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Qualitative longitudinal research: Application, potentials and challenges in the context of migration research

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**QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH:
APPLICATION, POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES IN THE
CONTEXT OF MIGRATION RESEARCH**

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Qualitative Longitudinal Research: application, potentials and challenges in the context of migration research

Abstract

The aim of this working paper is to review the possible applications, potentials and methodological challenges of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) in the context of migration studies. It is based on a literature review of both theoretical and empirical papers focused on QLR as such, or discussing various specific elements related to this approach. I start by giving a brief overview of the characteristic features and potentials of QLR as acknowledged by different authors. Next I move on to unwrap the numerous methodological and practical aspects important to QLR, including building and retaining an adequate research sample (especially in the case of mobile and spatially dispersed populations) as well as reflexions on research methodology (including also online interviewing). I then turn to the stage of data analysis and finally acknowledge ethical issues, especially concerning anonymity and researcher-participant relationships. Throughout the text I reflect on the possible applications of this approach to migration studies, including also multiple migration.

Keywords: Qualitative Longitudinal Research, Migration

Podłużne badania jakościowe: zastosowanie, potencjały i wyzwania w kontekście badań migracyjnych

Streszczenie

Celem tego tekstu jest przegląd potencjalnych zalet oraz wyzwań metodologicznych związanych z zastosowaniem jakościowych badań podłużnych, w szczególności w kontekście migracji. Tekst opiera się na przeglądzie literatury obejmującym zarówno prace teoretyczne, jak i empiryczne, poruszające tematykę jakościowych badań podłużnych oraz analizujące szczegółowe elementy tego podejścia. Na wstępie przedstawiam krótki przegląd charakterystycznych cech tej metody, w ujęciu różnych autorów. Następnie poruszam ważne w tym podejściu kwestie – zarówno metodologiczne, jak i praktyczne – takie jak dobór i utrzymanie próby oraz zastosowanie odpowiedniej metodologii zarówno przy projektowaniu, jak i prowadzeniu badania. W dalszej części tekstu przyglądam się możliwościom analizy zebranego materiału oraz poruszam kwestie etyczne, w szczególności dotyczące anonimowości oraz zarządzania relacją badacz-badany. Przeglądowi towarzyszy refleksja nad możliwym zastosowaniem tego podejścia do obszaru studiów migracyjnych, w tym również do badania migracji wielokrotnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Badania podłużne, badania jakościowe, migracje

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Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	5
2. Characteristic features of QLR	6
3. Developing a research sample.....	8
3.1 Attrition and retention in qualitative longitudinal research	10
4. Conducting interviews online	11
5. ‘Flexible research methodology’	13
6. Analysis.....	14
7. Ethics.....	17
7.1 Anonymity	18
7.2 Researcher – participant long-term relationship.....	20
8. Concluding remarks	22
References	25

1. Introduction

The characteristic feature of longitudinal research is a focus on processes of change, stability and continuity through time (Gravlee et al. 2009; Neale & Flowerdew 2003), where the temporal dimension distinguishes this methodology from other research paradigms. Traditionally, this approach has involved quantitative methods and has been applied to address questions concerning life trajectories (regarding especially health, social and professional career and family matters). The use of qualitative methods is less developed in longitudinal studies although authors notice that there is evolving practice in the social sciences of qualitative tracing and understanding processes of change, often for social policy development and evaluation purposes (Holland et al. 2006). Disciplines that have applied qualitative longitudinal methodology include community studies, education, health, criminology as well as psychological and social development, family, childhood, youth and ageing studies (for a review see Holland et al. 2006). However, to date this approach has not been given much attention in the field of migration, although it seems potentially suitable for the study of mobility trajectories and migrant experiences at different points in time.

The aim of this working paper is therefore to review the possible applications, potentials and methodological challenges of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR or QLLR or LQR) in the context of migration studies. It is based on a literature review of both theoretical and empirical papers focused on QLR as such, or discussing various specific elements related to this approach. Throughout the text I will aim to indicate the characteristic features that distinguish longitudinal from cross-sectional research on the one hand and longitudinal qualitative from longitudinal quantitative research on the other hand. I will reflect on the possible applications of this methodology to migration studies, including also multiple migration, which adds a specific spatial dimension to the traditional approach, and creates potential for the acknowledgement of change and continuity through time *and space*.

I start by giving a brief overview of the characteristic features and potentials of QLR as recognized by different authors. Next I move on to unwrap the numerous methodological and practical elements important to QLR, including building and retaining an adequate research sample and reflexions on research methodology. I also focus on the specific aspects of conducting interviews online – as this method of data collection has many practical advantages in researching mobile and spatially dispersed populations. I then turn to the stage

of data analysis and finally acknowledge ethical issues, especially concerning anonymity and researcher-participant relationships in qualitative longitudinal studies.

2. Characteristic features of QLR

Longitudinal research concentrates both on "how people change" and on "how people respond to change" (Corden, Millar 2007: 529). Traditionally, this approach has been more popular in quantitative studies to measure the objective aspects of change through dimensions such as physical and mental health (including indicators such as illnesses), personal and social trajectories (including especially family relations and biographical events) and educational as well as professional careers. In this respect quantitative methods allow for statistical comparisons through time and for assessing the probability of specific processes and events occurring in particular segments of the researched population. They are however "unable to access the fluid and often highly situation specific experiences, understandings and perceptions that mediate the ways in which people deal with and respond to social change" (Henwood, Lang 2003: 49, as cited in Holland et al. 2006: 2).

