



National Centre for Research Methods Report

# New frontiers in QLR: definition, design and display

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### **Abstract**

Research that is attentive to temporal processes and durational phenomena is an important tradition within the social sciences internationally with distinct disciplinary trajectories.

Qualitative longitudinal research emerged as a distinct methodological paradigm around the turn of the millennium, named within the UK through journal special issues, literature reviews and funding commitments. In 2012-3 the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods funded a network for methodological innovation to map 'New frontiers of QLR', bringing together a group of scholars who have been actively involved in establishing QLR as a methodological field. The network provided an opportunity to consolidate the learning that has developed in QLR over a sustained period of investment and to engage critically with what QLR might mean in new times. This paper documents the series of discussions staged by the network involving the definition of QLR, the kinds of relationships and practices it involves and the consequences of these in a changing landscape for social research. The series was deliberately interdisciplinary ensuring that we engaged with the temporal perspectives and norms of different academic and practice traditions and this has both enriched and complicated the picture that has emerged from our deliberations. In this paper we argue that QLR is a methodological paradigm that by definition moves with the times, and is an ongoing site of innovation and experiment. Key issues identified for future development in QLR include: intervening in debates of 'big data' with visions of deep data that involve following and connecting cases over time; the potential of longitudinal approaches to reframe the 'sample' exploring new ways of connecting the particular and the general; new thinking about research ethics that move us beyond anonymity to better explore the meanings of confidentiality and the co-production of research knowledge; and finally the promotion of a QLR sensibility that involves a heightened awareness of the here and now in the making of knowledge, yet which also connects research biographically over a career, enriched by a reflexive understanding of time as a resource in the making of meaning.

## Introduction

Qualitative longitudinal research emerged as a distinct methodological paradigm around the turn of the millennium, named within the UK through journal special issues (Thomson et al. 2003, Corden and Millar 2007b), literature reviews (Holland et al. 2006, Corden and Millar 2007a, Thomson 2009) and funding commitments (ESRC 2004.) 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. A review undertaken for the ESRC in 2005 (Holland et al. 2006) demonstrates that there is 'nothing new' about QLR, but also shows how conditions have arisen that give this methodology a new salience and focus. In general terms, the current interest in QLR can be seen as part of a 'temporal' turn within the social sciences associated with a range of 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).

The UK has been at the forefront of both qualitative and longitudinal studies, combined in a range of ways, but including a stream of work that is both qualitative and longitudinal (Elliott et al. 2007). The latter has been 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 lifecourse ([Timescapes 2011](#)), organisational development ([Real Times component of Third Sector Research Centre 2010](#)) and transport futures ([EPSRC Step Change project](#)). Other initiatives, although not named as QLR, also use qualitative approaches to focus on durational processes, for example traditions of long term ethnography (and revisits) in anthropology and development 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, 2013). QLR has also made a significant impact in policy research, with funders and researchers recognising the potential of the method to generate unique insights into the ways that social policies and interventions are 'lived' and moreover 'survived' by individuals, families, communities and organisations (Corden and Millar 2007, McGrellis 2011, Ridge and Millar 2011, Shildrick et al. 2012).

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 Puwar 2012, Lury and Wakeford 2012), a recognition of the logic of 'continuous rather than bundled time' that is an affordance of digital devices (Savage et al. 2010b) and the ethical implications of a digitised knowledge economy (Macmillan 2011, Mauthner and Parry 2012, Mauthner 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 volatile and contested, with longitudinality condensing and amplifying ethical sensibilities regarding privacy, ownership, reputation, exploitation and anonymity (Henwood 2008, Thomson 2007, Mauthner 2012, Moore 2012, Coltart et al. 2013, Taylor et al. forthcoming). In particular, visual methods offer a powerful tool for longitudinal qualitative research, disrupting boundaries between popular story-telling and academic knowledge production, reframing the mediating role of the researcher and demonstrating co-production in inescapable ways (Henwood et al. 2011, Hurdley and Dicks 2011, Pink 2011). In the light of growing awareness of the 'performativity' of research methods there is also value in engaging with how longitudinality and meaning making have formed part of practice traditions in which 'situated' and durational forms of observation and participation play a key role, for example: infant observation (Urwin and Steinberg 2012), development (Anderson 2000) and performance (Bayly and Baraitser 2008, Saldana 2003).

