The Longitudinal Qualitative Interview

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Abstract Studies have emerged that use qualitative techniques to collect and analyze data on subjects followed over time. But due to the novelty of this approach, a codified methodology underlying longitudinal qualitative research is underdeveloped. This article focuses on one method of longitudinal qualitative research, the longitudinal qualitative interview (LQI), to: 1) account for its origin and epistemology, and 2) delimit the parameters within which LQIs are successfully conducted, using an example from the author’s studies of careers. LQIs are conducted with the same people over a time period sufficient to allow for the collection of data on specified conditions of change. They are also an important means by which to study how people experience, interpret, and respond to change. Accordingly, they are a prime means to study development at individual, group, and societal levels. While the foundation of LQIs is traceable to a long history, their robust application belongs to an as yet unrealized future.

Keywords Interviews · Longitudinal · Methodology · Epistemology

Longitudinal research has customarily employed quantitative methods. The preponderance of longitudinal research draws upon a family of quantitative techniques directed at measurement of panel data. But what is longitudinal research? Following Menard (2002), we may understand it as research in which 1) data are collected about an item over two or more distinct periods of time; 2) that which is analyzed is the same or comparable across periods of time; and 3) analysis involves comparison of data across time periods. Yet as Saldana (2008, 297) has noted: “Just as there is statistical increase, decrease, constancy, idiosyncrasy and the like in quantitative data, so too can there be qualitative increase, decrease, constancy, idiosyncrasy and the like within and among participants in social settings.”

1Even in the most recent handbook of longitudinal research (Menard 2008), only one of the thirty-eight chapters is devoted to qualitative research.

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Since 2000, studies have increasingly emerged that employ qualitative techniques in the collection and analysis of data from subjects followed over time. The techniques enable the identification and meaning of temporal change across lives, and the exploration of how people interpret and respond to such change. Applications are found in studies of persistence and desistence from crime (Laub and Sampson 2003); child socialization, parenting, and family relationships (Neale and Flowerdew 2003); drug use and treatment services (Harrop and Dennis 2003; Ward and Henderson 2003); poverty (Millar 2007); and occupational careers (Hermanowicz 2009), among other settings, often bearing policy relevance (e.g., Corden and Nice 2007). Owing to the nascent nature of this line of work, however, the voices are relatively few in codifying a methodology underlying longitudinal qualitative research (LQR).^3^

I focus on one method of longitudinal qualitative research, the longitudinal qualitative interview (LQI), to account for its origin and epistemology. LQIs are conducted with the same people over a time period sufficient to allow for the collection of data on specified conditions of change. The discussion underscores the principal aim of longitudinal qualitative research: to expose process, evaluate causality, and substantiate micro–macro linkage. To this end, longitudinal qualitative research, and LQI specifically, has arisen as an innovative way by which to understand developmental change, whether conceived at an individual, group, institutional, or societal level (Rusini 1999). As the discussion will indicate, the etiology underlying LQIs is familial. The account thus speaks also to the origin and aim of other approaches in which LQR is manifested, such as in case studies (Thomson 2007), ethnography (Burton et al. 2009), observational work (Saldana 2008), and mixed methods (Huber and Van de Ven 1995; Tomanovic 2003).

Origin and Epistemology

LQR encompasses a set of research methods and approaches that have theoretic premises. While contemporary empirical instantiations of LQR are found in such varied substantive work as noted above, its origin dates to a specific line of thought, one which ironically traces to the founding of sociology in the United States: the Chicago School of Sociology (Bulmer 1984; Faris 1967; Musolf 2003). The work of the Chicago School located explanations of behavior and social situations in the actor’s point of view as situated ecologically in an environment understood to both shape and be shaped by participants in a setting.

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^2^ A partial exception is Clausen (1993), who began his investigation into the patterning of lives from the Berkeley longitudinal studies in 1928. The subjects were followed annually through the 1930s, and then at subsequent intervals up to the 1990s. A combination of survey and interview data were collected at these times. Sixty men and women were selected for in-depth life history interviews for American Lives, and six of these individuals form chapter-length vignettes. The book blends quantitative and qualitative data, with arguably more emphasis placed on quantitative analysis, instruments, and measures. It does not contain an account of the qualitative procedures employed across the decades of the project.

^3^ While LQR remains young in application, researchers in Great Britain have to-date been the most active in establishing a beginning foundation of empirical studies (Corden and Millar 2007a; Thomson and Holland 2003). Comments by Thomson et al. (2003, 185) in a special issue of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology, devoted to longitudinal approaches, underscore this point: “The origins of this special issue lie in a combination of excitement and anxiety: excitement that we were working with promising new methodology and anxiety that this was taking place without a relevant literature to inform and debate the epistemological or practical decisions we were making.” Corden and Millar (2007b), make similar observations in a special section of Social Policy and Society. Saldana’s (2003) book-length discussion, focused on observation, arguably remains the most sustained treatment.
Early Chicago School sociologists, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess foremost among them, advanced this orientation in studies of the city (Park 1952; Park et al. 1925; also Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-20/1958; With 1928), typically treating Chicago as a vast laboratory for social research. These researchers grounded the orientation analytically in the work of another Chicago faculty member (in philosophy), George Herbert Mead, and his pragmatist social psychology, a perspective that evolved through works of the Chicago School into an explicit symbolic interactionism. This approach specified an empirical method: anthropological-like field study involving heavy use of the interview and participant observation. The result tended to be a biographical form of data and analysis wherein the lives of people came to life in the context of the institutional worlds in which they found themselves.

By the Chicago School’s perspective, self and society, individual and institution are examined through their reciprocity, each in mutual creation of the other. Consequently, the course underscored a consideration of process, change, and causality in the dialogue between micro and macro forces that create situated orders on these levels. Implied, thus, if not explicitly articulated in the School’s work, is a temporality in the study of social life. Selves and societies, individuals and institutions, pass together in historical time, each successively adapting and “coming into being” through their interaction.