Qualitative longitudinal research in turn incorporates specific elements of qualitative methods that allow for the exploration of subjective interpretations and motivations, perceptions and opinions as well as their variations through time, with particular attention given both to contextual details and individual characteristics (Holland et al. 2006: 1). Research material is usually gathered through interviews (individual life history, structured or semi-structured etc.), accompanied often by observation and other research methods (such as diaries or mapping), where direct and personal relationships are created between the researcher and the research participants. In this paper I will refer to qualitative longitudinal research as an approach that involves repeated interviews conducted with the same participants over a significant period of time (see also Krings et al. 2013). The significant duration of the research is essential here, as it allows to capture temporal changes in beliefs, attitudes and experiences at different points of the life trajectory.

In contrast, for example biographical research often involves multiple interviews with the same respondents, however change in such cases is usually approached in retrospect instead of real-time accounts (Thomson, Holland 2003). This is also the case in many studies of mobility processes, such as for example migration careers (Cohen et al. 2015). Moreover, applying qualitative longitudinal research requires not only re-interviewing the same sample

of research participants but also planning specific waves of the study (at least two), at more or less fixed intervals (Vogl, Zartler, Schmidt, Rieder 2017), where the length of these intervals “should be an amount of time sufficient to examine relevant change from one point to another” (Hermanowicz 2013: 196). Such characteristics differentiate this kind of research from other types of long-term studies, as for example ethnographic and field research (Gravlee et al. 2009), including also revisits to the field (Burawoy 2003) or lengthy participant observation, as in the extended case method (Burawoy 1998).

Holland et al. (2006:18) indicate that “ideally, QLL research is open-ended and intentional (...); relates to the number of waves rather than a period of time; and to a dynamic research process (...)”. Neale and Flowerdew (2003) argue that time and texture constitute dimensions distinguishing longitudinal qualitative methodologies from other research paradigms. The temporal dimension allows for the understanding of both structural change and change management on the part of individuals. Texture is defined here as the cultural dimension of social life – “the subjective meanings and active crafting of social relationships, cultural practices and personal identities and pathways” (Neale, Flowerdew 2003: 192).

Longitudinal qualitative social research is “concerned with the exploration of individual lives as they develop” (Farrall et al. 2016: 288), it enables to capture ‘movies’, not just ‘snapshots’ (Berthoud 2000, cited after: Neale, Flowerdew 2003) and “to understand and make sense of experiences as they unfold *over time* (...)” (Miller 2015: 293). QLR is therefore adequate in the search for answers to research questions that “relate to the life course, trajectories, and critical moments, as well as the motivations and experiences of biographical change (...)” and for better understanding of the complexities of processes associated with change (Morrow, Crivello 2015: 267).

It needs to be acknowledged that the temporal dimension (along with its theoretical implications) is gaining attention in migration research, especially in the context of biographical timelines, life course transitions, temporality and uncertainty, where authors argue that temporal subjectivities are an important key to the interpretation of migrant decisions and actions (Cojocaru 2016). In this perspective QLR can allow for the investigation of (multiple) migration experiences on the one hand, changes of perception concerning these experiences on the other hand and moreover to analyze this in relation to the changing social, political and economic context that they are embedded in (see also Krings et

al. 2013). In the following paragraphs I will review some essential elements of qualitative longitudinal research, along with the challenges they pose in the context of migration studies.

3. Developing a research sample

Sampling is a very important element of the qualitative research process (although sometimes given less consideration than in quantitative studies) and requires adequate attention. The literature offers vague guidelines as to the appropriate size of a qualitative sample such that it should be “neither too small nor too large” (Hermanowicz 2013: 193) but provide “theoretical saturation” – an implication embedded in grounded theory (Glaser 1965, as cited after Fugard, Potts 2015) and that “justification alludes to having enough data to demonstrate patterns while ensuring there is not too much data to manage” (Fugard, Potts 2015: 671). The research data in this case does not warrant drawing general conclusions it can however give insights as to the nature of life trajectories and types of change over time.

Robinson (2014) proposes a four-point framework to approach sampling in interview-based qualitative psychological research in order to develop a strategy that is “coherent, achievable and appropriate to research aims” (Robinson 2014: 38). This framework can be applied also to the social sciences (both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies) and it includes the following components:

- Defining a sample universe (target population), which requires specifying both inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria are set in relation to initial assumptions concerning how much homogeneity / heterogeneity in the sample (and resulting specificity / generality of interpretation possibilities) and on what dimensions is necessary to adequately address the study’s research questions (Robinson 2014: 25-28).
- Deciding on a sample size, taking into account the objectives of the research. This preliminary decision is often altered (one way or the other) in the course of the research due to both theoretical and practical reasons (Robinson 2014: 29-31).
- Selecting a sample strategy which can be based either on random and convenience sampling strategies on the one hand or purposive sampling on the other. In the second instance the researcher acknowledges that specific categories and types of cases (with clear distinguishing characteristics) need to be represented in the sample (Robinson 2014: 31-35). Other authors stress that an adequate sample should involve possibly all ‘theoretically relevant groups’, along with ‘extreme cases’ (Kuhn, Witzel 2000).