### **A network for methodological innovation**

In 2012-3 the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods ([NCRM](#)) funded a network for methodological innovation to map 'New frontiers of QLR' ([NFQLR 2014](#)). At the heart of the network was a group of scholars who have been actively involved in establishing QLR as a methodological field, including those working on related intellectual endeavours such as narrative and biographical analysis ([CNR 2008](#), [NABS 2012](#)) and the creation and analysis of qualitative longitudinal archives ([Timescapes Archive 2011](#) and [Mass Observation Archive](#)). The network built on related innovation in the area of archives and data re-use (Geiger et al. 2010, Cohen 2005) and sought synergies with complementary initiatives such as the NCRM node

NOVELLA (2014), the 'Social Life of Methods' stream of CRESC (2010) the Olive Schreiner letters project (2008) and the first stages of the AHRC's Care for the Future initiative including the Temporal Belongings project (2010). It also brought together a range of QLR projects: both the plethora of small scale projects associated with PhD, postdoctoral and unfunded research, and larger scale endeavours such as the DfID funded 'Young Lives' study (2010) (Oxford University), the ESRC/EPSRC funded studies 'Step Change' (Leeds/Manchester) and 'Energy Biographies' (Cardiff) and the 'Real Times' component of the ESRC funded Third Sector Research Centre (2010) (TSRC, Birmingham). The network involved researchers at different stages of their career and sought to extend the reach of QLR to include traditions of research and theory emerging from practice – including traditions of research in psychoanalysis, development and performance studies (NFQLR 2014). Five events took place over the course of 12 months, hosted by the universities of Southampton, Cardiff, Manchester, London (Birkbeck College) and Sussex. The events were each linked to skills-based workshops aimed at doctoral students and early career researchers. A network blog was also created as a longitudinal method, individual network members were invited to collaborate in a project of documenting and reflecting on the network events through individual blog entries (McGeeney 2012, NewFrontiersBlog 2014).

The following overview of the year of activity organised by the network documents innovative approaches emerging in different disciplines and practices, and the ways that the network has built on the synergies generated by the series of events to expand thinking and consider future practice in QLR.

## **Overview of the events**

### **Event I, November 15th 2012, the University of Southampton, *Interdisciplinary perspectives on continuity and change: What counts as QLR?***

This one day launch event in collaboration with Quest at the University of Southampton examined how continuities and changes can be captured and demonstrated over time, drawing

on perspectives from a range of disciplines including anthropology/ development studies, educational sociology, community studies and organizational studies. Key issues explored in this event relate to how seriality, mobility, change and continuity are conceptualised, marked and evidenced through empirical materials. Speakers included Professor Lois Weis, (SUNY, USA) who discussed the utility of 'longitudinal ethnography' and reflected on the 'critical bifocality' that emerged from revisiting her own ethnographic study of a white working class community after the passage of 20 years. Professor Graham Crow (Southampton) discussed his partial restudy of Ray Pahl's Sheppey studies of the 1970s drawing attention to the serendipities of the archive (Crow 2012). Jeanine Anderson (Catholic University Lima, Peru) reflected on her career-long ethnographic research in a shanty town in Lima, capturing the interplay of historical and biographical time in profound ways (Anderson 2012). Contributions were also made by Rob Macmillan and Malin Arvidson drawing on the Real Times project of TSRC (Birmingham), Gina Crivello (Oxford) who discussed the international longitudinal Young Lives project and asked us to consider what meaningful research reciprocity means in a QLR study, and historian Lucy Robinson (Sussex) reflecting on a digital archiving project on the 1980s.

This first event raised many issues that continued to be explored over the course of the series including compelling questions about the ethics of archiving and data sharing and the centrality of the research relationship to understanding qualitative longitudinal data. One distinctive insight generated during the day was how QLR enables us to move beyond questions of continuity and change to identify and explore phenomena that are inherently temporal – for example processes of corruption and the making and unmaking of reputations that can be understood as 'tournaments of value' (Anderson), the formation and expressions of class identities (Weis) and the function and affordances of local spaces. The analysis of such phenomena demand that we engage with the interplay between agency and structure, recognising the intensity of what happens within families, communities and organisations while also understanding how this accumulates into social, structural and ultimately historical processes. Qualitative longitudinal approaches, broadly defined, can open up for analysis the processes and practices through which the continuous flow of culture is achieved. An important theme for analysis is how the passage of time is narrated by individuals and collectives (incidental/ consequential, rough/ smooth, fast/ slow, deliberate, anticipated/ foreseen) and how archives are in turn shaped by legal and media protocols and wider forms of governance. Archives need to be read with and against the grain, noticing what is in as well as what is left out. Lucy Robinson encouraged us to think critically about popular and professional