Chicago School research generated a delimitable scholarly specialty in the form of urban sociology, but it also spurred inquiry elsewhere, most notably in occupational sociology—the study of people and their work—inspired by Everett C. Hughes, a Chicago faculty member from 1938 to 1961. No concept employed by Hughes better captured the temporal underpinnings of the Chicago School than that of the career. For Hughes, careers are studied for their “two sides” (Hughes 1937; later developed by Goffman 1961; see also Hughes’s posthumous publication 1997). The objective career consists of the sequence of statuses a person holds over time. The subjective career, existing in tandem, consists of the shifting personal perspectives individuals develop about themselves and their work.

Turning points are used to explain when and how change occurs in the subjective career as it “converses” with the objective side (Hughes 1958). As careers unfold, people undergo a series of changes, not only in their objective status, but also in the patterned subjective views they hold about themselves in light of this change. The idea is, of course, applicable to status change, as when men and women progressively enter new statuses and consequently formulate views of themselves because of them, moving for example, at the onset of adulthood from single adulthood, courtship, marriage, parenthood, grandparenthood, to widowhood in life’s final set of status transitions (Glaser and Strauss 1971). So conceived, the idea of a career arose in studies of occupational life (e.g., Faulkner 1985) as in studies of students (e.g., Becker et al. 1961), delinquents (e.g., Becker 1963), and mental patients (e.g., Goffman 1961). It well captured the element of developmental change.

One point is striking. For the emphasis placed by the Chicago School on temporality, Hughes’s work, like nearly every other work of the School, was cross-sectional. The studies utilized retrospective and/or prospective cross-sectional designs. Subjects would talk about their lives and situations such that the present, following Mead’s ontology (who by turn built on others as far back as St. Augustine), was understood as a mediation of the past and the future (Mead 1932). In certain respects, this methodological situation is surprising given the centrality of process to the School’s efforts to comprehend life in (and apart from) the urban milieu. Longitudinal study in sociology would not ascend until the 1960s (Giele and Elder

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4 “Who will see that all past time is driven back by the future, that all the future is consequent on the past, and all the past and future are created and take their course from that which is ever present?” (The Confessions of St. Augustine, Book 11, Chapter 11).
1998; Elder and Giele 2009), but herein, too, lies the added surprise of the work taking predominantly quantitative form, as captured, for instance, in Young et al. (1991) inventory of longitudinal studies in the social sciences. Scholars have suggested that the eclipse of Chicago School-style work occurred in light of new-found popularity in survey work and structural analysis, a substantially different methodological and theoretic orientation, which may partly explain why longitudinal qualitative inquiry has been, by this historical view, oddly late in developing (Abbott and Gaziano 1995; Bulmer 1984; Platt 1996). Samuel Stouffer himself, who earned a Chicago Ph.D. in 1930, undoubtedly acted as an incipient turning point, by arguing that questionnaires provided more valuable data than situated life histories (Zaretzky 1984). The changes occurred against a backdrop of sentiment in this time about "scientizing" sociology, largely by turning to a natural science model of empirical inquiry (Bulmer 1984; Platt 1996; Zaretzky 1984).

There was one exception. It was Clifford Shaw's (1930/1966) foray into the life and mind of Stanley, the delinquent boy navigating the streets of his native Chicago. The Jack-Roller is simultaneously a case study, life history, and life story, obtained through a combination of interview and diary techniques. An exception in its time, it is longitudinal. The work is usually cast as a descendent of Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) pioneering work, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, the first sociological study to adopt the life history approach. But while based on life histories, The Polish Peasant was, like much of the sociological work in its day, cross-sectional.5 Shaw, by turn, followed Stanley for six years.

The Jack-Roller illustrates conceptual advantages brought about by its method. First, it takes the "actor's point of view" following a logic wherein actions are considered in terms of how opportunities and alternatives are viewed by a subject. Second, it provides a fine-grained view of the context in which a life is conditioned. The subject identifies the social and cultural situations to which he is responsive. Finally, we are provided a sequence of past experiences as they are arranged meaningfully by the subject. The account thus becomes a chief means by which to establish a rendering of causality.

Most important, these qualities achieve significance by introducing the element of time. Thus we are positioned to see Stanley's self-definition and how it is progressively changed, formed in conjunction with his environment. Stanley at sixteen is altogether different at twenty-two; by following him across time we are able to ascerten mechanisms of social control (in his work, mentor relationships, courtship and marriage) that regulate the transformation. What is more, the longitudinal evidence composing the case is capable of spawning formal theorizing about the substantive concerns—delinquency, persistence, and desistance in crime. Selected

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5 The Polish Peasant is at once cast as a monument in its time and subsequently overlooked. Thomas's abrupt firing by the University of Chicago president in 1918, related to an arrest at a downtown hotel where Thomas was charged with "interstate transport of females for immoral purposes" and false hotel registration, did not help the work's reception or the author's scholarly legacy. The president even directed the University of Chicago Press to abandon publication of the book; it was rescued by a Boston publisher. By 1948, Shils criticized sociologists for neglecting the work and called Thomas into a company of great sociological thinkers: "Durkheim, Weber, and Pareto, in whose class he surely belongs" (Shils 1948, 26, note 33; also quoted in Bulmer 1984, 45). By 1969, Niehth called The Polish Peasant "the greatest single study done thus far by an American sociologist," and argued that "had American sociology managed to follow in the lines of guidance contained in this remarkable work, it would not be so largely lost today in its tortuous and too often vapid categories and concepts related to social systems and their assorted properties" (Niehth 1969, 326; also quoted in Zaretzky 1984, 31). Years later still, in words not far off from Niehth's, Shils returned to his point in a biographical account of Robert Maynard Hutchins, the subsequent Chicago president who tried unsuccessfully to bring Thomas back to the University: "Thomas was at the time of his dismissed at the height of his intellectual powers. He was with Robert Park the most outstanding sociologist in the United States and one of the most outstanding in the world. He still remains in that category despite the passage of years and the multitudes of busy sociologists" (Shils 1991, 195).
modern-day criminological theory, in particular age-graded informal social control, traces many of its foundations to this early work (Laub and Sampson 2003).