Robinson (2014) adds that regardless of the sampling strategy, an explicit description of the sample allows for the transparency of the research findings.

- Sourcing the sample taking into account crucial requirements concerning informed consent, but concurrently also the potential risks of self-selection bias. This stage of the sampling procedure requires also a recruitment strategy: advertising the research or setting up a referral process (such as snowball or respondent driven sampling, see e.g. Noy 2008) to recruit interviewees for the study (Robinson 2014: 35-37). Researchers need to bear in mind that the adopted recruitment strategy has significant influence on who opts-in (and concurrently who opts-out), which can in turn alter the resulting research findings (Bytheway, Bornat 2010).

The reflections presented above constitute some general guidelines for sampling in qualitative research. However, we need to take into account also the specific aspects of sampling in migration studies. It needs to be stressed here that migrants (including also multiple migrants) constitute a highly dispersed, mobile, often hard-to-reach or hidden population (see Platt et al. 2015; Reichel, Morales 2017) and sometimes also vulnerable respondents (given e.g. their irregular status or difficult socio-economic situation) (see Vershinina, Rodionova 2011). Both assessing the size of the sample and applying adequate sampling strategies pose significant challenges due to the lack of reliable statistical data concerning the sample universe on the one hand and difficulty in locating, contacting and approaching its representatives on the other hand. Given their specific social, political and economic situation (e.g. adapting to life in a new country, financial challenges, lack of various political and social rights) migrants may be especially prone to self-selection bias. The researcher himself (or herself) may also select interviewees according to non-theoretical criteria, such as accessibility, expectations towards biographical careers or preferred (and sometimes unusual) aspects of life history. Moreover, qualitative migration research is often explorative in character, thus assessing the ‘theoretical saturation’ of the sample may also pose difficulties, both at the beginning of the research process and in the course of the analysis, as new and relevant sampling criteria may be uncovered along the way (Helling 1990). Another important challenge that researchers need to take into account in longitudinal research (as opposed to cross-sectional studies) are participants’ motivations for repeated contact throughout the research process. This leads to the consideration of issues of attrition and retention.

3.1 Attrition and retention in qualitative longitudinal research

Conducting qualitative longitudinal research requires long-term commitment, both on the part of the research participants and the researchers (Vogl et al. 2017). One of the main challenges of qualitative longitudinal studies when it comes to obtaining an adequate sample are attrition (a decrease in the number of research participants due to various reasons and circumstances) and retention (keeping an adequate sample size throughout the research process). Neale (2013: 9) notices that “there is an evident tension between the methodological drive to maintain a sample over time and the ethical requirement to ensure that participants are properly informed, and can withdraw from a project at any point” (including also temporary opt-out). This is closely related to the issue of informed consent where the participant can make an informed decision to agree for repeated contacts on the part of the research team (this issue will be elaborated on further in the text). In this context it is important to undertake measures that will positively attach the participant to the project and when it comes to qualitative studies – also to the researcher (Weller 2012; Gravlee et al. 2009). This can be done by establishing relationships through emails, cards and newsletters (see also Hemmerman 2010). An important aspect is also to develop flexible and innovative research methods that will be both motivating to take part in and easily compatible with other daily activities. Developing a relationship with the participants requires also regular updates about the progress of the study and maintaining “a distant presence between interviews, wishing to be neither intrusive nor overburdening” (Weller 2012: 124).

Farrall et al. (2016) notice that re-interviewing requires locating sample members, establishing contact and finally conducting interviews. The authors give a set of suggestions on how to maintain retention and re-trace participants in qualitative longitudinal research. Some helpful strategies include keeping contact sheets for each participant (on condition that they are stored in a confidential way), establishing contact through telephone calls and emails (and nowadays also social media), making the research reliable through formal letters stating the institutional context and funding (I would note here also the importance of project websites - not mentioned by the authors explicitly), giving explanations to the research participants as to the importance of maintaining a rich sample and the irreplaceability of interviewees (Farrall et al. 2016). A common strategy aimed at increasing retention is to offer incentives, although this comes with many potential drawbacks and risks (Robinson 2014). An important element aimed at enhancing long-term participation in a study is also to provide appropriate feedback to the research participants (including readable newsletters or simple

summaries of the research conclusions) (Hermanowicz 2013) and some form of closure at the end of the research process, such as a concluding ‘event’ accompanied by a final ‘product’ (e.g. publication) (Neale 2013).

Both changes in time and space pose significant challenges in the context of sample attrition and retention, for example the mobility of research participants between cities and countries, changes in their professional and personal lives (changing jobs, starting families) often influence their availability and sometimes also willingness to continue taking part in the study. At the same time however, these two elements are central to the understanding of migrant experiences, especially in the case of multiple migrations. The nature of migration studies by definition assumes mobility, therefore flexible and innovative research methods need to be applied to follow migrants’ life trajectories, analyse decisions taken along the way and capture unique experiences. Such innovations (vs more traditional approaches) include applying remote and mobile technologies to the study of biographical events taking place in the lives of migrants widely dispersed in space (both within the sample and between research waves), where especially conducting interviews online poses a significant opportunity, but also a challenge.

