INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a growing interest in Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research as a distinctive mode of social enquiry. The Timescapes Initiative (ESRC 2007-12) was part of this growth and has since fuelled further expansion; the method is now being applied across a wide range of disciplines and into new areas of scholarship, both in the UK and internationally. Timescapes has advanced QL research through a network of projects, the creation of an archive of QL data, a secondary analysis programme and a range of training and capacity building activities. The 20 guides in this series reflect these broad endeavours and illustrate the rich possibilities and challenges of QL research across numerous dimensions of the research process. The series complements the methodological publications produced under Timescapes, which provide more detailed coverage of specific topics and themes (see www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk). This introduction provides a brief overview of the guides, and outlines the nature of QL research and the creative dimensions of research design and practice. It also touches on the power and potential of this method to discern the interior logic of lives as they unfold, and to illuminate the intricacies of time in human experience.

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TIMESCAPES METHODS GUIDES SERIES 2012
Guide No. 1

Qualitative Longitudinal Research: An Introduction to the Timescapes Methods Guides Series
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BACKGROUND

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Qualitative longitudinal research may be defined simply as qualitative enquiry that is conducted through or in relation to time. As a research strategy, QL research is hardly new; it forms part of a rich ethnographic tradition, spanning fields as diverse as social anthropology, oral history, community and theatre studies (see, for example, Kemper and Royce 2002; Chamberlayne *et al* 2001; Saldana 2003). However, over the past decade a growing body of scholarship has sought to delineate the method, and promote it as a distinctive way of knowing and understanding the social world (Saldana 2003; Thomson and Holland 2003; Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). As a result, researchers are routinely seeking to incorporate QL methods into their research, and a growing number of studies, ranging from the lived experience of welfare reform to the dynamics of transport and energy, are being funded by government, the ESRC and the main UK charities. This growth reflects a need to better understand the intricacies of change and continuity in the social world, the processes by which change occurs, and the agency of individuals in shaping or accommodating to these processes (Neale, 2011). Understanding how and why change is created, lived and experienced is important for a number of reasons. Conceptually, it is through time that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change. Indeed it is only through time that we can discern how the personal and social, agency and structure, the micro and macro dimensions of experience are interconnected and how they come to be transformed; for these connections have an essentially dynamic nature (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). More prosaically, an empirical understanding of change is important in policy contexts where individuals or organisations are required to change their behaviour or adapt to changing circumstances (Corden and Millar, 2007).

Designs and strategies for working through time are flexible and creative, but four broad approaches are worth distinguishing. *Prospective* designs involve tracking individuals or groups through changing life course, policy or historical contexts in 'real' time, as they occur. Working flexibly, each wave of data collection may be used to inform the next. The timeframes vary; tracking may be done intensively over the short term for those undergoing a particular transition or policy intervention, with the facility to capture changing biographies or critical historical moments. Or the tracking may occur over extensive periods of time, to discern changes over the life course (e.g. Laub and Sampson. 2003) and with the potential to capture the wider sweep of macro historical change. Funding for longer term tracking of samples is scarce, but researchers are often able to secure 'add on' funding for projects that follow up an original sample. These varied time frames point to an important feature of this method: there is no fixed period of time over which a QL study should be designed. Secondly, there are *retrospective or life history* designs that investigate social processes through re-creations of past events and experiences. These enable the causes and consequences of change to be understood 'backwards' from the vantage point of the present (Laub and Sampson 2003). Prospective and retrospective designs can be combined very effectively in QL research - past and future can be revisited at each research encounter, and re-constructed through the lens of the ever shifting present. A third approach, *repeat cross sectional* designs, may or may not involve the same individuals or groups. These QL studies commonly 'revisit' classic studies after a lapse of decades, in order to uncover historical processes of change and continuity within particular communities or organisations (e.g. Charles *et al.*, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Finally, '*Mixed' longitudinal designs* that bring QL and Quantitative Longitudinal (QNL) survey data into conversation with each are increasingly evident. Combining the depth of QL analysis with the breadth of QNL analysis can enrich findings and may have particular relevance in policy contexts. Such designs are being incorporated into large scale panel and cohort studies, and utilised in STEM disciplines and in public sector evaluation research (see guide no. 14).

However designed, QL research enables an exploration of complex flows of time – Timescapes – through which people organise and make sense of their lives. As our definition of QL research implies, time within this approach can be understood in two senses. It is, firstly, the medium through which we conduct our research, thereby throwing up a range of possibilities, complexities and challenges in research design and practice. Secondly it is an important topic of enquiry in its own right. We discuss both dimensions of QL research below.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE
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Time As the Medium for Conducting QL Research.