practices of periodization including how our understandings may be shaped by the democratization of the archive through practices such as family history and the 'decadisation' embraced by popular media. Graham Crow championed the serendipity of archived materials that may disrupt these narratives and surprise us in the future. The event was characterised by what we came to call a QLR sensibility over the course of the series: an appetite to understand ourselves and our knowledge projects as situated and dynamic and engaging in recursive practices of documentation, reflection and analysis. The linked Early Career Researcher (ECR)/ Doctoral workshop included master classes from Lois Weis and Jeanine Anderson exploring further how a QLR sensibility can be pursued to connect different research projects over time ([HadfieldNFQLR 2012](#)).

**Event 2, February 7th-8th 2013, University of Cardiff, *Research relationships in time***

The second event in the series focused on the research relationship within qualitative longitudinal research, exploring how the extension of this relationship over time in an increasingly digitised landscape complicates and amplifies a range of ethical issues such as confidentiality/privacy and the ownership, control and display of data. Experienced QLR researchers were invited to take part in panels and to debate questions such as what is the impact of QLR; boundaries of research relationships; the vulnerable researcher; data ownership and sharing; and the ending of QLR: death, withdrawal, legacies and working with archives.

Natasha Mauthner (Aberdeen) began the day by asking participants to reflect critically on the unintended consequences of regulatory research funding guidelines on archiving and data sharing which she suggests can force researchers to privilege public interests over those of their participants, requiring them to make promises to participants that may be difficult to keep ([Mauthner 2013](#)). The social and economic conditions within which research is undertaken were also a feature of presentations by Karen Henwood (Cardiff) and Heather Elliot (Institute of Education) who explored the emotional dynamics of interview relationships over time as well as relationships within research teams and the interdependencies between permanent and contract researchers. They drew attention to the vulnerabilities of researchers whose emotional resources are a key feature of 'data' that may be shared through teams yet potentially lost to secondary researchers or developed in later work by permanent researchers from the original team without contract researchers' involvement ([Elliott 2013](#), [Henwood 2013](#)). Sheena McGrellis (Ulster) and Stephen Farrell (Sheffield) described the

challenge of keeping and following a QLR sample over extended periods of time, Sheena likening her role in the 15 year Inventing Adulthood study to a 'friendly stalker' and Stephen sharing a detectives tool kit of 'cold-case review', 'contact-tracing' and 'persistence' that enabled his team to trace a sample of probationers over 53 waves. Rachel Thomson (Sussex) and Tess Ridge (Bristol) explored the challenge of reporting QLR data to audiences that may include the participants themselves as well as policy makers/ practitioners and other academics ([Ridge 2013](#), [Thomson 2013](#)). Rachel emphasised the need to engage in ethical experiments, embracing multi-media strategies for sharing the extraordinary perspectives enabled by QLR approaches, while Tess drew on her experience of researching families living in poverty to caution us on the dangers of losing control over how findings are interpreted within the public sphere. Both presentations observed the difficulties of maintaining anonymity within QLR in an age of digital methods, questioning whether we are moving from a paradigm of analog to digital ethics associated with the affordances of new media (for example where data is indexically marked with time and place information). This question was further explored by Rebecca Taylor (Birmingham) reporting on the challenges of anonymising whole organisations in the Real Times study of the third sector, suggesting that the decision whether to anonymise or not is highly consequential for the kind of knowledge that can be produced as well as the nature of the research relationship ([Taylor 2013](#)).