4. Conducting interviews online

The advantages of computer assisted research methods have been acknowledged for some time now, however the continuously growing possibilities of real-time interviewing via internet (particularly video conferencing) have opened new significant opportunities to social research, especially in the field of mobility and migration, where large samples of respondents can be interviewed in relevantly short time, regardless of physical distance, time zone changes or tight schedules. Moreover, this allows to develop a research sample consisting of participants considerably dispersed in space, where changing place of residence within and between research waves does not constitute an obstacle to conducting the study. Nevertheless, online options – as a more remote form of communication – also pose some risks, especially when it comes to involvement, the flow, intensity and intimacy of conversation as well as establishing rapport and personal connection (Weller 2015, 2017; Seitz 2016; Deakin, Wakefield 2014).

Weller (2015, 2017) stresses that an essential part of the qualitative research process is building trust and respect between the researcher and the research participants, which creates conditions for disclosure of detailed information, which in turn enhances the quality of the

data. This is especially important in migration studies, where everyday problems (in the case of e.g. irregular migration status or difficult socio-economic conditions) can be sources of anxiety on the part of interviewees and thus create difficulties to the research. Internet interviews (e.g. through Skype) often pose technical challenges, especially at their initial stage (making sure connection, sound and vision work properly), which does not create friendly conditions for casual talk, greetings and informal exchanges, and these constitute key elements to building a good research relationship. It is also probable that technicalities may interrupt the interview at various moments of the encounter, each of which carry potential drawbacks. Seitz (2016) notes some common disadvantages of Skype qualitative interviews, among which she includes dropped calls and pauses as well as inaudible fragments. In order to overcome these potential research barriers Seitz points to the fact that technological preparation is needed in advance both on the part of the researcher and the participant (such as establishing a stable internet connection and updating as well as testing the communication program). Online interviewing requires also choosing an appropriate setting (again on the part of both interaction partners) and authors propose creating an interview preparation checklist for both the researcher and the participants to properly organize the encounter (Seitz 2016).

Although studies indicate that online interviews are experienced as less personal, they are also perceived as less intrusive, more casual and carrying less pressure. These last characteristics constitute potential advantages but on the other hand can lead to the blurring of the research encounter and in turn result in non-optimal levels of disclosure – either too reserved or too elaborate (Weller 2017). Moreover, it needs to be acknowledged that the lack of physical co-presence of the researcher and research participant delimits the communication of an important non-verbal dimension (including also the setting of the interview), where information and emotions essential for accurate interpretation, often conveyed ‘between the lines’, are reduced or limited due to the technical qualities of the video transmission (Weller 2017, Seitz 2016). Online interviews may also be more apt to drop-outs and require building appropriate familiarity and commitment beforehand (Deakin, Wakefield 2014). In the case of migrants however, online technologies are often an inherent element of their everyday lives, as they communicate with their family and friends living in other countries (see e.g. Bacigalupe, Camara 2012). This method may thus be perceived as quite natural and adequate to repeated inquiries concerning various, sometimes quite personal, experiences.

5. 'Flexible research methodology'

Many researchers stress the need for a general 'methodological flexibility' in qualitative studies, which should be based on reflexivity of the emerging research findings and an openness to redefinitions and re-designing the research process (Tuval-Mashiach 2017, see also Holland et al. 2006; Hermanowicz 2013). This is especially valid in the case of longitudinal research where questions and interpretations (along with methods and techniques) often develop over time as the study unfolds and concepts emerge. Previous waves of research material often constitute a basis for further investigations, taking into account also new perspectives and technological options. It is moreover a key element of exploratory studies – such as those concerning migration processes and experiences – to modify assumptions and research questions as more insight is gained along the way from the initial starting point (Tuval-Mashiach 2017). This flexibility allows also to alter interview questions in various waves of data collection, according to the changes that take place in the respondents lives, and to address new themes that have appeared in the course of the research (Hermanowicz 2013).

'Methodological flexibility' needs however to be accompanied by methodological transparency in order to assure validity and relevance. Tuval-Mashiach (2017) acknowledges two aspects of transparency: self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher concerning his or her influence on the research (including decisions, dilemmas and various kinds of selections along the way) and then further communicating these reflections to the audience. In the case of longitudinal research we also need to take into account the developing relationship and mutual influences between the researcher and the research participants, which I will acknowledge further in the text. Tuval-Mashiach (2017) proposes a set of three questions for systematic reflection and enhancing transparency at various stages of the research, but particularly at the stage of analysis: *what I did, how I did it and why I did it*.

The first question requires stating a clear paradigm and methodological approach, along with research questions and aims, detailed research sequence, methods for data collection and analysis. Transparency requires also a recollection of dilemmas and challenges acknowledged in the course of the research and decisions made along the way as well as their circumstances – including also methodological changes and modifications (see also Koro-Ljungberg, Bussing 2013). The second question concerns a detailed description of steps and actions taken by the researcher(s) as well as the development of analysis. The third question involves

justification for methodological and practical decisions made along the course of the research as well as reflexivity concerning the researcher's (and wider context) impact on the study (Tuval-Mashiach 2017). Tuval-Mashiach recommends also reporting to some extent on what the researcher decided *not to do* (what he or she excluded, omitted or ignored as “roads not taken”) and why. Koro-Kjungberg and Bussing (2013) stress moreover that methodological flexibility needs to be accompanied by conceptual and methodological continuity and consistency.