In an introduction to The Jack-Roller, Becker (1930/1966) notes that we have alternative methods at our disposal. We could, for instance, administer a questionnaire to people at two points in time and infer a process of change in their lives in light of the answers they provide.

But our interpretation has significance only if our imagery of the underlying process is accurate...this accuracy of imagery—this congruence of theoretically posited process with what we could observe if we took the necessary time and trouble—can be...achieved...through the use of life history documents. For the life history, if it is done well, will give us the details of that process whose character we would otherwise only be able to speculate about...It will describe those crucial interactive episodes in which new lines of individual and collective activity are forged. (1930/1966, xiv)

To know the ways by which micro and macro orders are successively constructed—and with what consequences to individuals and to society—requires data in situ.

The Jack-Roller was based on an N of 1, which introduces constraints—namely generalization and theory building—even as the qualitative goal is to generalize on analytic (as opposed to statistical) grounds. Survey research, drawing on large samples, seeks to produce general statements about empirical regularities found within large populations. By contrast, qualitative research seeks to reveal people’s interpretations of forces that change or produce social processes (Ragin 1987; Weiss 1994). While the results of qualitative research direct researchers toward uncovering social processes by examining the details of individually lived experience, the social processes uncovered usually pertain to more general populations—an ideal of case study methods, but more achievable by approaches variously called small-N analysis (Abbott 2004), ethnographic revisits (Burawoy 2003), and biographical approaches to the study of lives (Atkinson 1998; Bertaux and Kohli 1984; Clausen 1998; Denzin 1989). As Abbott (2004, 22) explains:

Small-N comparison attempts to combine the advantages of single-case analysis with those of multicase analysis, at the same time trying to avoid the disadvantages of each. On the one hand, it retains much information about each case. On the other, it compares the different cases to test arguments in ways that are impossible with a single case. By making these detailed comparisons, it tries to avoid the standard criticism—that one can’t generalize from a single case—as well as the standard criticism of multicase analysis—that it oversimplifies and changes the meaning of variables by removing them from their context.

In longitudinal qualitative interviews, we are able to accomplish these aims by drawing upon samples that are neither too small nor too large, while maximizing our view of process by situating our subjects diachronically.6

Having thus emerged, a major goal of the LQI is to study development: in individuals and groups, and in institutions and societies. In doing so, we seek to expose how order is

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6 In qualitative research, sample size is typically established through theoretic sampling until a saturation point is reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Morse 2007). There are trade-offs in the size and composition of all samples. The point here is that LQR, like qualitative work in general, seeks to generalize on analytic dimensions that establish a framework by which to authentically interpret a group, setting, or situation. This objective tends to require a sample greater than one, since analytic dimensions are likely to emerge more readily amidst a plurality of subjects. And it tends to require a sample smaller than the samples customarily found in survey research, since the aim is not statistical generalization. Specific sample size is answerable by the aims of the given research, in the context of these guiding principles (Small 2009).
reciprocally accomplished at micro and macro levels of analysis. This goal is served by the qualitative practice of studying interpretations that people make of their situations and experiences. Because interviews occur serially with the same subjects, we render ourselves capable of advancing an ancillary goal, that of identifying and understanding the meaning of temporal change to people, while also exploring how people interpret and respond to such change. The result builds upon classic methodological underpinnings in sociology to create an innovative means of contemporary social analysis.

Application

My concern for LQIs, their codification and articulation, is prompted by my longitudinal studies of scientific careers (Hermanowicz 1998, 2009), a referent in points to follow. The longitudinal study of scientists was motivated by the question: What can we learn when we follow people over the years and across the course of their professional lives? Answers to the question form a sociological study of the interplay among careers, identities, and institutions (Barley 1989). I examined academics’ shifting perceptions of their jobs to uncover the meanings they invest in their work, when and where they find satisfaction, how they succeed and fail, and how the rhythms of work change as they age. The study was based on face-to-face interviews with academics who I first interviewed in 1994–95 and again in 2004–05. Research participants were initially sampled across a range of career stages (early, middle, and late) and in a range of institutions. The subsequent longitudinal study examined the career paths of these academics as they advanced from these points, including into the stage of retirement and exit from the career. Age and institutional location thus provided the structure to analyze individual, subjective careers through diachronic change.

A variety of considerations, major and minor, need to be given to implementing longitudinal qualitative interviews in research. The discussion focuses on five major ones because they establish the parameters of LQI design. These include: the point at which longitudinal inquiry originates; the number and frequency of longitudinal interviews; interview protocol format and accompanying mode of analysis; subject attrition and retention; and, respondent reaction. These parameters are theorized to be of major significance to the design of LQIs because they encompass when LQIs begin, how often they occur, the way in which they are structured by questions that guide the very method, how they are constituted by subject participation, and how their success may be conditioned by responses from subjects about the research. When one of these parameters fails, the ability to employ LQIs is compromised or altogether impracticable.

Origination

LQIs may proceed from two different starting points. They may be factored into the design at the outset of a study, where researchers anticipate and plan in advance the use of serial interviews. Millar’s (2007) study of lone mothers and their children as they leave income support for employment illustrates this approach. Alternatively, LQIs may be formulated into a design after a study has been completed, when the research is conducive to longitudinal formulation and where the benefits of such work are likely large. Thomson and Holland’s (2003) study of youth identity and values reflects this approach, as does the study of scientific careers (for coverage on the related issue of archiving and re-using qualitative sol data, see Parry and Mauthner 2004, 2005 and the special issue of the Australian Journal of Social Issues, 2009).
The foundational study of scientists was conceived and completed in the absence of entertaining a possibility of longitudinal work. The subsequent discovery that such an undertaking would be the first longitudinal study of the academic profession suggested that this might be a profitable new way to examine careers. I began contacting respondents of the original sample in spring of 2004. I did so by sending them a letter which attempted to place the longitudinal study in context by reminding them of their previous participation in the foundational work, by explaining what the longitudinal study sought to accomplish, and by informing them about what their continued participation would involve (For an example of the letter used to re-contact respondents, see Hermanowicz 2009, Appendix B).

