. One scheme starts with an entry point: a drop-in centre providing a range of basic services (washing and laundry facilities, computer access, and storage for belongings). This is followed by re-settlement into a supported housing scheme, followed by eventual relocation to independent living.

Taken together, these studies show that the success or otherwise of these resettlement schemes relies on a recognition of the **complex causal processes (multiple, fluid and relational)** that shape the journeys of rough sleepers. Firstly, tackling homelessness, particularly entrenched, long-term homelessness, must take into account a *multitude of factors* that go beyond the provision of simple shelter. These include the provision of companionship and social contacts (e.g. shared meals), opportunities for useful and sociable occupations (e.g. community gardening or cookery schemes); basic housing facilities such as privacy; and the provision of sustained, non-judgemental professional support. Holistic support is commonly needed, tailored to individual needs (e.g. to tackle addiction problems, health issues, lack of family contact, and the need for skills training and employment – see the Helen case study, above).

Secondly the journeys of rough sleepers are fluid and circuitous, not linear and straightforward. They are lengthy, arduous, and unfold through fits and starts, detours, rehearsals, and steps backward as well as forward in time. Schemes are more likely to be effective if they allow for fluid causality, and enable people to undertake their journeys at their own pace, in their own time, and on their own terms (Davidson et al 2021). Thirdly, schemes need to take relational causality into account: to provide high quality, sustained support that remains in place beyond the time that people arrive into a re-settlement scheme. The journeys themselves are emotional and interactive, as well as practical, involving the forging of new identities, and the development of trust with key workers. Davidson et al (2021) report it could take a key worker months of painstaking and gentle persistence to build such trust. The complex causal processes documented in these studies enable fresh understandings of longer term outcomes for rough sleepers, why they engage with or disengage from re-settlement schemes, and the factors that enable or constrain the schemes in meeting their objectives.

Universal Credit (UK)

Universal Credit (UC) is a major change in the UK's social security system, with the roll out due to be completed by 2024. It will affect around 8 million households by replacing six existing means-tested benefits and tax credits with a single monthly payment. It aims to simplify working age benefits, ease the transition between benefits and paid work; improve work incentives, provide employers with flexible workers, reduce fraud and error, and prevent poverty. A three-year ESRC funded QL study of universal credit (Millar and Bennett) is exploring the impact of the scheme on couples. Evidence from the first wave indicates that it is far from the simple, comprehensible, straightforward and personal benefit that it claims to be (Griffiths et al 2020). Conditionality and sanctions have increased under this scheme, to the detriment of a wider range of claimants, including couples and low-paid, in-work claimants (described further below).

Thus far, the idea that people will be consistently better off under this scheme is not borne out by the evidence from claimants. It seems to have reduced the levels of benefits, which are not calculated in relation to any minimum income standards for the UK, with concerns that it is leading to higher levels of poverty and debt (Wright and Dwyer 2020). The removal of tax credits, an in-work benefit based on the model of the '*willing worker*' is an unfortunate effect of the new scheme, for it degrades the status of low-income workers (Wright and Dwyer 2020). The operation of the scheme (monthly payments, an initial five week wait until benefits kick in, and a complex means-testing formula, calculated monthly) leaves people unsure about the levels of benefits they will receive each month, which creates financial insecurity for households. Discrepancies have also been found between UC entitlement and the actual amounts paid, once deductions are made for benefit and tax credits overpayments. The QL couples study has found that even couples with earnings at the upper ends of the eligibility for UC were struggling to manage their household finances month by month. Where UC is the sole source of income in a household, the financial pressures are all the greater (Griffiths et al 2020).

The longitudinal picture for couples will become clearer once the second wave of fieldwork for this study is analysed, but there already seem to be problems with both the principles of the scheme and its operation. It is a scheme that is 'too far removed from the realities of life on a low income' (Millar and Bennett 2017: 179), and is failing to meet some of the basic principles for the adequacy of MIP schemes:

- Providing enough to live on (based on minimum income standards) and meeting additional costs where needed (e.g. relating to disability or children);
- Treating claimants with dignity, respect, trust and encouraging their own choices;
- Providing rights and entitlements as part of a public service model of social security;
- Providing a system that is clear, user friendly, and accessible to all.

Marx (2019) notes that this scheme has been acknowledged by DWP to have the lowest level of claimant satisfaction of any welfare benefit in the UK. The online nature of the scheme takes no account of the one in six claimants who have no internet access, and who have to use libraries, cafes or job centres to apply for or update their claims. In sum, 'the problem seems to be that people's lives are far more complex than neat work incentive graphs suggest' (Marx 2019: 12 Trlifajová and Hurrell 2019).