6. Analysis

Various authors note that in qualitative longitudinal research more important than the technical strategies of data collection and analysis are the analytical processes themselves – researcher reflexivity, interpretation and grounding the empirical material in a wider theoretical field (Yates 2003). The process of analysis involves primarily comparison, categorization and synthezation of themes and patterns (Hermanowicz 2013). Qualitative longitudinal research allows the researcher to capture various types of change: in participants narrative, as well as in reinterpretations both on the part of participants and the researcher himself (Lewis 2007, cited after Vogl et al. 2017). This is both a potential and challenge. Due to the multi-dimensional character of the data, its analysis requires both cross-sectional (synchronic) and longitudinal (diachronic) emphasis, comparing narratives at a certain point in time – in the search for patterns and types – and concurrently tracking the development of these narratives over time (Vogl et al. 2017; see also: Weller 2012; Ryan et al. 2016; Hermanowicz 2013). Researchers view this as a complementary process of ‘the analysis of narratives’ and ‘narrative analysis’ (Polkinghorne 1995 cited after: Thomson, Holland 2003: 236), which also corresponds with Saldana's (2003) division between change over time (now vs. then) and change through time involving the subjective processes of everyday decisions, temporal orientations and perceptions of the future, the present and the past as well as experiencing and interpreting change (as cited after Shirani, Henwood 2011).

Thomson (2007) stresses two dimensions of longitudinal qualitative data – the longitudinal aspect of individual cases and the cross-sectional differences of structural context (social and spatial). She proposes developing case histories and then bringing them into conversation with each other through associating and comparing their various themes. This allows to move away “from a simple before-and-after or cause-and-effect model of behavioral change and points towards a more dynamic interplay of timing, resources and resourcefulness” (Thomson 2007:

577-578). Vogl et al. (2017: 5) in turn give criteria for making qualitative comparisons that include the temporal aspect of change. On the cross-sectional dimension they focus on linking and contrasting participants in every wave of data to form clusters, emerging themes and typologies of cases (see also: Thomson, Holland 2003). On the longitudinal dimension they focus on the analysis of individual case changes over time as well as comparisons between case profiles in order to develop typologies of change. Thomson and Holland propose a similar approach where every interview should be followed by an 'individual narrative analysis', every wave of research should involve a 'summary narrative analysis' and consequently interviews conducted with the same participant over time should be accompanied by an analytical 'case profile' where emphasis is put on longitudinal change and continuity of individual narrative, apprehending the 'kaleidoscope' of opinions and experiences (Thomson, Holland 2003). This also allows for more flexibility and multidimensionality in analyzing the research encounters.

A major challenge in this respect is the enormous amount of data that requires appropriate structuring and focus (Smith 2003). The process of analyzing qualitative longitudinal data often entails creating a complex coding system, including categories or themes that are relevant to the development of participants' personal and professional lives and adequate to the problems discussed in the interviews. The codes should also take into account the chronological order of interviews (Kuhn, Witzel 2000).

Authors caution that the process of comparison will most probably never be complete but due to its complexity should be taken a step at a time and in order to "utilize adequately the multi-layered data, a systematic plan with a clear outline of analytical steps taken, dimensions of comparisons and clear stated aims is crucial" (Vogl et al. 2017:9). An important requirement is therefore to provide consistency in the procedures of data collection in each wave of research (e.g. similar method and time) in order to allow for comparisons to be systematic (Gravlee et al. 2009). Another essential aspect is creating procedures of cooperation and sharing information within the research team. This involves two important elements: informed consent on the part of the research participants and developing detailed data documentation. This second element should include a recollection of the researchers' dilemmas and motivations, research methods applied and decisions taken along with accompanying observations and interpretations concerning the circumstances of the research (e.g. time and place), background information about the context and the participants as well as the course of the interviews (Gravlee et al. 2009; Thomson, Holland 2003; Kuula 2000). It is also important

to discuss data findings and conclusions within the research team, as researchers can have varying perspectives and emphasize different aspects of the empirical material which lead to diverse insights based on academic interests, expertise and researcher style (Thomson, Holland 2003). Data on the research process itself becomes this way part of the analysis, where dilemmas concerning the boundaries of ‘researcher disclosure’ may also appear (Hadfield 2010, cited after: Moore 2012).

Validity is a central requirement in scientific knowledge and addresses the question of “why we believe the things that we do and how we justify the claims that we make” (Norris 1997). In qualitative research this is a complicated issue, given the fact that research methods are often flexible and case oriented while researchers establish a specific relationship with the research participants. This relationship should be neither too distant and formal but also neither too close and familiar and subject to constant reflexivity, though not ‘hyperreflexivity’ (Norris 1997, Thomson, Holland 2003). Social researchers should be self-reflective and critical concerning their presuppositions as well as possible errors and biases in the research process and analysis. Among the sources of bias in qualitative research Norris (1997: 174) includes:

- the reactivity of researchers and research participants as well as wider audience,
- inevitable selection of people, issues, events and questions,
- researcher’s preference concerning theories and interpretations,
- researcher’s personal qualities as well as abilities, methodological skills and values.