The day gave rise to rich discussions about the contingencies of the research relationship and how it is shaped by technologies and the research environment, with Ester McGeeney (Sussex) observing how 'data' may be 'grabbed' by new social media technologies without consent or knowledge of its 'authors'. Janet Boddy (Sussex) asked whether researchers might engage in more ethical research practices without the protections of anonymity. Liz Stanley (Edinburgh) reminded participants that their concern with anonymity is a feature of a particular kind of researcher-led approach to data generation, which does not hold in the same way for those working with documents or archived sources. We were unable to explore a range of important debates concerning the ethics of the archive, the kinds of confidentiality that may be due to archive subjects and different levels of 'publicness' that may be associated with processes such as digitization and open access. Gina Crivello (Oxford) asked us to think about how we end research relationships as well as keep them going encouraging us to consider why and how temporal proximity impacts on ethical responsibilities. All these questions were explored in depth at the linked ECR/Doctoral workshop which included a panel discussion with speakers from day 1 and presentations on multi-modality by Bella Dicks and Fiona Shirani from Cardiff

University ([Dicks 2013](#), [Shirani 2013](#)). Activities led by Simon Wood (Cardiff University) facilitated the creation of short films on QLR by participants ([CIRCYSussex 2013a&2013b](#)).

**Event 3 March 18th 2013, the University of Manchester, ‘Reconceptualising the object of QLR: Duration and seriality’**

This event was hosted by the Social Life of Methods stream of CRESC and took as its focus the ‘durational phenomena’ that are the focus of QLR, attempting to make links between ideas of temporal and spatial mobilities. Speakers included Andrew Abbott (Chicago) who provided a theoretical account of the relationship between social space and social time, observing that it is always through space that we experience temporal processes of duration (‘the thick present’ of his title) and that the ‘event’ provides analytic focus for an account of the coming together of links and consequences ([Abbott 2013](#)). Michelle Bastian (Edinburgh) enriched this theoretical vocabulary by offering concepts that disrupt simple linear approaches to time and our location within it- including orientations that understand ancestors as ahead of rather, than behind us ([Bastian 2013](#)). The way that we position ourselves within time and narrate this to others is then a cultural artefact, expressing among other things our position within the social hierarchy, a point made clearly by Mike Savage (LSE) drawing on his work with the National Child Development panel ([Savage 2013](#)).

Liz Stanley (Edinburgh) challenged us to think about duration beyond the lives of individuals through an epistolary project examining letters exchanged between white South Africans over a 200 year period ([Stanley 2013](#)). By attending to the formal elements of the correspondence she alerted us to the value of the ‘letter’ as a ‘porous index of social change’. This continuous figuration of correspondence, made up of a changing cast of writer/recipients was interrogated through a focus on sequence, variance, temporal ordering and interval, showing how it is possible to bridge the vocabularies of quantitative and qualitative analysis. This was also a feature of presentations by Niamh Moore, Stuart Muir and Andy Miles (Manchester) and Dave Watling (Leeds) on their qualitative longitudinal study on sustainable transport ([Moore, Muir & Miles 2013](#)). These presentations explored how successive biographical narratives (as well as different approaches to eliciting biographies) can be a generative yet disruptive resource within an interdisciplinary project, complicating abstracted notions of the individual that underpin mathematical modelling of transport futures as well as challenging the crude periodisations of historical time that are a key part of sociologies of mobility. Alan Warde (Manchester) affirmed the value of QLR in two key ways: first within the wider context of mixed method research

QLR can provide a understanding of the complex and dynamic individual that could be built into studies with the capacity to map social fields and structures (for example multiple correspondence analysis)- thus bridging divisions between qualitative and quantitative approaches ([Warde 2013](#)). Second, by facilitating a focus on 'events' QLR approaches have synergies with practice theory approaches, raising analytic and empirical questions about continuities and discontinuities. Participants had the opportunity to digest the ideas from the seminar at a linked ECR/ Doctoral workshop which involved a Q&A session with Stanley and Abbott and the opportunity to collectively design a QLR study ([McGeeney 2013](#)).

**Event 4: June 13-14th 2013, Birkbeck College, University of London, QLR and practice traditions.**

Organised with the Department of Psycho-social Studies at Birkbeck College and the Department of Performance Studies at Roehampton University, this event staged an encounter between QLR and practice traditions in which 'situated' and durational forms of observation and participation play a key role, including clinical psychoanalysis (e.g. infant observation and forms of organisational consultancy) and varieties of 'socially-engaged' art practice. Questions that shaped the day included: what might the practice traditions of social and performance art, infant observation, and qualitative longitudinal research have to offer one another? How might engagement with and between traditions change the way we think about duration, observation, participation, the situation and reflexivity? Can we track what we observe and feel as social and psychic? What does it mean to be embedded in our research and how do our practices change over time?