While the design and execution of a QL project needs to be scientifically robust, it may also be regarded as a craft; the methods used are diverse and can be applied creatively and flexibly to address particular research questions, and to engage with varied sample populations. The discussion here focuses on prospective QL designs, which involve 'walking alongside' people as their lives unfold. Bringing time into the research process quite simply changes everything; the process is best seen as cyclical and cumulative, rather than linear. Developing a sampling frame, for example, is not a one off process. Since samples and circumstances change over time, sampling needs to be revisited at each wave of data generation (Guide no. 2). The same can be said for the tasks of seeking informed consent, or organising and representing large datasets: these are ongoing processes, with important practical and ethical dimensions, which require sustained and careful engagement (see guides no. 11 and 17). A further example is provided in guide no. 3, which explores the practical and ethical challenges of QL field research. The task is not so much one of maintaining samples but of sustaining long term and delicate research relationships – a process which inevitably touches the lives of both researcher and participant over time. Finally, the process of accessing and engaging participants over time, in itself, yields important insights into the tempo of participants' lives, a theme explored in guide no. 9.

As the above discussion indicates, researching qualitatively through time adds new and important ethical dimensions to the ESRC Research Ethics framework. Well established ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality take on new meaning when considered as long term processes. Confidentiality may be harder to maintain over time where data gathered at different points in time, or across family groupings, is brought together to construct case studies. Consent may be differently 'informed' when the future direction of a project may be flexible and subject to change. A continual revisiting of consent may become a burden on participants and create instability. New ethical dilemmas relating to intrusion or neglect may arise out of the researcher/participant relationship, when it is nurtured over time and involves enduring trust and reciprocity. Researchers may have to set clear boundaries to manage influence and/or dependency in relation to research participants. Ethical considerations also arise when weaving different time frames into the research process. For example, when participants imagine the future or revisit the past, care is needed in taking these versions of events back to them at follow up; these time frames are not fixed in people's lives but continually open to re-interpretation as individuals selectively remember, change plans or modify aspirations. Case study data can also reveal inconsistencies and silences (missing data) across accounts gathered at different points in time, raising questions about the ethical interpretation and representation of the data among primary researchers and secondary users. The issue of temporal ethics in the conduct of a QL empirical project is crucial, and is the subject of methods guide no. 11.
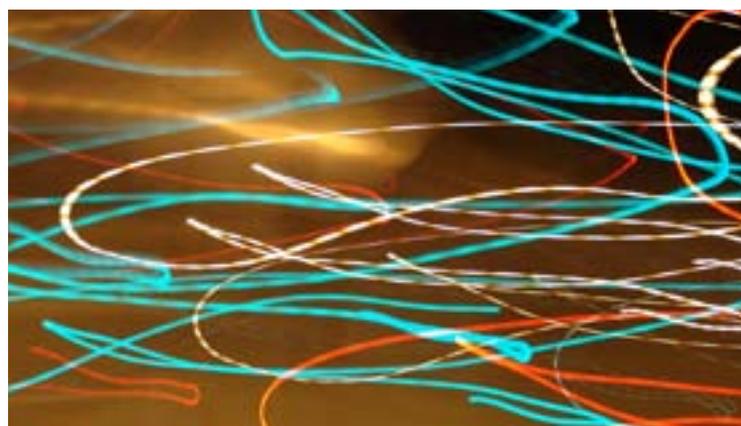
Time as a Substantive Topic.

The complexities outlined above, however, are only part of the picture; time is more than the medium through which QL research is conducted, it is an important theme in its own right. In this regard, QL research forms an important bridge between two parallel fields of enquiry – theoretical studies of time and empirically driven life course and longitudinal studies (Neale, 2011).

As a substantive topic, time can be understood and dissected in a variety of imaginative and fruitful ways. The conceptual framework guiding Timescapes is the intersection of three different timescales: - biographical, generational and historical. These are the micro, meso and macro dimensions of experience, through which is becomes possible to understand the dynamic relationship between individual and collective lives, and broader patterns of social change. The varied tempos of life, the pace or velocity of change, and disruptions to prescribed life course trajectories provide other ways of conceptualising time. It is possible, for example, to distinguish between industrial time (the rigid, inexorable and impersonal tempo of the clock), and family time (which is fluid, flexible, enduring and value laden); and to explore the intersection of these two time frames (Harden *et al.*, 2012). A third, somewhat neglected dimension of time concerns the intersection of time and space – when and where - to locate and contextualise experiences and events. Spatial metaphors (the notion of life journeys, for example, and Timescapes itself) abound in QL research as a way to encapsulate and grasp abstract temporalities; the two are inextricably linked. But perhaps the most vital and fruitful way of 'slicing' time in QL research concerns the ever shifting relationship between past, present and future. The past, hindsight and memory play important roles in the construction and reconstruction of biographies and identities over time, while capturing imaginary futures at each follow up is a powerful way to understand the changing aspirations of individuals, and how and why their life chances are forged, enabled or constrained over time. The future is a neglected field of research and yet it has the potential to reveal the seeds of change (Adam and Groves, 2007).

