Recruiting diverse data to sociological understanding

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Longitudinal, mixed methods and action research, ‘As well as the subject: additional dimensions in development research ethics’, School of International Development, University of East Anglia seminar series, UEA London 24 Feb 2012
On challenges of integrating data created through different methods or differing project contexts:
- Working across qualitative and quantitative data
- Working across diversely constituted qualitative data sets: an example of secondary analysis from ESRC Timescapes
Empirical example 1: Family contexts, parenting and class

- The research project started out as a small ‘extension’ project of Real Life Methods (part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods). We did a survey and pilot qualitative interviews – then built these up. Survey n = 560, semi-structured interviews: 34 (now done second wave)

- Research questions...
We want you to think about what it will take for children today to do well in life. People have very different ideas about this. For each statement please tick to show how important you think this characteristic is for a child to do well in life.

- **Having a good education** (very important/fairly important/not important/not sure)

Have these characteristics changed in their importance since you were a child? For each statement please tick to show if you think it has now become more important in helping a child do well in life, or less important, or stayed the same.

- **Having a good education** (more important/less important/about the same/not sure)
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- Changing salience of formal education / qualifications to successful working class employment routes.
- Interesting frame for sampling interviewees for qualitative part of study (objective and subjective orientations). Aim was to help tap into internal class diversity. Reference to different orientations to education might tap into varied dynamics in inter-generational inheritance.
Middle class – assured orientations to children’s educational futures

- Middle class assuredness; (see positioning) and routinised expectations of educational success; e.g.
- Alexander ........ I mean, I don't, I don't mind if they're not, they're not Oxford and Cambridge graduates, but I suppose I would like them to have gone as far in education as, as they can in some respects. And certainly the, the better educated you are, I think the more interesting the job you probably get....
  Erm, so I'd be, I'd be quite keen on doing... And I, I suspect coming from the family we come from, it'd be difficult not to do a degree, they’ll feel a degree of pressure even if we don’t say it, that they ought to be going to university. The same as I, you know, my father was an academic, my mother was an academic, erm, and I didn’t realise until quite late on that you didn’t have to go to university.
Middle class and strategic

- Julie: *Erm, for me, I think the main thing now what’s important to me is ensuring, particularly for [daughter], that she gets a good basic education to move her onto the next levels in life, and I think we’re really working hard at ensuring that she’s got a basic foundation in which to build upon. Because we realise now that she’s got a couple more years at primary school and, you know, these SATS tests that come through, we keep thinking, we’ve got to put lots into her, and I think we do now in terms of support and homework.*
Middle class diversity

- Diversity within middle class important to understanding orientations;
- Some strategic, others quite assured.
  - (Consistent with a theorisation of advantage which is much more deeply embedded in social structural relations (and systems) than implied by a model of volition (see Bottero 2005).

Working and intermediate class experiences
Summary

1. In this example, survey research was used as a sampling frame. What is somewhat unusual is using data on subjective orientations as well as socio-economic evidence to access diversity;

2. Can relate this to broader patterns of differential change (across classes)

3. Ground up qualitative analysis provides linked evidence about diversity, and clues about its making...

4. Which can reinforce our conceptualisation of broader structures of inequality – e.g. evidence on salience of stability and mobility across generations – further developed through W2 interviews
Timescapes

- A qualitative longitudinal study comprising 7 primary empirical projects; a new archive of QL data (with connections with ESDS Qualidata; affiliate projects, training and other dissemination events; and resources for social policy, and a programme of secondary analysis/dedicated SA project (last 2 years of TS)
- Substantive common interests in: Personal relationships and identities; family life, friendship; intimacy, care and support. Methodological and conceptual interests in time, biography, generation and historical time in qualitative longitudinal research.
Seven Timescapes Projects

1. **Siblings and Friends**: the changing nature of children’s lateral relationships (Prof. R. Edwards (LSBU, Soton))
2. **The Crafting of Young People’s Relationships** (Prof. B. Neale, Leeds)
3. **The Dynamics of Motherhood**: an intergenerational project (Prof. R. Thomson, Open)
4. **Masculinities, Identities and Risk**: stories of transition in the lives of men and fathers (Prof K. Henwood, Cardiff)
5. **Work and Family Lives**: the changing experiences of ‘young’ families (Prof Backett-Milburn, then Sarah Cunningham-Burley, Edinburgh)
6. **Intergenerational Exchange**: grandparents, social exclusion and health (Dr. K. Hughes, Leeds)
7. **The Oldest Generation**: Events, relationships and identities in later life (Prof J. Bornat, Open)
Debates about the value of qualitative secondary analysis

- (e.g. Mauthner, Parry and Backett–Milburn 1998; and cf. Hammersley 1997)