The day began with a series of presentations each concerned with documenting and understanding forms of embodied meaning and its transmission. This included an evocation of the first year in the life of a baby using infant observation methods by Jenifer Wakelyn (Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust), a documentary film by Belinda Mandelbaum (University of Sao Paolo, Brazil) that captured a community's relationship with cherished objects in the wake of a flood and Valerie Walkerdine's (Cardiff) account of the Performing Abergavenny project that used performance as a method for generating collective memories of place as well as her own visual art practice as a medium for tracking and theorising the transmission of embodied experience ([Mandelbaum 2013](#), [Wakelyn 2013](#), [Walkerdine 2013](#)). These themes were further developed in the afternoon session by presentations from a series of performance art practitioners. Simon Bayly (Roehampton) provided a survey of 'social

practice' as a method for the staging of new or existing social relations in specific situations ([Bayly 2013](#)). Richard Layzell (University of the Arts) embodied this in his presentation of his work as an artist/researcher in a range of organisational contexts, demonstrating how performance constitutes a live and provocative research practice ([Layzell 2013](#)). In the final session Joe Kelleher (Roehampton) explained his research as a form of 'expert spectatorship' in performance studies and Terry O'Connor (Forced Entertainment) shared her practice of 'experiential playing' developed in a series of performance pieces that invite audiences to engage in the generation of knowledge ([Kelleher 2013](#), [O'Connor 2013](#)).

As well as being fun, moving and provocative, the day encouraged participants to inspect taken-for-granted categories and practices and to consider what might be different, special and even absurd about social research practices. Discussion focused on the different ways in which 'research' is understood and enacted in different disciplines, and how social research might be enriched by attention to process as well as a recognition of its own artifice. Again anxieties around anonymisation emerged as distinctive to the social sciences and the project of making/ extracting/ producing 'data' from the world. By engaging with the practice traditions of psycho-analysis and performance, we sensitised ourselves to the unfolding present - an awareness of 'what is happening now?' as a question that can be asked again and again about layers of evidence, representations and documents that may be re-animated in successive moments and given coherence within biographical and historical frameworks. The linked ECR/ Doctoral workshop involved a Q&A session with seminar speakers (Kelleher and Baraitser) followed by a social practice exercise led by Simon Bayly involving mobile, visual and performative methods ([Jousselin 2013](#)).

**Event 5, September 11-12th 2013, the University of Sussex, *The child in time: Animating ideas of development and transition.***

The event was preceded by a writing workshop where members of the ECR/ PhD network shared and discussed draft papers inspired by their participation in the series with other members of the network, with a view to producing a working paper. The seminar hosted by the University of Sussex Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY) focused on two related issues: the part played by qualitative longitudinal methods in childhood studies and the importance of observational methods and visual display in animating ideas of 'development' and 'transition' in academic and popular imaginaries. The seminar built on work that emerged from the Norwegian Academy funded CAS project on personal development of

socio-cultural change and began with a paper from its director Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen (Oslo) who used a single case study from her 15 year QLR study of children to ask the question 'what times are in this child?', offering an alternative to the "new sociology of childhood" which jettisoned its ability to account for historical and biographical time in its rejection of developmental psychology and accounts of socialisation (Bjerrum Nielsen 2013). Papers by Pam Thurschwell (Sussex), Jette Kofoed (Aarhus, Denmark) and Bruce Bennett (Lancaster) explored the contribution of different media to the representation of the child in time (Bennett 2013, Kofoed 2013, Thurschwell 2013). Pam Thurschwell traced the queer temporalities embedded in depictions of adolescence over a century, from Henry James's novel *The Award Age* through to the teen time-travel movies of 1980s-2000s. Jette Kofoed explored the temporal affordances of new social media and the kinds of emotional intensities associated with the non-simultaneity that it involves. Bruce Bennett surveyed the history of children on film, emphasising how cinema operates as a 'time machine' able to both capture the passage of everyday time and document, dramatise and reconfigure the passage of time – often through figures of children.

