What is qualitative longitudinal research?

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Methods Festival 2019
Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR)

• What it is?
• Empirical research examples
• Benefits and challenges of using QLR?
What is it?

• An approach that is methodologically and theoretically interested in temporality and social processes as they unfold over time:

• Suited for the study of life-time trajectories or transition-points

• Based on data collection and the following of subjects or groups over time (repeat interviews, ethnographic, textual & visual data)

• The unit of analysis is typically (not always) the individual.

• Enables the identification and exploration of meanings people attach to social change, and how they personally interpret and respond to such change.
What is it good for?:

• Usefull when attempting to understand the interaction between temporal and geographical movement and the dynamics between people’s agency and structural determinants.

• For mapping transitions, pathways, looking at how change and adaptations take place, the impact of key events and changing circumstances; the evaluation of specific policies; developmental and cumulative processes.

• A realistic grasp of causality: peoples acts and agency in place and time
What is it used for and when?

- Shorter and longer-term qualitative tracking of how change is created, lived and experienced.
- Applications e.g. in studies concerning ageing and the lifespan, “risk-taking and crime/drug/sex work careers”, child socialization, parenting, and family relationships; education organizations and schooling outcomes & occupational careers.
- Also opens up possibilities of analyses on transitions to e.g. (grand)parenthood, retirement, migration, down-shifting etc.
Empirical example 1: Inventing adulthoods

• A 10-year project from 1996-2006
• 100 young people in 5 geographic, economic, social, cultural and environmental sites in the UK
• 11-17 to begin – 21-27 at end of data collection
• Multi-method investigation: primarily individual interviews (6 in the time-span), focus groups, ’memory books’ (reflective diaries)

In total 500 interviews, 68 focus groups and a range of other data.
Inventing Adulthood-project

• Started as a school-based project (school-culture)
• Evolved to a focus on how opportunities and resources are shaped by factors like class, gender, ethnicity and family resources.
• Focus also on the economies of the localities, the moral values, school culture, youth cultures and material resources as the background for transition to adulthood (macro-micro).
• Focus on resources, not youth problems
• Details: [http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/)
Example 2: Towards a 2-speed Finland?

- A Kone foundation project that looks at the paradox between the attempt to prolong work careers vs. increasing 50+ unemployment
- Tracking and following people who are made redundant in their fifties
- Case: the Finnish postal service
- Interviews, video diaries, lifelines + media data
- Focus: works identities, meaning of (un)employment, coping with change, trajectories: Institutional ageism in action
Benefits of doing QLR

• Looks at how selves and identities are created and maintained (‘habitus-in-process’, McLeod 2003)
• Focus on the dynamics of people’s agency within changing wider social structures
• Structure/agency & Micro ~ macro
• A growing awareness of the need to supplement statistical knowledge with complementary in-depth methods
Quant. vs. Qual. Longitudinal Research

- Enumeration of social reality
- Creates a series of statistical still pictures of peoples life trajectories according to class, gender, occupational status etc.,
- E.g. marginalisation, second generation (inherited) long-term unemployment etc.
- Frozen moments in time, offering a ‘bird’s eye panoramic view’ and a grand narrative of social change and ongoing social trends.
- (Neale & Flowerdew 2003: 192)

- Provides a more close-up movie of real lives, plots, storylines & defining turning points, and their interpretation (words & experience)
- Fills in details on the blind spots of quant. panel research & statistics.
- Focus not on what happens, but how people interpret, act and redirect themselves: why & how
- Provide knowledge for economic and sociopolitical planning, administrative practices, policy evaluation and governance generally => intervention
Challenges of QLR:

• Maintaining research relationships over time
• Ethical questions: Informed consent and the cumulative scope of data being generated
• Time- and money consuming: fits badly with funding policies
• Managing the analysis: Cross-sectional analysis combined with following and analysing individual cases between data collection waves.
• The management & archiving of large data sets
Your questions please?

“Any serious study of lives must consider time, process and context”
(Elder 1991: 58)
Refs.:


