Adding Time into the Mix: Stakeholder Ethics in Qualitative Longitudinal Research

Bren Neale
Sociology and Social Policy, Faculty of Education, Science and Law, University of Leeds

Abstract
This paper explores the ethical considerations that arise in the conduct of Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research, drawing on work undertaken as part of the ESRC Timescapes initiative. Adding time into the mix of a qualitative study heightens the need for ethical literacy. Well established ethical principles take on new meaning and need reworking when seen with a temporal gaze – for example, those relating to consent as an ongoing process; sustaining confidentiality when the risk of disclosure is magnified over time; and the ethical representation of lives in the construction, display and re-use of research data. The challenges are magnified in relation to the tenor, flux and recurrent nature of the research process. The elongated time frames for empirical research create long term, reciprocal research relationships that need careful consideration and nurturing over time.

More broadly, as QL research unfolds, a wider constituency of individuals and organisations become implicated in the process, necessitating new thinking about their varied needs and claims. QL researchers find themselves navigating through a broader ethical landscape, which this paper seeks to capture through the concept of ‘stakeholder’ ethics. A stakeholder approach allows for the varied needs of those implicated in the research to be recognised and reconciled, and for a greater appreciation of how research relationships intersect and impact on the research process as it unfolds. Adding time into the mix also enables a distinction to be drawn between pro-active and re-active ethical strategies, both of which are needed in the longer time frames of QL enquiry. The discussion focuses on the conduct of QL research, illustrating the practices of researchers in the field as a starting point for a productive iteration between ethical principles and practice. The paper concludes that time is a complicating factor but also an important resource in the ethical conduct of qualitative research.

Keywords: Qualitative longitudinal, ethics, secondary analysis, stakeholder ethics.

Introduction - The ethics of Qualitative Longitudinal Research
The need to maintain high ethical standards in the conduct of social research, such that principles of justice and respect are upheld and the people involved protected from harm, is now well established among researchers. At the same time, ideas about research ethics are continually open to new reflections and refinements. This is nowhere more evident than in qualitative research, where ethical principles, practice and regulation are the subject of on-going debate (Wiles 2013; Hammersley & Traianou 2012; Miller et al. 2012). The spate of recent publications on ethics from qualitative researchers reflects the wide ranging nature of ethical considerations; they have implications for every dimension of the research process, from the formulation of research questions to the presentation of findings; and they straddle considerations of the use...
and re-use of research data in a context where qualitative secondary analysis has become an established mode of enquiry (Bishop 2009; Mauthner 2012). This paper focuses on the ethics of Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research, drawing on work undertaken as part of the ESRC Timescapes initiative, and across a broader body of QL enquiry (Birch & Miller, 2002; Miller & Bell, 2002; Morrow, 2009; Wiles, 2013). The Timescapes initiative (2007-12) was funded to advance QL methodology, archiving and data sharing through an interdisciplinary network of projects investigating family and life course dynamics (www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk). Through an affiliation scheme, the initiative provided support for a broader network of interdisciplinary projects using QL methodology. The discussion below is placed in the context of qualitative research, and indeed, of social research more generally (ESRC, 2010). While the ethical considerations explored here are not exclusive to QL research, as Wiles (2013) observes, it is helpful to re-work familiar issues in new research contexts.

Adding time into the mix of a qualitative study heightens particular ethical issues and requires new thinking about principles and practice. Well established ethical principles take on new meaning and need reworking when seen with a temporal gaze – for example, those relating to participant consent as an ongoing process, or sustaining confidentiality when the risk of disclosure magnifies over time. ‘Walking alongside’ people as their lives unfold inevitably touches the lives of both participants and researchers; the ethical management of such relationships is perhaps the greatest challenge that arises when researching through time. Attention to these relationships – what Mauthner and Parry (2013 forthcoming) call the relational aspects of research practice - is crucial. The process is encapsulated here in the notion of ‘stakeholder’ ethics (Neale et al. 2012; Neale & Bishop 2012a/b; Neale & Hanna 2012). Stakeholders are individuals or groups with a direct interest, involvement or investment in the research, and who are therefore implicated in and potentially affected by the research process and its outputs. The primary stakeholders in empirical research are research participants. The need to ensure that they are fully informed and participate freely in a project, that their confidentiality will be protected, and their dignity and autonomy respected at all times, are cardinal principles that have been extensively documented (ESRC, 2010). Researchers, individually and collectively, are also key stakeholders, operating within and across research teams (Mauthner 2012). Recognition of and protection for their role, professional standing and labour, including their responsibility in mediating ethical principles and practice across the stakeholders, deserves attention. Secondary QL researchers are also important stakeholders, with similar claims to intellectual labour and professional standing. A range of less visible stakeholders also have rights and claims in the research process. Chief among these are academic institutions and bodies – funders, research ethics committees and archives, which lay down broad principles for the ethical conduct, regulation and use of research and research data (ESRC 2010). Finally there are public stakeholders, including family and community members, recruitment ‘gatekeepers’, service providers and policy makers. The wider public is also implicated here, as investors through public funding and under the rubric of the ‘common good’. The views and interests of these varied individuals and groups are not of equal weight; they come into prominence at different stages of the research process and are accorded varying degrees of priority in ethical decision making. Nevertheless, stakeholder ethics suggests the need to recognise the needs and claims of those involved, however tangential the involvement may be. Taking these complex relationships into account and understanding how they intersect and may impact on one another over time is an important component of ethical literacy in a longitudinal study.