Welfare Conditionality and Sanctions

Over the past twenty years, conditionality and sanctions attached to MIP schemes have intensified in the UK, and have been extended to a wider range of groups, including people with disabilities, lone parents with pre-school age children and in-work claimants on universal credit (Watts and Fitzpatrick 2018). A hard form of conditionality appears to have replaced the soft form evident in the *New Deal* Schemes documented above. The UK *Welfare Conditionality* study (2013-18) (Dwyer 2018; 2020) carried out three waves of in-depth interviews, over a three to four-year period, with varied subsamples of benefit claimants across the UK (listed above). The aim was to discern claimants' experiences of welfare conditionality and its longer-term impact on their ability to find and sustain employment.

The findings from this study are stark and consistent across the sub groups. Conditionality and sanctions were found to be largely ineffective in facilitating people's entry into or progression through employment. In terms of employment outcomes, the study found that the most common pattern was stasis rather than progression, a lack of significant and sustained change in employment status, despite the fact that claimants were very keen to work and to get off benefits. Changes occurred in zig zags between progression and regression. Those who found work were most likely to churn in and out of short term, insecure employment, interspersed with periods of unemployment. Linked to this outcome, the enabling schemes - job search and skills and training support - designed to help people into paid employment were found to be too generic, of poor quality and largely ineffective. They rarely met their objectives. Where meaningful support was provided, however, it was pivotal in triggering and sustaining paid employment and positive changes, such as reductions in anti-social and problematic behaviour.

Mirroring earlier research (e.g. Meager et al's (2014) QL evaluation of the work programme) the study also found that conditionality strategies were often harshly and/or inappropriately applied. Their increasing use is based on a model of the 'unwilling worker', who needs to be coerced into finding employment. The findings suggest that such schemes do not incentivise people or support them, but are counterproductive in taking away people's dignity and sense of agency and worth. For a substantial minority of participants in this study, conditions and sanctions also triggered a range of negative behavioural changes and experiences, including:

- Counter-productive compliance;
- Disengagement from the system;
- Increased poverty and, in some cases, destitution;
- Moves into survival crime;
- Exacerbated ill health and impairments.

Among the groups followed for this study were 46 Universal Credit claimants, including in-work claimants as well as those out of work. Conditionality is applied particularly aggressively under the terms of the UC scheme (Wright et al 2018; Wright and Dwyer 2020). The scheme is designed to create a new regime of work for claimants, one that elevates the search for work to a full time and inflexible occupation in its own right. This is put into practice through rules for the number of hours spent on job searching and the number of jobs applied for (regardless of the suitability of the jobs), pressure on in-work claimants to take up multiple occupations to increase their earnings, and threats of sanctions if they do not comply. Reporting back through compulsory meetings with job coaches was equally inflexible. Some claimants with part-time and low-paid (zero hours) jobs were sanctioned if they missed these appointments, even when they were unable to attend because they were at work. This indicates a punitive and illogical system that has a Kafkaesque feel.

Perhaps not surprisingly, claimants reported rising levels of stress and impact on their mental and physical health over time, leading to increased drop out from the scheme. The overall findings from this study indicate the need to modify conditionality and sanctions as the drivers for MIP schemes, and to reinstate a 'willing worker' model that provides personalised employment provisions to more effectively support people into employment. The evidence from this study on the impact of conditionality and sanctions on vulnerable people testifies to the power of relational causality, which may, for good or ill, lead to very different outcomes for benefit claimants.

Many of the more recent QL studies outlined above uncover a growing chasm between the lived experiences of claimants, and the policy processes that are designed to help and support them. This lack of fit occurs where MIP schemes are built on simple or 'thin' causal logic (that an input, A, will lead to a desired effect, B) that fails to recognise or work with the complexities and dynamics of real world processes.

However, such studies can do more than highlight what does not work. They can also shed valuable light on what does or can work well over time, based on more refined understandings of the complex causal processes that shape lives. We can come to understand how and why some individuals, families and households become entrenched in hardship, why others escape, and how fluid, relational experiences are implicated in these processes. Moreover the flexible, grounded nature of QL enquiry offers unique insights into the volatility of low income lives over the short term; and the improvisations and temporary solutions that people adopt when facing fractured labour and housing markets. It is the capacity to address 'how and why' questions, grounded in lived experiences and 'real world' processes, that gives QL research its value.

4 Using QL studies to Evaluate MIP Schemes in the EU

We hold out this hope ... that we do whatever we do with passion and a belief that our scholarship can make a difference, that is, move people to action.
(Holstein and Minkler 2007: 26)

This part of the paper sets out some pointers for discussion on the potential use of QL methodology in evaluating MIP schemes, and how it might be harnessed as part of a complementary suite of monitoring and evaluation tools. This tiered provision will also include administrative data (Immervoll et al 2020), expert evidence, and scientific research data generated through large-scale national and international surveys (e.g. EU-SILC), which provide valuable data but are not designed to target and evaluate specific schemes and their impacts on recipients (van der Ende et al 2020).