In the final panel session Ginny Morrow, (Young Lives , Oxford) and health and arts practitioner Mary Robson explored the idea of development as an imperative within policy and practice (Morrow 2013, Robson 2013). Ginny showed how the Young Lives project uses QLR to bring the everyday lives of real children into abstract debates on sustainability and change within development studies. Mary Robson's long term arts-based work with children and communities demonstrates how practices of documentation and reflection can constitute an intervention, operating as a kind of curiosity fuelled 'manure' that enriches individuals, relationships and environments. Again we contemplated how longitudinal approaches force us to question our own research practices and boundaries between research and other practice traditions. With the input of discussants Ann Phoenix (IoE), Mary Jane Kehily (Open) and Vicky Lebeau (Sussex) we identified the value of QLR in complex relationship between normative prescriptions of how childhood could and should be, and representations of actual childhoods and concrete times and places.

## **Future research directions?**

### **Big data, deep data:**

One theme to emerge from the series was the potential for QLR approaches to complicate a qualitative/ quantitative research divide – by bringing together heterogeneous sources that can

be connected and manipulated through the affordances of digitisation. The Olive Schreiner letter project is an exemplar data set that is simultaneously big (4800 letters in total), long (covering the period between 1871 and 1920), relational (structured by different and discontinuous correspondences spanning space and time) and dense (constituted by individual compositions situated in time and space). QLR projects are paradoxically big and small, with what might be seen as a small sample giving rise to an exponential data set as time passes, with temporal scale defined by numbers of research waves and the passage of time. The potential for combining quantitative and qualitative panel data was also observed, with narrative complexity offering an alternative to the abstract individual that is so often assumed by quantitative paradigms. QLR also demands that we question boundaries between historical and sociological approaches to 'sources/ data' with the former characterized by a more flexible understanding of the relationship between primary and secondary sources than the latter (Stanley 2013, Thomson 2014). Multi-media approaches also have the capacity to capture lived time in sound and vision, documenting changing lives and changing media. Whether such relationships are enabled by data linkage strategies or integrated research designs is an important question with technical as well as ethical and epistemological dimensions. QLR studies may include either or both archived and researcher generated data sources. The challenge is to move beyond both the mixed methods research paradigm that understands qualitative research as providing illustrative examples, and the big data trend for quantifying large text based data sets – neither of which exploit the unique capacity of QLR to explore lived time.

### **The particular, the general and the longitudinal case**

QLR promises movement between the particular and the general without relinquishing the situated specificity of the individual case nor the ability to trace antecedents and consequences. QLR is often associated with researcher-generated repeat individual interview research designs, yet it also includes researcher-assembled data associated with archive based approaches. The individual can be understood as an empirical entry-point into processes that are relational and social as well as biographical. QLR is characterised by a focus on temporal phenomena, with a distinct facility for revealing the unfolding of processes and the relationship between a linear clock time and the complexities of time as lived that encompasses subjects and researchers. QLR may work with multiple units of analysis, moving between micro, meso and macro scales of space and time, and utilising a varied analytic vocabulary of 'becomings', 'psychosocial temporalities', 'bundles of practices', 'events', 'figurations' and 'periodisation'. In the past QLR

studies have adopted many of the practices of 'snap shot' research, working with large samples, revisited in waves with data collection taking precedence over analysis or display. As the method matures we begin to see a more strategic use of sampling and the development of fewer yet highly generative 'emblematic cases' (Thomson 2009) which depending on how they are constructed and extended/contracted over time can link the micro, macro or meso levels.

### **Beyond anonymity?**

QLR research raises particular ethical challenges for researchers as the accumulation of information over time makes it difficult to reliably obscure identities in the ways that is often codified as good ethical practice in the institutional practices of social research (Neale and Hanna 2012, Neale 2013). One effect of this is to encourage us to reflect on why anonymity is necessary or desirable, the differences between confidentiality (which refers to rules or a promise that limits access or places restrictions on certain types of information) and anonymity (which refers to the withholding of personally identity from public knowledge) and the disciplinary contexts and temporal assumptions of these different commitments. What might it mean for people to engage in social research without the promise of anonymity, and how might the different aspects of confidentiality be explored in relation to the 'context collapse' between publicness and privateness associated with digital communications and information practices (Marwick & boyd 2011, Vitak 2012)? How are our expectations and sentiments shaped by a changing cultural context? There are traditions of research that do not make assumptions of anonymity – for example action research which conceptualises a partnership between researchers and researched, oral history that conceptualises subjects as the authors of their own testimonies, and documentary research traditions that work with archived sources. Is it possible to anticipate the afterlife of a 'data set' at the moment of its creation? QLR raises important questions about the relationship between 'documents', the people involved in their creation and curation and the potential to revisit and reanimate these relationships over time in such a way that problematizes interdisciplinary boundaries and associated distinctions between 'subjects', 'data' and 'sources'.