 **Difficulties..**
- ‘Being there’ – researcher presence
- Knowledge of context

Hammersley (2009): on data and evidence

*Primary analysts have a privileged relationship to the data they have generated, but do not necessarily have a privileged claim on the arguments that can be made from that data. .... ‘being there’ is not the final arbiter of the adequacy of [social scientific] understandings* (see Irwin and Winterton 2011a)
Secondary analysis in practice

- **Getting to know a project**
  - Understanding sample structure and developing logics for selecting data for analysis
  - Understanding context (the nature of data and the conditions of its production)

- **Developing analytic strategies**

- **Working across diversely constituted data sets**
  - esp. thanks to WFL team (Backett-Milburn; Harden; et al; and MaF team: Henwood, Shirani); ToG: Bornat).
• Understanding context (the nature of data and the conditions of its production)
  ◦ Mundane changes within and across projects, and different ‘framing’ of questions shape data.. (well known to qual researchers, part of raison d’etre, but challenging issues for secondary analysis)
  ◦ Project designs: disciplinary concerns; sample; research design (e.g. who is interviewed; how people are oriented to project); research methods all shape data.
    (Example (a) – perceptions of generation across different projects / The Oldest Generation: evidence embedded in method of its creation..)
Analytic strategies, example 1

Working across data sets

- Approaching TS data sets as secondary analysts and working with common themes (across independent projects).
- Background: interest in issues of gender, changing commitments to work and care, time pressure and work life balance issues
- Focus on gendered experiences of time pressure grounded in (exploratory) readings of data. We built up a picture of internal diversity and different contexts in which time pressure was experienced (and managed), and the differences that gender makes.
- Mapped out different positioning of participants with respect to how they perceived managing time, and work/care commitments
Rachel, talking about her work identity and how she manages it refers to the juggling which is a theme of many women’s accounts: “But the juggling, constant juggling, is always there. It’s just this background noise in your head”

Since the gender dimension appears so strong, we might ask: how does this play out in different contexts?

Therefore considered women and men in different domestic divisions of labour; hypothesise that women more likely to be positioned to experience stress across range of circumstances where they do extensive paid work (even where partner has extensive caring role…)
Consider, then, whether we can bring our evidence and analysis into conversation with data from another project. Worked with ‘Men as Fathers’, using a more deductive sampling strategy, identifying diverse circumstances in respect of household paid employment. Translate our research questions (e.g. into a context where only men are interviewed, and oriented in specific ways...e.g. are men more sanguine about domestic divisions of labour...

Consider men in range of domestic division of labour circumstances, and include comparisons between men who are more ‘conventional’ (combining work and involved fatherhood) and those who desire extensive practical hands-on care of young children.
Bruce (school teacher, HoD at W3, partner full time work as director of her own company); he desires extensive practical caring involvement –

*Int: do you feel you have a different role to (your partner)*

*Bruce: I think it is interchangeable as far as the sort of caring is concerned, I mean I think that probably we are not the average couple...... I think we are interchangeable and.. I mean it is hilarious but it is that I am more of a mum and she is more of a dad. ....there is almost a role reversal in the traditional roles*

Facilitated by resources and buying in nanny, and by his role at work, including his orientation to, and authority over, his time:
Bruce (w3):

_Actually I have re-organised my working patterns I suppose, and I am also now much less worried about missing minor deadlines. You know in some ways I am rather more robust and about things at work....

...I used to be very assiduous.. It had to be right and now you know well you know if something works well fine and that will do

(may tell us something about different male positions in work, but also perhaps differing assertions of authority or autonomy)
A minority of fathers describe compromise and conflict in managing their time across work and home life. This arises in contexts where they hold an ongoing determination for an extensive ‘hands-on’ carer role; and where they have limited autonomy over their working time.

- *Int:* ....when I say time to you what do you think of?
- *Malcolm:* Not enough, not enough,… one thing I’ve not got enough…. Its not so bad at the moment but I never used to have enough time to complete me work and I’d come home and I’d look at it and think there’s not enough time to have something to eat before I go to bed.

Women’s remain ‘stuck’ with time stress; and men move towards it when they hold similar commitments:- evidence of entrenched gender differences.
In summary – working across data sets we need to consider:

- Embeddedness of data in diverse contexts (samples; disciplinary context; orientations of participants; methods…)

- How to *translate* our concepts and hypotheses across differently constituted projects.

- How to then evolve and refine these concepts working within and across data sets.
Some references

Irwin and Elley 2011 *Sociology*, 45 [3]
Irwin and Elley (forthcoming) *The Sociological Review*

And on Timescapes:
1. Irwin, Bornat, Winterton (2012) *Qualitative Research*;
2. Timescapes website; including 4 SA working papers. Visit the Secondary Analysis Project pages at [http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/)
   And working papers 4 to 7 at [http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/events-dissemination/publications.php](http://www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk/events-dissemination/publications.php)

3. Other work – forthcoming