QL evidence complements the statistical picture yielded through larger surveys and administrative data. Large scale monitoring that charts changes in household income across populations year on year is vital, but targeted evaluations of the operation and effectiveness of specific schemes, and their impact on MIP claimants, are also vital. QL research is more expensive than single-visit qualitative studies, but the costs are very modest in comparison to large scale quantitative surveys or panel studies (Neale 2021).

Three broad strategies are possible:

- **Targeted QL evaluations** of a stratified sample of MIP schemes in the EU. The grounded, real-time nature of these studies can yield know-how knowledge in a timely manner (Neale 2021b). These evaluations can be carried out as independent, stand-alone studies, as network studies across national and

international settings (see above), or through mixed method designs, described below. They can cover a purposively chosen range of MIP schemes that operate on different principles of welfare provision (see the typology in Frazer and Marlier 2016).

- **Mixed Method (Nested or Linked) evaluations**, using harmonisation of research questions and data to dovetail with national or international surveys or longitudinal studies that collect larger scale data (e.g. EU SILC). The qualitative panels can be relatively small scale in relation to the larger datasets. They can be designed to trace the unfolding lives of strategically chosen sub-samples of claimants across varied member states, who are supported through a purposively chosen range of MIP schemes. These can be rolled out through a first stage pilot panel to test the methodology⁵.

The designs above can be supported through measures to synthesise existing research evidence and data. Secondary analysis of existing datasets (Hughes and Tarrant 2020), as well as synthesis of existing findings, can enhance the evidence base upon which to build new schemes. Existing data infrastructure for qualitative resources can be utilised and/or developed to enable data to be collated and shared, with a large or specialist repository acting as a co-ordinating hub. Data sharing protocols can be set up at different scales: through local/regional archives, national repositories and international archives.

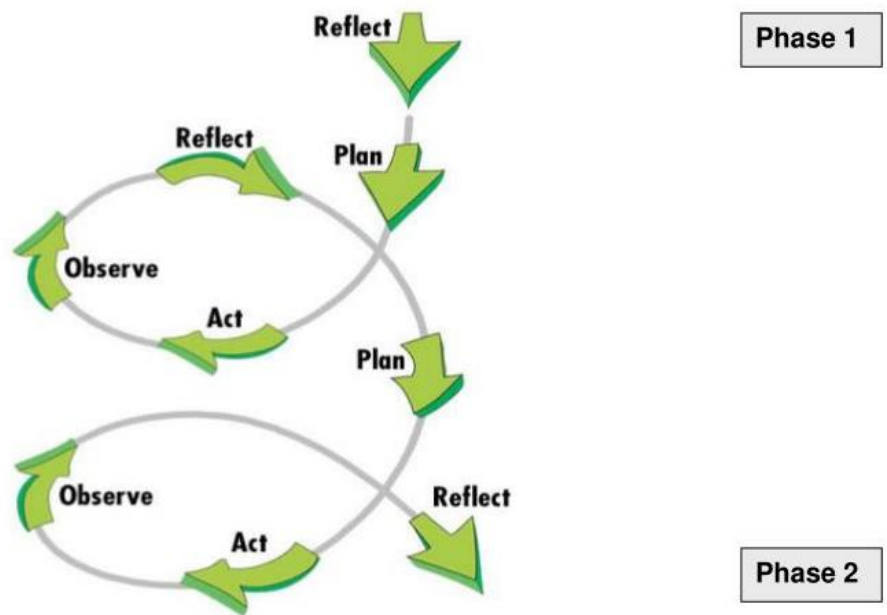
- **Partnership and Design-based Evaluations**. QL evaluations can also be tied more closely to the policy development process. Some tentative ideas on this are set out below.

Partnership and Design-based evaluations are based on practical, real-time modes of knowledge production, and built around collaborations between researchers, policy makers, and service providers, along with the selective participation of service users as experts by experience. Such designs are grounded in the principles of co-producing knowledge (rather than transferring or exchanging knowledge, Neale 2021b). This is a new way to broker the interface between research and policy/practice developments, which can lead to policy-informed research and research-based practice. It may also help to overcome the reluctance of some governments to engage with evaluation processes, and help to revitalise the value of evidence-based policy (Monaghan and Ingold 2019; Neale 2021b).