Numerous cross-sectional studies lend themselves to repeated investigation. Even prior longitudinal studies that had seemingly ended are potentially amenable to new and highly revealing iterations of empirical investigation, as exemplified in Laub and Sampson’s (2003) late twentieth-century study of the criminal life course based on subjects originally studied by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck at mid-century. The Polish Peasant fits the formulation of cross-sectional study that is amendable to longitudinal follow-up. Had Thomas and Znaniecki (or other researchers) taken the cross-sectional work and followed the subjects over a period of years, we would have in all likelihood seen an account of assimilation and adaptation—Thomas and Znaniecki’s prevailing goal—that was more instructive in its findings and theoretical power than the original work. It would have enabled the world at this time to address pertinent questions, as pressing then as they remain today: What becomes of the lives of immigrants? How are their life paths differentiated, and at what cost, by social conditions and social interventions, such as education and employment? How can social policy be informed by this knowledge?

An implication posed by origination involves opportunity. Many opportunities have been missed by failing to see how once cross-sectional studies may be adapted for longitudinal inquiry. Where opportunity was seized and longitudinal work accomplished, a different implication arises: what we may call emergence. In qualitative work, meaning and significance of data emerges over time as researchers grapple with formulating interpretation. This is true in both cross-sectional and longitudinal work. In longitudinal research, however, more time is introduced for ideas to “come about,” develop, and emerge. Specific research emphases, questions, and themes may change over time. In my foundational study of scientists, the research emphasized “ambition” and its role in constructing careers, whereas the longitudinal study emphasized aging and adaptation to work. In the foundational study, “acceleration” and “deceleration” were the major themes in interpreting interview data, whereas in the longitudinal study they were “continuity” and “change.” Thus the foundational study could not have anticipated, or grappled theoretically, with the changed outlooks that prove to mark many careers years later. A conceptual re-tooling was necessary in order to understand lives diachronically. Such change is illustrated in the account provided by a respondent who had passed from early to mid career phases:

Respondent: I would say...my research career, ten years ago, was at a peak. I was working with two or three graduate students continuously and two or three post-docs continuously...My attitudes about the job, about me, and about the university have undergone tremendous changes in the last ten years. I’ve gone from having a fairly large amount of [grant] money, especially for the stage of my career, to having my name on a grant, but not taking any money out of it at all. I’m not sure I want to even submit things to published journals anymore...I’m disgusted by the whole thing...I got tired of getting referee reports [on manuscripts submitted to journals for peer review] that spend a page talking about the bibliography; they were entirely concerned
with whether I cited their work or their friends’ work, and they hadn’t read the paper. I got to the point where at [national] meetings I was telling people, “Please don’t reference my paper, if you don’t read it, don’t reference it.” It’s a game to so many people, and there are many fools. I didn’t do this [go into an academic career] to deal with fools. They don’t understand basic things…I went from not having tenure to slowly being delighted with tenure because I can do the right thing…There are more important things in life than getting grants from the National Science Foundation, getting Nobel Prizes even or any of that stuff. That’s all just a game. I’m interested in solving problems…I am at a crossroad.

Interviewer: Do you see yourself getting back to research?

Respondent: If you mean publishing papers and going to conferences and advising graduate students, no I don’t…What do I care for refereed publications?…I’m not angry about it anymore, I just don’t care about it…

Interviewer: How would you complete the sentence, “I am more X and less Y compared to a decade ago?”

Respondent: I would like to say I am wiser and I am less naive. But it could be just the opposite as far as I know. I really am in a very transitional stage. I’m questioning whether I want to be in physics. I’ve gone a little bit even beyond that. I’m thinking I probably will not stay in professional physics. I want to do something very different. (Hermanowicz 2009, 105–106)

Because people change over time, newly posed research questions, ideas and themes emerge to grapple analytically with the qualitative complexity in the data. Themes of acceleration and deceleration as initially used are not suitable for an accounting of data ten years later that speak, for example, of disengagement, frustration, and even exit. This reality imposes significant limitations on the extent to which LQR can be designed at the outset as fully operational. By circumstance alone, designs will change in LQR, and even the best-planned project will not, at the outset, be able to anticipate and accommodate what arises subsequently as newly emphasized areas of interest. We return to this issue in discussing “Protocol Format.”

Number and Frequency of Interviews

Number refers to the total amount of interviews, frequency to the periodicity at which they occur. The number and frequency of serial interviews that compose a longitudinal study will depend on how a given research problem is posed, and will thus vary from study to study. Another way of stating this consideration is via the question of how much time should pass before a successive set of interviews is conducted (Saldana 2003). The answer is that it should be an amount of time sufficient to examine relevant change from one point to another.

In medical studies with patients, for example, the time interval may be relatively short, and the number of iterations of interviews relatively large. In their studies of people with chronic illnesses, Murray et al. (2009) used three-month intervals to study patients with lung cancer, but six-month intervals to study patients with obstructive pulmonary disease, which develops less quickly. Corden and Nice (2007) tracked individuals who participated in employment programs on their journey to employment. The determination of time intervals depended on specific events occurring in respondents’ lives, which did not occur at the same rate. The timing of serial interviews was contingent upon an event sequence in the research subjects’ varied lives in order to establish appropriate parameters in which to assess change.
In other studies, such as Shaw’s (1930), subjects may need to be interviewed multiple times in a given iteration. Wide-ranging data on people’s multi-faceted lives obtained at multiple points will often compel a plurality of interviews at each point of contact. This situation is most likely to arise in collecting successive life stories (Atkinson 1998; McCracken 1988).