There is no single model of confidentiality and anonymity that characterises contemporary social research, yet some of our assumption as to what constitutes good ethical practice may well be a consequence of a moment in sociology associated with the rise of the survey and interview that Savage argues abstracted the individual from the physical landscape and generated 'new' ethical concerns to 'protect anonymity, to champion confidentiality, to avoid

making value judgments on their samples' (Savage 2010: 237). The cumulative specificity of QLR cases may express the broader character of digitised data, always marked by an indexical time and place stamp. Yet Rebecca Taylor's contribution to event 2 suggests that in relinquishing anonymity we may also let go of a model of researcher independence which at its best has the qualities of 'taking nothing for granted, refusing conventional normative framings and respecting the everyday and ordinary' (Savage 2010: 237). Questions of authorship, ownership and control also arise in this context as the boundaries between 'found', 'administrative' and 'researcher/participant generated' data are blurred. At its best QLR deploys a model of iterative and situated ethics, that assumes that neither researchers nor research participants can anticipate the full consequences of what we may agree to and thus should have the opportunity to revisit these decisions and their consequences over time. To deliver on this model requires a level of human resource, infrastructure and commitment that may not always be available.

### **Privileging the here and now:**

A key theme that arose from the series was the way in which QLR incites a critical reflexivity about the artifice and paradoxically the reality of the research process. The QLR approach historicises social science practice, drawing attention to the artifice of our methods, the biography of the researcher and the cultural context within which 'research' is meaningful. In revealing and including what is usually invisible QLR has the potential to foster interdisciplinarity between the research traditions of the social sciences and those within the arts and humanities. This is especially apparent in relation to the recasting the ways that primary and secondary sources (and/or data and context) are imagined and treated and the assumed linearity of the research process that moves through research design; data generation; analysis, write up, file/dump/archive data and moving on.

Attention to the live practice of research also demands recognition of the research relationship (with both people and texts), a stance which incites collaborative logics for the co-production and co-creation of a range of objects, from community archives and documented oral histories to forms of DIY media production, live performance or even alternative forms of economic production. This is an approach that has some tensions with the formal requirements of ethical review which demand that ethical challenges are anticipated and resolved in advance without the input of the research subjects (Miller 2012). It may also disrupt institutional and funder

policies around intellectual property and open access that make assumptions about authorship, ownership and access *a priori*. A situated ethics informed by QLR is likely to pay greater attention to endings, self-censorship, visibility and the re-negotiation of consent for researchers and the researched in a context of the re-use and archiving of research documents.

### **A QLR sensibility:**

Over the course of the series we moved our attention between large scale collaborative initiatives and small scale personal research projects which themselves may become part of longer intellectual trajectories over time as samples and themes as explored and returned to over the course of a career. Our interdisciplinary approach enabled us to understand the affinities between many different research traditions which in different ways design time into intellectual endeavour. This may include archival projects, revisiting one's own or others research, documenting and contributing to a community over a lifetime, engaging in creative work with a research team or a 'company' over many years, becoming part of a network with a shared purpose. We became increasingly convinced that QLR does not denote a particular research design and it is important that it does not become a euphemism for repeat interview approaches. Elaborating what constitutes a QLR sensibility is an important project our network continues to discuss, in the words of Catherine Walker 'We began to see QLR not as a method, or set of methods, but as a sensibility, a mindset, an orientation, a foregrounding of temporality, an inspiration to remain alert to time and temporality in our research (all definitions used across the series). [...] Seeing QLR as a sensibility in search of a set of methods opens up possibilities beyond what QLR might traditionally or typically be known for, that is, carrying out research with the same participants over time. For whilst not all research fits these criterion, all research takes place in time and over time. And yet in order to avoid QLR becoming a catch-all, so-broad-it-becomes-meaningless concept, I think it is helpful to think about ways of understanding time, and their implications for a research project and more broadly a research career.' ([Walker 2013](#)).