These specific causes of bias are difficult to eliminate within the research procedures so they require additional reflexivity, peer-review and participant validation, although enhancing validity still does not guarantee the full accuracy of the research (Norris 1997). Authors also notice that during longitudinal research the position of the researcher towards the research participants can change according to various temporal elements e.g. change of life cycle or frequency of contact (Leung 2015). Moreover, as stressed earlier, qualitative longitudinal research is never actually complete and conclusions can never be final, as “there is no closure of analysis and the next round of data can challenge interpretations” (Thomson, Holland 2003: 237). This corresponds with the nature of mobility and migration studies, where in relation to the paradigm of ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ Tyfield and Blok (2016: 631) notice that “knowledge itself also loses its ability to reach a determinate conclusiveness (...) the researcher no longer has any single, fixed and objectively definable future to uncover, but instead an ambivalent and shifting set of ethical-political horizons and futures in-the-making”.

An issue worth considering is whether the respondents should participate in the data analysis and to what extent should the researchers include their opinions or comments. This also evokes the question of whether to give the participants access to transcripts of their interviews and how to respond to possible requests for alterations (Wiles et al. 2006). Another potential question of participation is whether to consult the inclusion of verbatim quotations in publications and the form of attributions made in relation to the authors of these quotes (concerning anonymization processes), along with their selection and editing (Corden, Sainsbury 2006; Wiles et al. 2008). These are both important ethical and methodological issues. Wiles et al. (2006: 294) note in this respect that “the trend towards ensuring consent and agreement from participants for the use of their data has significant implications for the freedom of the researcher to interpret the data in the way she or he views as appropriate, and poses an ethical dilemma in balancing the rights or needs of the participant with the needs of the research and the researcher”. In specific contexts this may also require – or validate – consulting these dilemmas with the research participants (Saunders et al. 2015).

7. Ethics

Conducting qualitative longitudinal research reinforces the traditional ethical concerns connected to qualitative studies as such. These include confidentiality, anonymity, collection of personal or sensitive data as well as intrusions of privacy and informed consent (Weller 2012). As Neale (2013:7) notices: “adding time into the mix of a qualitative study heightens particular ethical issues and requires new thinking about principles and practice”. Authors acknowledge, that the particular characteristics of social science research often require a case and context-specific ethical approach. This also includes the application of new internet-based methodologies where researchers propose a ‘negotiated ethics’ (Convery, Cox 2012). Ethical considerations need to take into account the responsibilities of researchers towards the research participants, the field of their research, the academic community and the wider audience (Wiles et al. 2006). In many cases creating a model of responding to unforeseen ethical dilemmas is also recommendable (Neale 2013).

In this regard (ongoing) informed consent is a crucial aspect of an ethical research process, where a balance needs to be found between maximizing the understanding of implications connected to participating in the research on the one hand and avoiding unnecessary over-formalization of the consent procedure on the other (Wiles et al. 2006). In the process of gaining informed consent the researcher should also provide the participants with information

concerning the possible impact of the study. Most important ethical issues – in the context of a qualitative longitudinal approach – include anonymity and the relationship between the researcher and the research participants.

7.1 Anonymity

Anonymity is an important ethical principle in qualitative studies and involves removing or changing recognizable details concerning the research participants (as well as any revealed third parties) such as names, characteristics and locations (Taylor 2015; Wiles et al. 2008). The standard of anonymization is in some cases subject to discussion (as will be noticed further in the text), however the aim of this process is to conceal the identity of particular people or communities, especially when the information that they disclose during the research may be sensitive, problematic or embarrassing (Clark 2006). Anonymization can be done at different stages of the research – from data archives through notes and transcripts to publications, including also discussions within and outside of the research team. Moreover, this may include the aggregation of research data (and removing specific detailed information) or the generalization of case studies as well as changing or omitting key descriptive characteristics (see also Wiles et al. 2008). All the applied procedures may be described in an ‘anonymization code book’ (Moore 2012). The process of anonymization is defined as a complex task, where “researchers balance two competing priorities: maximizing protection of participants’ identities and maintaining the value and integrity of the data” (Saunders et al. 2015: 617).

Researchers discuss the actual possibilities of maintaining guarantees of anonymity at various stages of qualitative social and ethnographic studies, given for example the fact that changing or erasing names still leaves the research data with a vast amount of thorough characteristics and details that can lead to the potential identification of participants in specific cases (van den Hoonaard 2003; Wiles et al. 2008; Nespov 2000). Authors discuss that in many instances information about the social, ethnic or religious background, gender, age, profession etc. of the research participants may easily reveal their identity, while at the same time may provide essential information for the understanding of experiences and opinions. Taylor indicates that “whilst QLR involves building up rich multi-layered stories of cases, these are hard to anonymize in a way that does not also lose contextual richness and the coherent narrative of the case” (Taylor 2015: 282, see also Nespov 2000). Researchers thus need “to strike a balance between confidentiality and authenticity” (Neale 2013: 8) as well as “getting

participant's voices heard". This may be especially important in the case of vulnerable populations – such as irregular migrants or those who conceal their actual problems and difficulties from family and friends.