In the study of scientists, a ten-year interval was used for just a second point of contact. The ten-year interval had both practical and theoretic importance. Practically, the ten-year mark represented a point at which the greatest number of respondents from the original sample would have been available for longitudinal study. A longer time interval would have posed risk of involuntary attrition. Theoretically, ten years of time accomplishes a major outcome: It places all of the original respondents at different phases of their careers. Because the respondents were originally sampled at early, middle, and late phases of their careers, the ten-year interval advances all of them into the next set of three parallel phases, enabling longitudinal work to capture how people make transitions throughout a career. Thus if we considered careers simply synchronically, we would see this (from a scientist in his early career):

The dream is to discover some fantastic new effect that knocks the socks off my friends and colleagues, that knocks the socks off the community, so that when I walk down the corridor, the young students know me and say, “There goes [Silverman], he invented the [Silverman] effect.” That’s what I want; I want my effect. I want to be the first person to predict such and such an event and for it to be… I can even smell what it’s like already. It has to be something which once you think about it, is very reasonable. Very surprising at first sight, but at second sight, yes, of course, that’s how it had to be. I want one of those, I want my Josephson effect, my fractional quantum Hall effect. (Hermanowicz 2009, 86–87)

But let us see the same person diachronically, after a ten-year interval of time in his career, to help establish what longitudinal data adds:

It clearly must have been a vain wish… I was more “effect driven” then. I remember being interviewed for a job at Oxford University, and they asked me something like “What do you want to do?” and I said, “I want to knock the socks off all the other physicists in the world with such and such.” I remember them just flinching and recoiling, I shouldn’t say such a thing. So, how interesting…I know exactly what you’re saying, I was speaking of the Josephson effect. I was obsessed with it at the time, I had my own set of versions of it. I never even published that piece of work, I have a hundred-page manuscript sitting on my computer that I haven’t published. But I was completely smitten with those feelings… That has definitely slipped off the radar screen… I would say that my previous remarks were unrealistic… I see that the opportunities for such events are so rare as to be not part of the normal course of science… [My aspirations] have… mellowed. (Hermanowicz 2009, 88)

In the scientist study, a shorter time interval would not have accomplished the work’s theoretic objective. A sufficient amount of time needs to pass in order to track change and continuity. Time intervals vary from one type of group to another, but nevertheless must be considered to design longitudinal inquiry with a theoretic logic.

Protocol Format & Mode of Analysis

Whether LQIs are designed in advance of, or after, an initial study prompts an additional consideration, namely the format and substance of an interview protocol, and the ensuing
mode of analyzing longitudinal data. LQIs designed in advance lend themselves to protocols containing identical questions posed to respondents at different times in order to assess change. But LQR is not restricted to the use of identical questions. What is more, LQIs designed after an initial investigation are less likely to avail themselves to such protocols; instead the questions at subsequent contact are likely different.

The issue presents two means by which to structure interview protocols that undergird LQIs. One consists of posing the same questions on the same themes. The second consists of posing different questions on selected same and newly emergent themes. The first means is perhaps more recognizable because it parallels quantitative longitudinal design (Menard 2002; Ruspini 2002; Scott and Alwin 1998). The second means is not found readily in qualitative longitudinal design; it is a strength of qualitative study.

In the latter instance, the conditions of research subjects are established from base round interviews, which may include an account of the setting in which the subjects operate, usually through heavy contextualization. Both qualitative and quantitative evidence may be used to establish and inquire about these conditions, as often found in ethnographic work (e.g., Suttles 1968). Longitudinal work is then used to examine change, not against responses to identical questions, but against the themes that emerged to characterize the conditions of people and their social settings.

It is useful to consider past work heuristically. Had Thomas and Znaniecki followed their subjects over time, they would not have administered identical interview protocols at designated time periods to the people studied. Rather, they would have contrasted the characterizations they had made of people’s conditions—of lives and of families—from their originating point to that of a subsequent point. Themes in individuals’ and families’ lives (e.g., assimilation, adaptation, employment, children, spouses, poverty, loneliness, isolation) would anchor the comparisons across time. Likewise, Shaw did not ask Stanley identical questions serially. Instead, Shaw crafted characterizations of Stanley’s condition, in conjunction with his milieu, which were then compared and contrasted with characterizations of Stanley at subsequent points in time.

Apted’s documentary series Up captures this approach on film. Apted follows the lives of fourteen British people since they were 7 years of age in the early 1960s by re-interviewing them every seven years, thus capturing on film lives as they are unfolding at ages 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, and 49 (36 Up is due for release at this writing). Each of the subjects is questioned at these seven-year intervals on a variety of thematic topics that seek to portray life development holistically, such as courtship, marriage, children, education, work, extended familial and spousal relations, health, and the role of class in the conditioning of life changes.

Apted does not ask exclusively identical questions across each of the iterations; that would be non-sensical. For example, specific questions about courtship and perceptions of anticipated marriage and children are relevant to early iterations, but not to latter ones. In latter iterations, the themes (of marriage, children, family, and so on) remain relevant when the subjects are in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, but must of course be addressed through different questions. Moreover, new themes emerge (e.g., death) and others subside (e.g., dating) in life passage, rendering sets of questions newly formed over time and others obsolete.

In this type of design, questions do not in and of themselves serve as the baseline of comparison, but rather characterizations of people and their situations. Perceptions of

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7 Apted’s is not an academic study but rather a visual documentary. Academic social scientists and documentarians (including journalists) subscribe to different conventions of practice and ethical codes in their work. These caveats in mind, Apted’s work may be fruitful for illustrative and comparative purposes in academic matters, just as some academic work may be relevant to the practitioner outside of academia.
marriage and family are compared across time, not specific questions about marriage and family. Perceptions of education are compared across time, not specific questions about education, and so on. The result is a vivid depiction (and likely for this reason, a popular rendering) of how lives unfold. In the study of scientists, a preponderance of new questions were used in the longitudinal work. Many of the questions asked of scientists in the foundational study were time-bound (e.g., “How did you come to arrive at this university?” “What aspirations did you have as a graduate student?”) These types of questions had low utility value in being asked again in longitudinal work.

What is a way in which to analyze longitudinal qualitative data? In the scientist study, specific codes were often adopted to mirror the subjects of the questions. For example, “Do you think you are working harder, less hard, or about as hard as you were 10 years ago?” Responses were coded using the same response categories offered in the question. “In learning what you have about academic careers, would you go into an academic career if you were starting all over again?” Responses were coded affirmatively or negatively, and a probe question was analyzed for the explanation provided in the response, using codes such as “funding,” “difficulty,” “lack of reward,” and “freedom.”