'Capturing' Time in the Field

The projects in Timescapes combined in-depth interviews with a palette of ethnographic methods to gather insights about these varied dimensions of time. Life history interviewing enables a detailed exploration of past lives, while follow up and recursive interviews (sharing past interview data with participants at follow up) reveal changes and continuities in narratives and practices as lives unfold (guides no. 12 and 13). Timelines and written accounts, generated by participants, are useful complementary methods - tools to 'think with', in contructing past and future and discerning the time horizons of participants (guides no. 4 and 5). Similarly, objects or photographs can be used to trigger memories and insights into what matters to people (guides no. 10 and 13), while accounts of individual turning points or critical moments in a life journey enable an understanding of the choices people make, and what triggers changes in their trajectories or identities (Thomson *et al.*, 2002). The palette of methods explored in this series includes, diaries, video diaries, the use of historical and contemporary images, relational maps and other drawing and mapping exercises (guides no. 5, 7, 10).

Working with a sample over time opens up the potential to generate dynamic data via participant observation (for example, of significant events or transitions, walking interviews or day in a life tracking, guide no. 13), or through interactive group work (eg. focus groups, inter-generational group interviewing and web networking (guides no. 3, 8 and 20). The latter are useful mechanisms for enabling participants to collectively 'take stock' of a particular social process or life transition. Projects in Timescapes often combined two or more complementary methods to good effect –in particular, interviews were commonly combined with focus groups and visual, drawing or writing exercises to draw out varied perceptions of time. The Oldest Generation project combined life history interviews with diaries, thereby discerning the long sweep of a life lived over time, alongside participant-generated accounts of the day-to-day contingencies and risks facing older people (guides no. 7 and 12).

Managing, Analysing and Archiving QL Data

QL research entails in-depth work with theoretically drawn samples. However the method generates large multi-media multi-wave datasets that need to be managed and organised for longitudinal analysis, and for sharing and re-use. In this area of research practice, no less than in others, the element of time creates enormous potential, but presents challenges. Keeping track of data in waves, cases, themes and formats is a crucial task and is aided by good data management planning (guide no. 17). The analytical process in itself is complex. It involves repeat cross sectional analysis, conducted after each wave of data generation; the construction of longitudinal case studies, on a case by case basis; and a temporal iteration between the two as the trajectories of lives converge and diverge. Tools such as Framework (now incorporated within NVivo 9) and life history grids are useful here. The practical and ethical construction of longitudinal case histories is explored in guide no. 6, and the process of developing a bespoke approach to analysis working with narrative and psychosocial principles in guide no. 10.

The process of good data management serves a dual purpose – it creates well organised data for cumulative analysis, but at the same time creates archive-ready data for sharing and secondary use. Part of our remit in Timescapes was to create a much needed research infrastructure to enable the sharing and re-use of QL data. Over the five years of the programme the rich datasets from across our network of projects have been gathered together to create the Timescapes Archive. The development of this resource and its key features are described in guide no 16. In tandem with this process we have pioneered new ways to conduct secondary analysis of these data, and developed protocols for the metadata (data about data) needed to facilitate secondary analysis (see guides no. 17 and 19 and the extended guide to Qualitative Secondary Analysis on the Timescapes website).

More broadly, and running alongside these activities and developments, we have addressed the issue of building a culture of QL data sharing and re-use and the ethics and practicalities of these processes. The timing and nature of the research process in QL research creates particular challenges in this regard. If researchers re-visit the data they have generated over time, is this primary or secondary analysis? The distinction begins to break down. More broadly, when does primary analysis (by the originating team) stop and secondary (by others) begin? – there is no evident cut-off point in QL research, when data are always provisional and in the making. The overlapping research endeavours of primary and secondary researchers requires consideration of how to facilitate data sharing in ways that respect the needs of both. These themes are addressed in guide no. 18.

THE POWER AND VALUE OF QL RESEARCH

Whatever the challenges of QL research, it can provide compelling insights into the dynamics of personal and collective lives in relation to wider social processes. It does so by turning cross-sectional 'snapshots' of social life into a detailed and situated 'movie'. The potential for QL research to feed into new disciplinary contexts and new areas of scholarship is now being realised (see, for example, Henwood and Shirani 2012 in press). Several guides in the series address this theme. The synergies between QL research and Oral History, and its application in psycho-social research are explored in guides no. 12 and 13. The use of QL methods in third sector research, which involves tracking organisations over time, and in public sector evaluation research, is explored in guides no. 14 and 15.

The potential for QL research to make a difference in the real world (the impact agenda) is the subject of the final guide in this series (guide no. 20). The nature of QL enquiry creates the potential for both substantive and methodological impacts. Since the research process is flexible, grounded in real time developments, and interactive, it can be harnessed to run alongside policy and practice interventions, with the potential to create impact as an integral part of the research process. QL research evidence bears the imprint of the method through which it was generated; the elongated time frames for data gathering and the attention to the temporal dimensions of experience produce distinctive forms of temporal knowledge and insight, in ways that can change our vision of the social world.

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