What is qualitative longitudinal research?

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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 data)
• The unit of analysis is typically (but 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.
Uses:

• Shorter and longer-term qual. 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/work careers.
• Also opens up possibilities of analyses on transitions to e.g. (grand)parenthood, retirement, migration, down-shifting etc.
Empirical example: 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.
The Inventing Adulthoods -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/
Project: Towards a Two-speed Finland

- Qualitative longitudinal data on 50+ workers made redundant in mid-work career
- Empirical case the Finnish postal service
- Repeat interviews, phone interviews, visual methods
- Drawing an image on people’s situations, the morality of becoming unemployed, people’s agency, decisions, coping and accounts of the everyday.
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 more 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 upon which to base 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
"Any serious study of lives must consider time, process and context" (Elder 1991: 58)

Questions please?
References: