New frontiers in QLR: an agenda for research

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Abstract

This paper outlines the state of the art in qualitative longitudinal methodology, reflecting on more than 10 years of development since a previous special issue on QLR was published by the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* in 2003. The papers presented in this special issue emerge from a methodological innovation network that brought together an international community of researchers in order to map new frontiers for the method. This paper summarises the development of the method from a design to a sensibility, identifying three new frontiers as part of a future research agenda including: the need for a processual imaginary; experimentation with temporal perspectives and orientations and explicating the temporal affordances of our methods.

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In 2003, The *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* published a special issue on Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) methods that featured papers presented at a symposium held at London South Bank University that had brought together individuals working with an emergent method. Since then QLR has caught the imagination of researchers and funders internationally, although British social research continues to be central to methodological innovation in the field, and has been supported by national research funding schemes and networks. QLR is now widely recognized as a distinct methodological paradigm, yet one that encompasses a range of approaches, concepts and project designs.

All research takes place in time, and research that is attentive to temporal processes and durational phenomena is an important tradition within the social sciences internationally, with distinct disciplinary trajectories and bodies of work in substantive fields such as community studies, child development, life history, educational and organizational research. Research that combines qualitative and longitudinal elements is of course not new, and existed before the naming and self-conscious explication of QLR as a method (Holland et al 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to consider some of the circumstances surrounding the upsurge of interest and mobilization of this methodology in particular times and places.

The current interest in QLR can be seen as part of a 'temporal' turn within the social sciences associated with approaches that allow for an understanding of social phenomena in greater time perspective, including a growing interest in secondary analysis and archival work, intergenerational approaches and revisiting of classic studies (Abbott 2001, Weis 2004, Andrews 2007, Edwards 2008, McLeod and Thomson 2009, Savage 2010, Brannen et al. 2011). Research methods have their own histories and politics, expressing and constructing particular ways of knowing the social world (McLeod and Thomson 2009, Savage 2010). The current iteration of QLR coincides with new questions about how the 'empirical' is produced and understood within a digital landscape (Adkins and Lury 2009), involving an awareness of the performativity of research methods (Law and Urry 2004, Back and Pumar 2012, Lury and Wakeford 2012), the affordance of digital devices (Ruppert et al. 2013) and the ethical implications of a digitised knowledge economy (Mauthner 2012, Smart et al. 2014).

Research ethics are a sensitive barometer of change, registering the interaction of established models of professional practice and new technical possibilities or political demands. The ethics of QLR are provocative, with longitudinality inciting co-production (Henwood et al. 2011, Hurdley and Dicks 2011, Pink 2011), while also condensing and amplifying ethical sensibilities regarding privacy, ownership, reputation, exploitation and anonymity (Thomson 2007, Mauthner 2012, Moore 2012, Coltart et al. 2013, Neale 2013). Awareness of the 'performativity' of research methods encourages us to explore the relationship between social research and other practice traditions in which 'situated' and durational forms of enquiry play a key role, for example: infant observation (Urwin and Steinberg 2012), development (Anderson 2000) and performance (Bayly and Baraitser 2008, Saldana 2003).

Other initiatives, although not usually named as QLR, also use qualitative approaches to focus on durational processes, for example traditions of long-term ethnography (and revisits) in anthropology, community and educational studies (Kemper and Royce 2002, Crow and Lyon 2011), as well as the exploration of temporality within narrative and biographical research (Andrews 2008, Stanley 2011). QLR has also made a significant impact in policy research, with funders and researchers recognising its potential to generate unique insights into the ways that social policies and interventions are 'lived' and 'survived' by individuals, families, communities and organisations (Corden and Millar 2007, McGrellis 2011, Ridge and Millar 2011, Shildrick et al. 2012).

In the case of the UK, there has been considerable investment in QLR, both in substantive research projects and in investigating its methodological innovations and challenges. This is evident in journal special issues (Thomson et al. 2003, Corden and Millar 2007b) and published literature reviews and mappings of the field (Holland et al. 2006, Corden and Millar 2007). National funding commitments have given rise to a stream of work that is both qualitative and longitudinal (Elliott et al. 2007), realised through individual studies and collaborative initiatives that allow for an empirical and analytic 'scaling up' in order to understand micro-level changes and continuities across the life course (Timescapes 2011), organisational development (Real Times component of Third Sector Research Centre 2010) and transport futures (EPSRC Step Change project). In 2013 the British ESRC National Centre for Research Methods funded a methodological innovation network to review the state of the art and to map 'New frontiers of QLR' (Thomson et al. 2014). This special issue arises from the series[i]. Other important national traditions include biographical research in Germany (Rosenthal 1998, Heinz and Kruger 2001) and France (Bertaux 1981, Bertaux & Thompson 1997), longitudinal youth studies in Australia (McLeod and Yates 2006, Wyn 2012, Woodman and Wyn 2015) and educational and social work research in Norway (Nielsen forthcoming, Helegland 2010)