In coding and analyzing the longitudinal data, I paid particular attention to how responses coalesced around themes of consistency and change. Following Saldana (2003, 64), I employed a variety of conceptual and thematic questions to help situate data analysis, including:

1. What increases or emerges through time?
2. What is cumulative through time?
3. What kinds of surges occur through time?
4. What decreases or ceases through time?
5. What remains constant or consistent through time?
6. What is idiosyncratic through time?
7. What is missing through time?
8. Which changes interrelate through time?
9. What are participant or conceptual rhythms through time?
10. What is the characterization of across time experience, and how do characterizations differ by sub-groups of the sample?

My intent was to formulate understandings of respondents’ experiences and to derive substantive comparisons and contrasts with respect to the key dimensions of the research design: the institutional contexts in which scientists worked and their career stages. This allowed me to address the guiding question of how scientists age in their work environments. Thus we are placed in a position to compare aging in organizations. For illustration, we can compare a scientist’s account at an elite research university (scientist 1) with that from a more teaching-oriented institution (scientist 2), to trace the effects of institution on the individual. Both scientists, in the latter-most phases of their careers at the time of the longitudinal interviews, were born at approximately the same time (in the early 1930s) and earned their doctorates in physics a year apart from each other. Their professional careers were spent in one respective institution; however, they followed significantly different paths.

Scientist 1: I come in usually around 6:00 a.m., 6:30 a.m., and leave about 5:30 p.m., 5:15 p.m. I’m here [at the university] about half the time [of the year]. December was a light travel month because of the holidays. I only went to one foreign country—Sweden. In January, I had a really big load: Taiwan, UK, and Japan, in that order. It
would have been nice to have it more continuous. I was supposed to go to Chile but couldn’t fit it in, so it was only a conference call. [Looking ahead], Utah is the first week of the month and from Utah I go to the West Coast—I have a panel review Academy meeting. I have to do some homework for that, get organized. I leave tomorrow. From there, I’m supposed to go to Brazil. When I come back, I have to give a plenary talk at a conference in Florida. Right after that, I go to Arizona. I come back here for three days or two days. I make many trips to New York...If I never wrote another paper, it wouldn’t be so bad. But I know I’m going to write many more, because I have many in the pipeline, things that I’m working on. It’s hard to imagine a time I won’t be doing this. (Hermanowicz 2009, 189)

**Scientist 2:** I had two or three pretty good ideas during the course of my career, and I haven’t had any since. I really don’t keep up with the literature...I think early on, even though I did some fairly decent work, both as a graduate student and in the beginning of my career, I never was satisfied. I always thought that I could have done better or sooner or more. In more recent years, I have become content, not only with what I was doing, but also how much. I think this is a reflection of my coming to like myself more.

**Interviewer:** What worries or concerns would you say you have about your career?

**Scientist 2:** None, now. My career as a physicist is over. I talk to colleagues occasionally. But they’ve gone on to do other things. The faculty has either retired or has gone on to try to do something else.

**Interviewer:** Since retiring, what do you miss most about your job?

**Scientist 2:** Not a hell of a lot.

**Interviewer:** Is there anything that you miss?

**Scientist 2:** No. Not at all. There are very few people that I really enjoy being around, and none of them are my former colleagues. I find them boring. This one guy was a very, is still a good friend. But, you know, I’m around him for fifteen, twenty minutes, and I’m thinking, I’ve got to get away. He rattles on and on about the same old things.

**Interviewer:** What has been the best part of retirement?

**Scientist 2:** Doing whatever the hell I want. I can get up and go to the [gym] and work out, or ride my bike [downtown] and have coffee, or even go over to the department—I don’t do that very much anymore. (Hermanowicz 2009, 207)

I utilized an approach to data analysis most often referred to as “constant comparison” (Charmaz 1990, 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994). In this approach, a researcher simultaneously collects and analyzes data. In the course of doing so, the researcher pursues emergent themes and begins to discover basic social processes in the data. These themes and processes are elaborated, modified, or qualified through further data collection and analysis. In time, the researcher constructs and refines, inductively, abstract conceptual categories that explain and synthesize these themes and processes. The researcher eventually seeks to integrate categories into a meaningful theoretic framework that specifies conditions and consequences of the studied processes (Charmaz 2007; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001).

In constant-comparative analysis, typical, predominant patterns are gleaned from the data. Thus, for example, the accounts from the two scientists directly above are indicative of modal career patterns found among scientists employed at research-oriented versus teaching-oriented universities. The career patterns are differentiated with respect to key categories, derived from analyzing the data comparatively, including: *work/family focus, the attribution of place, objects of satisfaction, definition of success, and whether scientists would seek an academic career again*. Scientists at research-oriented institutions who are in late career phases tend to focus on work as well as leisure, view their institutions as a "haven" for their
work, understand research as the principal object of their satisfaction, utilize external.

audiences to define and characterize their success, and would readily pursue an academic
career again were they to start all over. By contrast, scientists at teaching-oriented institu-
tions who are in late career phases tend to focus on just leisure, view their institutions as
“places departed” (i.e., from which they have disengaged), understand retirement as the
principal object of their satisfaction, utilize internal means to define and characterize their
success through self-crafted measures, and would not pursue an academic career again.
These are but five of twenty analytic categories that arose in the larger work through
constant comparison. For the other fifteen, and for illustration in how analytic categories
can by turn be displayed in tabular form, see Hermanowicz (2009, tables 22, 25, 28).

