

Introduction to the Special Issue

Prospective Qualitative Research: New Directions, Opportunities and Challenges

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The combination of qualitative approaches and longitudinal research designs is a powerful way to explore changes in individual life courses as they occur. While qualitative research is mostly associated with retrospective studies that analyse lives 'backwards' in time, prospective qualitative studies that track lives as they unfold have grown in popularity over the past two decades. Their increased importance goes hand in hand with the growing attention in the social sciences to process and change versus stability and continuity through time. Prospective qualitative studies are uniquely suited to analysing continuity and change in people's lives, offering a complex understanding of critical junctures, transitions and gradual, non-linear or contradictory processes of change as they are interpreted and revisited by individuals with the unfolding of their lives. With its intrinsic focus on time and temporalities, prospective qualitative research allows us to address not only changing meanings and perceptions, but how people examine their pasts and look into their futures, and how these temporal perspectives are modified along with life events and transitions.

Together with its undoubted advantages, a range of analytical and methodological challenges arise in the process of engaging with participants in a prospective qualitative study, where time, lives, perceptions and meanings are continually shifting and under revision. The benefits of combining prospective and retrospective insights and meanings involve a complex and demanding analytical effort that addresses potentially emerging discrepancies in the reporting of the same event or transition. The notion of a linear temporality that structures social action needs to be reconciled with narratives that reflect the fluidity of past and future time, stagnation, zigzag or even reversible developments. Questions of archiving are a source of concern for researchers whose data sets are iteratively generated over time, raising issues about consent, anonymity and ownership. Ethical issues also sharpen as the level of personal involvement between researcher and participant increases with repeated interactions across the different waves. With the increased availability of qualitative prospective studies, there is a growing agreement about the benefits of using secondary data. Arguments about research costs and underexploitation of existing data are gaining ground

against the traditional reluctance of qualitative researchers to make their data available for reuse. There is, hence, an emerging need to reflect on the strategies and practices of data creation and management for long-term storage and use by others. In parallel, challenges of combining different data sources with similar foci for analytical and comparative purposes are increasingly recognised.

These are just a few of the challenges facing prospective qualitative researchers, but they clearly point to the need for further methodological reflection on how time impacts on the design, conduct and theoretical underpinnings of qualitative longitudinal studies. This special issue advances current debates and explores new theoretical and methodological directions in this field through a range of contributions that are both international and interdisciplinary in scope.

The first article, 'Relative time and life course research', by Núria Sánchez-Mira and Laura Bernardi argues the need for a more comprehensive theoretical conceptualisation of time in life course research integrating absolute and relative time. Building on the interdisciplinary literature, this theoretical piece proposes a tripartite definition of relative time (multidirectional, telescopic and elastic times), and shows the value of applying these concepts to analyse the intersection of biographical and social times. The authors discuss the implications of an explicit integration of relative time in life course research, and the suitability of prospective qualitative research for enhancing our understanding of the complex temporal processes that shape the lives.

In the second article, 'Studying turning points in labour market trajectories – benefits of a panel-based mixed methods design', Nicolas Legewie and Ingrid Tucci look at the potential of having a qualitative study nested into a population representative panel study and the added value of a mixed methods design for the fine-grained analysis of turning points in labour market trajectories. The example given concerns a qualitative study of migrants added to the German Socio-economic Panel. Combining the information obtained in retrospective in-depth interviews with panel survey data allows a double entry and a more integrated understanding of the complexity of processes involving critical junctures and their multifaceted nature, including their objective measurement and their subjective reporting. The authors argue how mixing methods yields not only complementary but also analytically valuable discrepant information, which can help avoid under-theorisation and misinterpretation of life sequences. Linking panel survey data and repeated qualitative interviews in the study of life course processes is outlined as a promising future avenue for research.

The next two articles deal more specifically with challenges and opportunities related to research design and data management and analysis in qualitative panels. In their contribution 'Little and large: methodological reflections from two qualitative longitudinal policy studies on welfare conditionality', Peter Dwyer and Ruth Patrick compare two UK research projects with which they have been involved. They reflect on the potentialities and challenges of working with different scales of study and time spans, and the existing trade-offs in terms of explanatory breadth and depth. Their article shows the value of analysing people's experiences through time in order to

understand how and why processes of behaviour change may occur, while highlighting the challenges and benefits of the demanding analytical effort specific to qualitative longitudinal research. The authors explain why qualitative longitudinal research is ideally and uniquely suited to address how individuals engage with policy interventions and the resulting effects on their lives.

Susanne Vogl and Ulrike Zartler base their contribution, 'Interviewing adolescents through time: balancing continuity and flexibility in a qualitative longitudinal study', on a project in Vienna. They address the challenges of maintaining a qualitative study through time, looking in particular at the necessary balance between flexibility and continuity in the generation of temporal interview data. Change being a core aspect of qualitative longitudinal research, a certain degree of openness, adaptation and innovation are crucial for maximising the advantages of this approach. At the same time, a given degree of continuity is needed to maintain the focus and comparability over time. The authors discuss the challenges involved in achieving this delicate balance and offer practical advice based on their own experiences in managing an interview panel study, focusing on two main issues: panel maintenance and substantive changes in the research setup or the research team.

In her final commentary, 'Promises and pitfalls of qualitative longitudinal research', Betina Holstein addresses the promises and expectations raised by qualitative longitudinal research, as well as some of the main challenges and potential pitfalls involved in the design of a qualitative longitudinal study. The commentary provides interesting insights on how choices about methods for data collection and data analysis along with sampling strategies crucially influence the comparisons that can be drawn across cases and over time and, thus, which inferences can and cannot be made from the data. Holstein shows how different methods of data collection and analysis are not independent from the degree of stability and change that is identified with the analysis. She argues that the temporal aspects of the research design must match the expected rhythm of change and stability that the study aims to enquire, and that a minimum degree of standardisation must be ensured to be able to bring out dynamic developments. Finally, she reflects on how sampling strategies determine the study's explanatory power.

It is the hope of the co-editors that this special issue will provide useful theoretical and methodological avenues for facing the challenges built into prospective qualitative research. At the same time, we hope that we have contributed another stone to bridge quantitative and qualitative life course research, by arguing in favour of the integration of multiple time perspectives and of different kinds of panel studies.

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