In this model of working, researchers are engaged in supporting the design and development of new pilot schemes from an early stage in their development. The longitudinal frame of a QL study is then harnessed as a navigational and co-ordinating device, running alongside a new scheme to monitor it in real-time. But this model also allows for real-time iteration between the research process and practical action. Stakeholders can take stock at key moments, try out new directions, and refine the elements of a programme as it unfolds, in ways that may create and stimulate change. An exploration of *how things work* is embedded within and emerges through the research process. The aim is not simply to observe or record change, but to facilitate change as an ongoing process of reflection and fine-tuning: 'rational social management ... proceeds in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin 1946: 38).

⁵ It would also be worth exploring the feasibility of generating data that would feed into the development of minimum income standards and reference budgets. As Deeming notes, definitions of minimum standards are culturally determined and inherently subjective (Deeming 2020). Currently, they seem to be determined largely through expert formulae, with some focus group input. It might be possible to develop more finely grained measures, suitable for different groups, if data could be drawn from the strategically defined samples that are identified and accessed through QL research.

Figure 1. The Action Research Spiral (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988)



In a two-phase or rolling research design, for example, an initial process of tracking and evaluating existing provision can become a springboard for the design, development and evaluation of a new initiative. In line with the action research spiral (above), the process allows for successive waves of reflecting, planning, acting, and observing, in a cumulative process of review and refinement.

Phase 1 (Baseline):

- **Stakeholder Consultations** with policy makers, analysts, front line services, to identify gaps in knowledge, perceptions, current limitations, possible solutions; Recruitment of policy/practice partners and experts by experience; set up mechanisms for data sharing;
- **Qualitative Synthesis** of complementary research evidence/ legacy data, developed in consultation with stakeholders;
- **Programme Design:** Design of new initiative supported through research input;
- **Monitoring:** using real-time (intensive longitudinal) methods to track, monitor and evaluate a new MIP scheme from the perspective of its key stakeholders (claimants, service providers, policy analysts/makers);
- **Taking Stock:** consultations with programme designers; identify modifications; share good practice through data review/re-analysis;
- **Reporting/Review** of potential modifications/further development in different contexts/settings.

Phase 2:

- New cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring and review, using real-time consultations and tracking as above.

Involving QL researchers at an early stage of the policy process enables design and development to be more effectively informed by real-world evidence about what may or may not work. Design-based research strategies have been developed in the main in the fields of health and education research (Penuel and Gallagher 2017; McKenney and Reeves 2018; Nyström et al 2018) and are being used effectively by QL researchers (Kinsey 2020; Neale 2021).

Partnership modes of research require brokering skills: diplomacy, clear terms of reference, and agility to balance the potentially conflicting agendas of multiple stakeholders. The challenges of this mode of research are well documented, alongside strategies to overcome them (Frankham 2009; Flinders et al 2016; Penuel and Gallagher 2017; Kislov et al 2017; Nyström et al 2018; Kislov 2019; Oliver et al 2019).

5 Final Reflections

Longitudinal research is commonly seen as limited in its societal impact because it takes too long to be of value. But using the flexible, grounded and responsive timeframes of a QL study can create impact and make a difference in real-time, as an integral part of the research process. Operating in real-time offers a timely and targeted mode of monitoring and evaluation, that is in tune with the unfolding policy process.

It is worth stressing that in a constantly changing, fluid world, there are no definitive or universal findings and no 'quick fix' solutions for policy makers. Whatever interventions and solutions are put in place are provisional, the best that may be achieved in the current circumstances. In tune with dynamic thinking, a rolling programme of monitoring and evaluation allows for a cycle of improvement as an ongoing and incremental process. This may help policy makers to see evaluation as a tool for continuous improvement (rather than an unwelcome judgement on their existing policies, Robson 2011). This is part of a broader shift towards a culture of improvement and transparency in policy making, based on a sharing of good practice, and the publication of reliable, trustworthy evidence on what works most effectively over time (Hye 2021; Torenvliet 2021).

In his classic study, Lewin (1946: 35) notes that, 'realistic fact finding and evaluation is a prerequisite for any learning'. He also observes that, 'mere diagnosis – and surveys are a type of diagnosis – does not suffice. In ... social management, the diagnosis has to be complemented by ... comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change' (1946: 37). Lewin's insights reinforce a basic point: robust and detailed monitoring and evaluation systems are not simply an optional extra in policy formulation and development. They are the crucial mechanisms for ensuring that MIP schemes can be improved over time.

Developing a new micro-dynamic evidence base on lived experiences in relation to policy responses would create more finely grained understandings of how MIP schemes operate and what works well in meeting policy objectives. QL research offers the potential to fill some of the gaps in the existing evidence base, by generating useful 'know how' knowledge for policy and for professional practice, and bringing lived experiences and policy responses into a closer and more productive alignment.

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