The task then may turn to “deviating cases,” or what others sometimes call “negative
cases,” which one can define as those cases departing from the typical found in any given
sub-grouping (Charmaz 2001). Thus, taking the example above, some individuals do not
conform to the patterns indicative of scientists in the respective career stages and institu-
tional types. Small sub-sets of scientists in late career at research-oriented institutions more
closely resemble late career scientists in teaching-oriented institutions, and vice versa. An
account from a late career scientist at a teaching-oriented institution illustrates a
countervailing case:

Without grants, you end up with a nine-month salary, and you have to ask the
department chair if you can teach a class during the summer, which takes up your
summer. I’ve never taught in the summer. I’ve always been able to fund myself during
the summer for the past thirty years. Every month of the summer I’ve been here, I’ve
been paid. Not everybody here can say that. There are a lot of people who don’t have
money during the summer, so they have to teach a course. (Hermanowicz 2009, 239)

For deviating cases, one can attempt to answer the questions of why and how they have
come to depart from the mode. This type of procedure allows the researcher to strengthen
assertions and to qualify suggestive conclusions about patterns indicative of groups and sub-
groupings in a sample.

Thomson and Holland (2003) emphasize the fact that with each iteration of
longitudinal data collection, the analysis of data can proceed along more than one
path (see also Pettigrew 1995). Data at time 1 + time x can be analyzed both cross-
sectionally and longitudinally in comparison to time 1 or to any intervening time
period where data has been collected. This presents significant conceptual and analytic
challenges. Adept not only studies and compares his subjects when they are forty-

nine, though this is a vital step in his project. Rather, he also studies and compares
his subjects to any one of a number of prior points, including the base year when his
subjects were age seven, as well as the many intervening seven-year periods. To
contend with this situation in my longitudinal study of scientists, I formulated tables
to characterize for readers the career conditions obtaining when I first interviewed my
subjects. I then used results generated by the longitudinal data to compare character-
izations of careers, both among respondents at time 2 and with respondents between
times 2 and 1. Thus, in the longitudinal work, one table presents “Early Career
Patterns” as established by the foundational study and another table presents “Early-
to Mid-Career Patterns” as established by the longitudinal data, and likewise for
respondents at all other stages in their careers. This arguably helped to eliminate
any need for readers to have read or been familiar with the first study in order to
understand the second. For illustration on how such tables and narrative summaries
can be crafted, see Hermanowicz (2009, tables 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28).
Attrition and Retention

Because samples in qualitative studies tend to be comparatively small, subject attrition is an especially prominent consideration in longitudinal qualitative work. In those studies where longitudinal inquiry is designed in advance, it is likely advantageous to factor attrition into the size of the sample as part of the study design. Thus, in such designs, comparatively small samples will become larger by necessity. In all longitudinal studies, whether implemented in advance of or after initial study, thought ought to be given to the care of respondents, not only to enhance the quality of data collected but also to promote subject retention.

I relied exclusively on the rapport established with my scientist respondents 10 years prior to the follow-up contact. Careful and considered framing of written correspondence at the time of follow-up further aided subject retention, including explicit explanation that the success of the work depended crucially on subjects' continued participation, while also making clear that such participation was voluntary. This strategy resulted in a response rate of 93 percent (For illustration of the exact documents used in this correspondence, see Hermanowicz 2009, Appendix B and C). It is likely that ancillary characteristics of the subjects aided retention. In this case, the subjects' lives were oriented to research and teaching, and thus broadly to helping and informing others. This occupational characteristic may have conditioned the subjects' proclivity to assist someone whose own work depended on their involvement.

Other types of studies using different types of participants may not be ordered on such auspicious grounds. Apted (2008), for example, in accounting for the success in retaining many of his film subjects over time, identified practices that he believed worked in this behalf: sending birthday cards and holiday notes to participants, and messages of congratulation on celebratory occasions, such as weddings and births, and messages of condolence in occasions of grief or stress. By his account, these practices helped to maintain rapport with subjects and thusly their cooperation. These types of practices may carry the further consequence of preserving, if not deepening, relationships such that participants at times of follow-up feel a warmth, security, and openness with a researcher. Few qualities ensure the acquisition of detailed, meaningful data better than these. Therein lies a self-demonstrating advantage of LQIs: Participant-researcher relationships developed over time enable a sharing of more private and detailed accounts than many initial interviews are able to obtain. LQR can thus enhance the validity in representations and explanations of the social world, if and only if subject attrition is offset by retention.

Because by its definition LQIs depend on respondents’ continued participation, the method and the larger family of LQR to which it belongs may be especially susceptible to problems in the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. The researcher anticipates in conducting such work that the scholarly pay-off can be large, particularly as this family of methods remains novel. Incentives to complete such work successfully can therefore be substantial. Longitudinal researchers must be recurrently and deliberately vigilant in how they go about their recruitment and re-recruitment of subjects. As in all research, financial incentives may be sometimes used to constitute samples, but they must be used only as long as the incentives are neither coercive nor binding. That is, all respondents, regardless of any incentive, must voluntarily choose to participate in any and in each successive round of longitudinal research, and their right to withdraw at any time without prejudice to them must be communicated clearly by researchers. To create and maintain ethical standards of longitudinal research, it should be incumbent upon authors to account in their published work for their research and field procedures. Researchers should be able to present to a community of their professional peers an accounting and justification of the
procedures they followed in handling human subjects and collecting data just as they are expected to account and justify their data analysis, interpretation, research conclusions, and pertinent policy insights or recommendations. By the same token, professional peer reviewers, of article and book manuscripts and of grants proposing longitudinal research, should insist on accounts from authors who can state clearly the procedures followed or to be followed in a piece of work. Such guidelines, for producers and for gatekeepers of LQR, will help to sustain an ethic for the methods.

Respondent Reaction

An issue that can interfere with subject retention at its extremes and with their cooperation at its minimum involves the reactions that respondents have to prior findings from the research in which they have participated. The researcher finds him or herself confronted by strong emotions. Respondents may express negative views about the research. They may be offended by particular interpretations or representations of themselves or others. Some may object to particular conclusions. The feelings arise for various reasons: in a researcher’s decision not to reveal plans to publish a piece of work in which subjects are portrayed; in a researcher’s decision to conceal information that subjects believe is important (Lareau 2011); in feeling “used” by a researcher (ten Have 2004); and even in having to leave the field and conclude relationships (Reiss 2005).