Moreover, the longitudinal aspect of research poses additional challenges. These include repeated contacts with the research participants and publishing preliminary reports whilst the study is still on-going (Taylor 2015). In connection to the presented dilemma researchers engage into discussion concerning how far anonymization procedures should go in order not to compromise the quality of the data and the possibilities for its interpretation, accurate presentation – including methodological scrutiny – as well as knowledge building value. Van den Hoonaard (2003: 147) states that: "*The quandary of anonymity – i.e. research codes insist on anonymity while the practice of research makes it virtually impossible to maintain anonymity – is only resolved with the involvement of the research participants and of the researchers themselves*". This often requires adopting a 'situated ethics approach' (Taylor 2015; Neale 2013), which means addressing ethical concerns on a step-by-step basis, analyzing and discussing specific issues as they appear in the context of the particular study and taking into account its particular circumstances – although within a principal ethical framework. This entails flexibility and focus both on proactive and reactive actions on the part of the research team, within the whole timeframe of the research and its dissemination (Taylor 2015; Neale 2013).

Ethical concerns are especially evident at the point of dissemination of the findings. These involve presenting the data along with the researcher's conclusions and adjusting it to different audiences – including the research participants themselves (Taylor 2015). In practice however, as van den Hoonaard (2003) notices, research participants often forget or do not really care about the research findings, which they usually have limited access to, due to the specificity of academic discourse as well as different place and time of publication than of the research itself. However, other authors note that growing online access, along with requirements concerning wide dissemination of evidence-based research findings, entail a careful re-thinking of issues of anonymity and confidentiality in the context of global web-transfers of information and knowledge (Tilley, Woodthorpe 2011).

The issue of anonymization is perceived as especially significant if the research material may be potentially reused in the future – a possibility more and more common and accessible due to the development of electronic archives and datasets. Authors approaching this problem

through the perspective of ‘feminist ethics of care’ rather than the ‘paternalistic notion of protection’, propose to discuss this as an ethical question of *why to anonymize*, rather than as a necessity and undiscussable principle as it has been dealt with widely in the literature and in practice (Moore 2012). The archiving and reuse of data makes the substantive difficulties resulting from anonymization even more evident – such as the practical impossibility to fully anonymize the research material on the one hand and risk of losing important contextual information or misinterpretation / alternative interpretations on the other (see also Clark 2006; Neale 2013). Moore (2012: 332) argues that “anonymization manifests paradoxically in discussion of reuse, as both a prerequisite for archiving data to ensure research participants are protected from possible future harm, and as a barrier, as that which may render the data unusable by removing essential context”. Anonymization of seemingly background details in many cases may lead to the potential loss of information important for the accurate understanding of the research material (Clark 2006).

Some authors propose a shift from the ‘blanket approach’ in anonymization to a more reflexive and situated ethics of ‘negotiating anonymity’ within the specific context of the research. In this perspective the question of when, how and at which point to anonymize the research material is not a single decision but a constant issue, taking into account the potential risks to participants on the one hand and the potential drawbacks and difficulties posed to accurate analysis on the other. Hence “*anonymization is an ongoing process of negotiation, reflection, and experimentation*” (Clark 2006: 18), similarly to the broader issue of informed consent (Holland et al. 2006).

7.2 Researcher – participant long-term relationship

The long-term relationship between the researcher and the research participants, though potentially very beneficial to the quality of the research data (see e.g. Hermanowicz 2013), raises concerns regarding the maintenance of informed consent, especially given the fact that “with growing familiarity and trust comes the danger of exploitation and the potential for participants to divulge more than they would otherwise be comfortable with” (Weller 2012: 123). It also requires reflection on personal self-disclosure on the part of the researcher and managing familiarity while concurrently preserving professional boundaries (Ryan et al. 2016). This overlaps the traditional insider-outsider dilemma in qualitative research, where a correspondence of social-demographic characteristics, group affiliations or life experiences between the researcher and the research participant may enhance the relevance of findings but

on the other hand can interfere with objectivity, neutrality and academic criticism. On the other hand, the growing research relationship may encourage the participants to provide more in-depth information given their evolving trust in the aims of the study (Gravlee et al. 2009), this also positively attaches them to the research project and enhances their engagement. Moreover, the longitudinal character of the research allows to build on themes developed earlier, reflect on previous opinions and gain more in-depth understanding of motives and decisions (Shirani, Henwood 2011).

The interview as a research method carries many potentials resulting from the social interaction that takes place between the researcher and the research participant which has been widely acknowledged in sociology as “the science of the interview” (Benney, Hughes 1956). The developing relationship between the researcher and the interviewees provides a rich context for analyzing changes in narrative as well as mutual interpretations and understandings. This adds important value to the research outcome, but on the other hand creates ethical concerns about sustaining participants’ consent as the research develops and constantly providing them with the option to withdraw (Taylor 2015, see also Hemmerman 2010). The ongoing relationship can influence both data collection and its analysis by the researcher who becomes more familiar and engaged with the affairs of his interviewees, while interviewees may also want to elaborate on stories important to them and not necessarily related to the interview scenario (Thomson, Holland 2003). Moreover, repeated qualitative (in-depth) interviews can also carry a ‘therapeutic potential’, when the interviewees become emotionally engaged in the research, which “must be treated with caution, recognizing the costs of self-exposure for the participant’s privacy and integrity” (Thomson, Holland 2003: 239, see also Hemmerman 2010; Krings et al. 2013). Furthermore, the change that takes place in the lives of participants between interviews may not necessarily be positive in character so they may be reluctant to talk about their experiences and an acknowledgement of undesirable facts may cause distress (Ryan et al. 2016). Another important issue to take into account is that repeated contacts with the researcher aimed at reflecting upon experiences (such as e.g. migration decisions) can alter the life trajectories, attitudes and perceptions of the research participants, which otherwise would not occur (Holland et al. 2006).