QLR: from a design to a sensibility

This collection presents a diverse group of papers which in different ways mark how the 'field' of QLR is developing, more than 10 years after the initial special issue, which was preoccupied by the project of definition. The papers represent some of the ways in which the method has

developed, often in tandem with researchers' own career trajectories and the changing intellectual and social contexts in which methodological experiment takes place. For example Miller's account of revisiting the samples of two of her own studies captures the auto/biographical potential of QLR in which scholars may re-engage with their own projects over a career, using the synchronised biographical time of researcher and researched as a medium of movement between the past and the present, the individual and the social. The academic journey also provides a framework for Natasha Mauthner's article which captures the ways in which her longstanding interest in thinking through the ontological, ethical and epistemological dimensions of revisiting data has been invigorated by a new materialist theoretical framework – suggesting that QLR not only unsettles ontologies but that a QLR sensibility is marked by a habit of historicising or situating everything from theoretical turns to technical revolutions. Papers by Stanley and by Taylor suggest how QLR has been embraced as a way of looking in new ways at phenomena. For Stanley this involves claiming QLR as a framework for her major epistolary investigations that work with collections of letters as a route into broad sociological and historical agendas. Stanley identifies sociological resources for thinking about temporal processes, including Elias's concept of the figuration and Simmel's framework for formal analysis, embracing notions of time, number, sociality and value. Taylor discusses the challenges of researching organisational figurations over time, reflecting on the dynamic relationship between the 'data' generated with participants and the changing context and meaning of this data as time passes within a relational ontology that encompasses ethics. Both studies hold the promise of enriching and disrupting understandings of QLR which, to date, have been dominated by a focus on individuals as a unit of analysis, researcher lead data collection and a prospective repeat-interview research design.

QLR is increasingly understood as a sensibility and orientation rather than a specific research design. This is exemplified by Morrow and Crivello's paper that uses QLR as a corrective to the quantitative economic logics that shape the field of development studies in a way that 'fetishizes the present' and depends heavily on the explanatory value of static variables. In this context, QLR provides strikingly different insights into policy problems, such as 'early marriage' and 'child labour', by capturing the accumulation of small shocks into temporally varied pathways and complexities of lived lives. The QLR sensibility can also be engaged to think about knowledge exchange practices and the temporal and relational character of academic production. Ester McGeeney, for example, uses the NFQLR series and its mediation through Twitter, blogging and ultimately this special issue to consider the affordances of digital tools for

academic production and their ethical/ political implications. The papers in the special issue map the limits of the method, ranging from descriptive accounts of what might constitute QLR to philosophical reflections on the epistemological consequences of privileging time.

In many ways we have come a long way since the 2003 special issue. QLR is a recognised and named methodological orientation, yet holds considerable promise for the future, resonating with debates on performative methods and new materiality, while also encapsulating cross-disciplinary conversations among the arts, humanities and social sciences and rubbing up against different national traditions and strategies for the digitisation and sharing of archives and data sets. We conclude our introduction by identifying three motifs that characterise 'state of the art' thinking about QLR in 2015. These were articulated through the seminar series in the presentations from invited speakers and in conversations among participants, and are developed in the papers here marking, we believe, new frontiers for Qualitative Longitudinal Research[1].

A processual imaginary: A key element of QLR scholarship involves forging, adapting and reanimating a set of conceptual metaphors and analytic tools that help us privilege temporality. A processual imaginary is associated with a fluidity of movement between units of analysis, between scales and between the particular and the general. Mauthner characterizes this as an ontology of 'mattering' in which the past is apprehended from an evolving present, with the challenge of analysis and interpretation shaped by the 'matter' that comes to 'matter' – including that produced in the research process. A processual imaginary requires its own metaphors: Stanley invokes a dance that extends beyond the participation of any particular dancer yet can be mapped through formal and relational analysis. The potential for QLR to not only to follow individuals, groups or institutions but to engage with durational practices, inheritances, flows and interruptions is an emergent and exciting frontier for the method.

Perspectives and temporal orientation: The collection highlights the analytic significance of perspective, both in terms of the temporal orientation captured in documents – are they forward facing (such as letters), retrospective (life histories) or hybrid (repeat interviews)? But this is also in terms of analytic orientations – are we reaching backwards (genealogy) or forwards, taking our lead from traces that remain in the present (archaeology)? Mauthner makes a case for adherence to a prospective and materialist metaphysics through which the past is produced in the present. These shifts from realist through poststructuralist and new materialist frames have ethico-onto-political dimensions: annonymity is understood in increasingly relational terms informed by issues of proximity in time and social space. Authorship emerges as another ethical hotspot, bringing with it a language of provenance, citational practices and ventriloquism, again shaped and fuelled by a relational economy. Tensions emerge as well between auto/biographical perspectives, where the researcher subjectivity provides a frame through which data is situated, as in a revisiting study, and less solipsistic ontologies that may focus on events, trajectories and/or figurations. How to move between these modes of time travel is again an emergent challenge for the field.

Affordances of 'data', documents and methods: Third, these papers encourage us to look closely at what we mean by 'data', not only their material and temporal affordances but also the ethical and technical baggage associated with naming in this way[ii]. For example, Stanley encourages us to understand letters as 'a between ontology'; and this resonates with McGeeney's analysis of the performative affordances of social media as inciting circulation and value accumulation as well as with Mauthner's suggestion that revisiting techniques involve 'reading texts intra-actively'. There is also a sense in which the materiality of methods must be kept visible – as explicated by Miller in her discussion of retracing research participants using social media. Through interdisciplinary conversations with arts practice traditions we are increasingly aware of the 'fourth wall' that contains so much social science methodology from the world it seeks to know, marking another frontier for us to explore.

Finally, it is vital that QLR itself does not settle into a set of fixed practices, designs and method rules. The familiarity now of the acronym, QLR, should not signal the fetishisation of this approach nor its reification as a bundle of research strategies that in a known-in-advance way mark out time. Rather, qualitative longitudinal research – as a sensibility, as an ontological and epistemological project, as an approach to attending to temporality – needs to remain open to the

possibility of experiment and undecided futures; the papers in this issue lead us in such a direction.

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[ii] See for example McLure's blog site 'The museum of Qualitative Data' [online http://museumofqualitativedata.info/]