From her study of mental illness in rural Ireland, Scheper-Hughes (2000) recounts how the work was promptly made a classic of anthropology yet simultaneously criticized in the Irish press as an extreme breach of privacy. Her return years later to the village in which she completed the original work resulted in her expulsion. Ellis (1995) tells the tale of the remote fishing communities she studied, where upon her return, residents reacted angrily toward her prior work. From his study of street life, Whyte (1996) reported tense reaction by community members to Street Corner Society. Studying class-based parenting patterns, Lareau (2011) reported highly negative responses from several participants, which damaged relationships in some instances and ended others altogether. In the Up series, Apted, too, has lost several subjects because of their irritation and/or displeasure with the work.

One might conclude that a way around this potential dilemma is to decide not to share the published work with participants. This is a possibility, but it does not address fully the issue of informing respondents what will come of the research. Such disclosure—the explicit statement that the researcher intends to publish work based on the research while protecting the anonymity of participants—is often treated as an ethical condition of conducting the work. Nor is a solution necessarily found in giving respondents pre-published work and amending it for publication according to respondent wishes. This is a version of the practice of “respondent validation,” wherein participants are given pieces of writing to affirm or disconfirm the validity of written material and/or to establish the veracity of particular points. Goffman (Forthcoming), in a study of people connected to urban crime, used this procedure to ensure that identities of participants were untraceable. The less standard practice of enlisting participants to edit, re-write, or change representation presents perhaps more problems than it resolves. Publication goals of researchers and requirements of publishers for content and style will often diverge from the desires of participants. What is more, researchers surrender their license and mandate as trained professionals while bestowing “expertise” upon others far outside the researcher’s community of professional peer-judges.

Scrutinizing her own experience, Lareau (2011) concluded that there is not an easy solution to this pitfall. By her account, one must clearly inform participants at the outset of their participation about the goals of the work, including its publication plans. Rather than furnish
participants with an eventual copy of the publication, she advocates instead devising an informative brochure that identifies key points, themes, and conclusions. A letter summarizing results, perhaps including charts and tables, may also be utilized. In this way, the researcher fulfills any obligation to inform participants of results while also creating an opportunity for feedback in a way that protects both the role of the researched and that of the researcher.

Even this approach has limitations. Some participants, in some studies, will be curious enough to find their rightful way to the more complete work. The internet and ready access to it via cellular telephones and mobile devices makes this especially feasible. Studies have yet to document this occurrence and any consequences for the research. Following Lareau, letters and brochures could include statements that “channel" more inquisitive subjects to fuller accounts and to thereby guard against subjects routing themselves to less responsibly gathered or less informed documents that litter various media. In addition, researchers can always make themselves available out of the field via mail or phone to questions from research subjects, and defuse potentially volatile situations (and the possibility of attrition) by personalized communication regarding facets of the work that prove to generate continued interest in participants. In fact, providing contact information to research subjects is a customary, and often mandatory, procedure. Such exchange can benefit all parties: the research subject, who has questions or concerns addressed if not always resolved, and the researcher, who may use feedback to hone analyses, interpretations, or conclusions (Rupp and Taylor 2011).

In Apted's case, participants unavoidably view the finished product, and some leave because of this. A version of this scenario played out in my own work. Upon publication of the foundational study, I sent participants a letter describing the outcome of the work and where the results were published. In returning to the field for the longitudinal study, one of my interviewees took umbrage at the prior publication. That this had occurred ten years earlier conveys the depth of the respondent's sentiment. The respondent disputed a specific way in which I had constructed a set of tables (in which he had been able to infer that he was treated as an outlier and excluded from selected computations). I attempted to explain at the interview the distortions that would arise were this procedure not followed. I explained that, under the specific conditions, this was a standard methodological procedure in my field and practiced widely by others.

I had allotted two hours for our interview; despite my efforts to address the matter and dispense with it, the discussion consumed forty minutes of our time. The respondent, a highly accomplished researcher and teacher, said angrily that he expected me to change the data presentation and if I did not do so, he would consider the present interview a “waste of his time,” “unfair,” a “discredit to his university,” and would not participate in an interview with me again. I told him that I would confer with my colleagues upon my return home. But my responses and gestures were to no avail. A pall clouded the entire meeting. The interview was irreparably marred by the respondent's opening hostility; it proceeded perfunctorily, and ended sooner than it should have.

As with all of the participants, I sent this respondent a thank you letter upon my return home. I might have tailored this respondent's letter to further acknowledge his concerns. But I also knew that I would be unable to accept his conditions and that the change he requested would not be made in the longitudinal work. I elected not to “blow air over a smoldering fire.” This type of experience occurred only once across fifty-five respondents. But it was surely memorable. I came to the conclusion, however, that I had done all I could, that the respondent had been treated ethically and properly, and that I was simply paying a price for conducting this type of work.5

5 Had I encountered other negative reactions, I would have likely drawn different conclusions. Depending on the substance of the reactions, I might have adjusted communication procedures with my subjects.

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Conclusion

The discussion has emphasized five parameters within which longitudinal qualitative interviews achieve success. Conversely, they are also the grounds on which such interviews fail, since each parameter, as theorized, forms a basis on which LQIs are practicable. These include the point of origination in longitudinal work, the number and frequency of interviews, the ways by which protocols may be formatted and how resulting data can be analyzed, the attrition and retention of research subjects, and reactions from respondents. Despite its origin in early American sociology, the longitudinal qualitative interview, and LQR as a whole, has emerged in earnest only recently as a means to study development by researching continuity and change in its subject matter. The success of its first but under-exploited application in The Jack-Roller only brushes the potential of the method. This is because work has been slow to chart courses from its methodological lead. Consequently, methodological treatment of LQR has lagged in articulation. This article has attempted to foster a maturation both by elucidating the origin and epistemology of the LQR and, via illustration, by explicating its parameters of implementation. Its classically situated start and its contemporary reformulations suggest empirical and analytic innovation whose scope has yet to be fully realized.

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References


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