Researchers thus need to develop awareness to ‘relational fragilities’ and take into account personal characteristics that influence the research process, including also differences of education and cultural capital between the interviewer and interviewees (Hemmerman 2010). Another important issue in this respect, taking into account the longitudinal character of the

research, is interviewer continuity. Studies indicate that this is especially important for the researchers themselves as it allows for building a relationship with the interviewees on the one hand and for enhancing the consistency of the data due to more background information on the other (Shirani 2010). However, such continuity and long-term relationship also poses risks, as stated earlier. In regard to these risks online interviews may carry some potential benefits due to their remoteness which decreases the probability of the researcher getting too involved in the relationship or distorting private vs professional boundaries (for similar dilemmas in the context of gatekeepers see Hemmerman 2010).

8. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to draw a brief outline of both methodological and practical issues related to qualitative longitudinal research and its potential in the context of ‘analyzing change through time’ and space, specifically in the case of studies on (multiple) migration. I have focused to a large extent on the challenges of planning and conducting such a study. A last issue worth mentioning here is the growing interest in legal, ethical, practical and methodological aspects of archiving and secondary use of qualitative data, including also longitudinal studies (see e.g. Parry, Mauthner 2004; Neale 2013). Issues raised in the literature in this respect include such matters as preparing the research material for archiving (including anonymization), informed consent and confidentiality in the context of data re-usage, methodological risks connected to depriving the data of its context and relationship with the researcher, access to datasets and responsible usage. Reflecting on these dilemmas is important, however it exceeds the thematic scope of this working paper.

To conclude the review it needs to be noted that one of the important advantages of qualitative longitudinal research is its flexibility, responsiveness as well as ‘fluctuating narrative’ (Vogl et al. 2017). According to various authors this method “has the potential to adjust instruments and specify research questions according to new insight, adaptation to individual narratives” (Vogl et al. 2017: 2). Others stress that “interview-based, QLR, increasingly undertaken from different disciplinary perspectives, enables accounts to be collected as biographically transformative experiences are lived through and/or reflected upon and narrated” and further that “qualitative *longitudinal* research emphasizes the temporal dimensions of experience and understanding as well as problematizing linear constructions of time” (Miller 2015: 293-294). It has to be kept in mind that “we need to understand the complex and subjective dimensions of temporality as a social construct” (Ryan et al. 2016: 2)

where “exploring these processes in a research interview means paying attention to the ways in which time is conceptualized and narrated by participants, as well as how time, and change over time, are framed by the researcher’s questions” (Ryan et al. 2016: 3).

In the case of researching migration in a mobile world it is essential to take into account both agency and structure when it comes to investigating processes as well as individual decisions (Findlay, Li 1999). Importantly, agency should be analysed in relation to temporal orientations – past, present and future – including also existing constraints (Cojocar 2016). Qualitative longitudinal research carries potential to respond to the challenge of methodological complexity which “is required to explore the ways in which migrant geographies are both made by migrants, and at the same time embedded in wider social and economic structures which the migrants do not choose, and which in part define the conditions of their existence” (Findlay, Li 1999: 53). The process of migration inherently involves ‘change through time’ and the application of a qualitative longitudinal approach seems adequate to address its specificity. There are however problems that researchers need to take into account. Mobile populations (such as migrants and multiple migrants) are often hard-to-reach and considerably dispersed which poses significant difficulties to longitudinal studies, especially when it comes to building and maintaining a research sample and conducting the research itself (e.g. interviews). In this respect online methods and technologies constitute a useful resource, however they also pose specific difficulties to the research, especially when it comes to establishing rapport between the researcher and the research participants. Moreover, the detailed migration stories of particular interviewees and the need to track these in time and space create potential difficulties to the maintenance of participant anonymity.

Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed, that QLR also provides important potentials for researching migration, and specifically also the phenomenon of multiple migration. Interviews repeated at different points in time give insights into the construction of mobility trajectories in relation to changes of life experiences, identities and external context. It enables the researcher to analyse changes in decision making, perceptions and interpretations as they develop along the way and not only in retrospective (which is often distorted by present circumstances). Holland et al. (2006: 19) conduct a review of areas and research issues where the potential of qualitative longitudinal methods could be developed and conclude that “a QLL approach may be particularly useful when attempting to understand the interaction between temporal and geographic movement and between individual / collective agency and

structural determinants”. Moreover, mobility and migration are viewed as areas where qualitative longitudinal research can contribute to the development of theory (Holland et al. 2006).

Gravlee et al. (2009: 461) point to three advantages of longitudinal data over cross-sectional research. These include the possibility to analyse change within individual trajectories as well as similarities or differences between trajectories, discover the direction of relationships and increase the accuracy of the study. These advantages may prove valid also in the case of migration studies, including multiple migrations. Neale and Flowerdew point out that “understanding how people move through time, use time or relate to time – their strategies for making sense of the past or navigating the futures – requires an understanding of the varied and individualized circumstances of their day-to-day lives” (Neale, Flowerdew 2003: 192). Qualitative longitudinal research creates methodological conditions to enable this. It also creates space for the development of research dynamics and advancing re-interpretations of the evolving research material.

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