### **Moving with the times**

Participants and organisers were surprised and invigorated by the vitality, energy and intellectual excitement that characterized the New Frontiers network. Although QLR as a methodological paradigm has been publically named, described and mapped since 2003, it continues to mark a dynamic space for innovation and experiment. The temporal turn within

research methodology has profound implications which continue to unfold, and many of the issues touched during this twelve months of intensive collaborative enquiry suggest significant new areas of thinking and development yet to come. A QLR framework has the potential to reframe and provide new thinking on any substantive area of enquiry. Yet it is most powerful in engaging with complex and interacting dynamic processes, for example between social and geographic mobility, between processes of maturation and technological change or in understanding the history of research methods themselves and their relationship to a changing cultural and technical landscape. QLR is also associated with the breaching of many of the temporal boundaries that have constituted the research process (between design, data collection, analysis, reporting, archiving) as well as the boundaries that distinguish arts and humanities from social science and research from practice. As a network we experience the excitement as well as the disorientation associated with these breaches yet were left in no doubt as to the potential for QLR to provide a purposive focus for consolidating and extending methodological development within and between our fields. We encourage the NCRM to continue to invest in QLR, marking as it does a highly generative interdisciplinary frontier for innovation in theory and method that by definition moves with the times, yet which has popular recognition and international salience.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have outlined how the 'New Frontiers in QLR' methodological innovation network positioned its project as the latest stage in an ongoing discussion of qualitative longitudinal methods. The network provided an opportunity to consolidate the learning that has developed in QLR over a sustained period of ESRC investment, and to engage critically with what QLR might mean in dynamic contemporary times. This paper documents how we staged a series of discussions involving the definition of QLR, the kinds of relationships and practices it involves and the consequences of these in a changing landscape for social research. The series was deliberately interdisciplinary ensuring that we engaged with the temporal perspectives and norms of different academic and practice traditions and this has both enriched and complicated the picture that has emerged from our deliberations encouraging us to challenge our research practices, develop synergies and define new frontiers. In attempting to map future directions for research in this area we have identified provocations, recurring themes and methodological, epistemological and ethical problematics that demand debate and elaboration. The network itself was understood by participants as an instance of QLR, collaboratively building knowledge

in forms of call-and-response through staged events that were both face to face and virtual and the after-life of these events and digital traces through the project blog and forms of writing such as this report. The provocations that we identified are expressions of the current moment within the field and the issues of the day that define the parameters of research strategies. Our engagement with the demands of ethical governance, with big data and with performance will no doubt date and place our enterprise and will be written over by new provocations and expressions of interest and alliance in the future.

QLR has obvious merits and still untapped potential for changing the way in which we think about social research and interdisciplinarity. Although there was no explicit discussion of feminism over the course of the series, many of the individuals involved would understand themselves as working within a feminist tradition of critical and reflexive research practice. Feminist methodology has provided a forum for debates on epistemology, ethics, collaboration and reflexivity as well as inspiring many of the empirical projects that are the exemplars of QLR. As such the QLR sensibility that we have described and enacted owes a great debt to feminism and its methods. We end this paper by returning to three quotations that were evoked over the course of the series by members of the network as a resource for helping us think about QLR:

‘We never step into the same river twice’ (coined by Heraclitus 400 years BC and shared by Graham Crow 15.11.12)

‘You beat your wings all your life but in the end the wind decides where you go’ (Julian Barnes 1998, shared by Rob Macmillan and Malin Arvidson 15.11.12)

‘The answer my friend is blowing in the wind’ (Bob Dylan 1963 shared by Niamh Moore 7.01.14)

The quotation from Heraclitus highlights that what is continuous is change – in people’s lives, including researcher lives, and in the world of research methods. Julian Barnes’s words capture something of the researcher’s attempts to control the process of research (and the frustrations arising from this). Bob Dylan offers a rather different version, which models the sensibility that researchers need for QLR (and any) research. Perhaps one can never step in the same river twice because one is the river, or is continuous with the river, or one is not blown in the wind, but one is the wind blowing.... so the researcher is no longer (if they ever were) on the outside

looking in. QLR amplifies how the researcher is always deeply implicated in the research and is a subject of the research, like (other) research participants, even if differently.

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