Integral to a stakeholder approach is the need to tease out the relationship between ethical principles, laid down by funders and regulatory bodies, and ethical practice, mediated through researchers in specific research contexts. There is ongoing debate about the relative weight to be accorded to principles and ‘situated’ or ‘emergent’ ethical practices. Ethical guidelines or frameworks that researchers can draw on as the starting point for their research are crucial. They can be adapted for specific research designs, and used as a
benchmark against which to address specific issues and dilemmas as they arise (Bishop 2009; and Wiles, 2013 for a review of ethical frameworks, including regulatory frameworks). The frameworks themselves are not fixed or immutable, but subject to refinement over time. Situated ethics, on the other hand, emphasizes the particularities of ethical questions and practice; these are context specific and require a sensitive appraisal of local circumstances and situated knowledge (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002: 27). Such an approach typically calls for researcher reflexivity and negotiation in resolving ethical questions, rather than relying on the application of general rules (Mauthner & Edwards, 2010). Emergent ethics has particular relevance for longitudinal enquiry, where there is increased likelihood of unanticipated ethical dilemmas emerging over time.

In combination, these two dimensions of ethics ensure that research practice is not divorced from broader principles but at the same time remains in tune with real lives and local circumstances (Wiles 2013). A temporal gaze reinforces this and allows for a distinction to be made between pro-active and re-active ethical strategies. The first involves formulating bespoke ethical protocols at the design stage of a project, drawing on pre-existing ethical frameworks and documented accounts of research practice. The second involves careful decision making when unanticipated events or dilemmas arise, with scope to reconfigure ethical protocols and refine practices as a study unfolds (Wiles 2013). In QL research pro-active and re-active strategies are both needed: pre-existing principles and situated ethics intersect and are refined in an iterative process that unfolds through the elongated time frames of the research.

In what follows, the ethical conduct of QL research is explored and illustrated through accounts drawn from research practice. The indented examples are derived from published findings or web commentaries produced by selected projects or affiliated projects in the Timescapes network. The discussion follows the research life cycle, starting with issues around informed consent, and going on to the sustaining of long term field relationship, and exploring how the principle of reciprocity can be accommodated within the broader framework of maintaining professional research relationships. This is followed by consideration of how research relationships are implicated in the generation, representation and use of research data, requiring researchers to strike a balance between confidentiality and authenticity. The final section of the paper explores the ethical challenges that arise in the re-use of QL data and how the needs of a range of stakeholders (participants, researchers, funders and archivists) may be accommodated. Overall, the discussion suggests that time – seen here primarily as the medium through which we gather data - is a complicating factor but also an important resource in the ethical conduct of qualitative research.

Consent as an ongoing process

Giving individuals an informed choice about participating in research is a basic principle of research ethics. In QL enquiry time complicates this matter – gaining informed consent is no longer a one off task, but becomes an ongoing process (Birch and Miller, 2002). This in itself creates some challenges: consent may be differently ‘informed’ when the future direction of a project may be flexible and subject to change, and a continual revisiting of consent may become a burden on participants and create instability. Being transparent from the outset about the aims of a research project, the longer term commitment requested of participants, the anticipated outcomes or impact, and plans for data archiving and re-use is good practice. Process consent entails following up initial verbal or written consent over the course of a study, and at times when trust has developed. This may be done at each research encounter or through exploratory and flexible conversations, held with participants at key intervals (what Birch & Miller (2002) refer to as ‘ethical talk’ or ‘moral conversations’). Participants are thereby able to reflect on their consent status as an ongoing process (Cutliffe & Ramcharan 2002), and with increased understanding of the research and their part in it as a study progresses.
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. Where ‘gatekeepers’ such as family members or professional organisations are involved in recruitment, care is needed to ensure that individuals are consenting freely and not being coerced into, or out of, participation (Miller & Bell, 2002). Similar considerations arise in relation to ‘thank you’ gifts for participants, and whether these are seen as recompense and reward, or, more dubiously, as incentives that may have a coercive effect (Morrow, 2009). The issue is heightened for repeat interviews, when participants may come to anticipate a reward (Wiles et al. 2005). Given the time commitments needed from participants in QL research, some recompense is justified, particularly where participants are lacking in resources; an equally important ethical principle is that participants should not be economically exploited through their involvement in research. In two projects in Timescapes, £50 gift vouchers were given at each encounter to participants who were engaged in lengthy and repeated life history interviews. As shown below, these form part of an ethic of reciprocity over time. Finding a way to be transparent at the outset about the giving of such gifts, and to explain their purpose clearly to participants, helps to avoid the potential for coercion.

Over time, care is needed to ensure that participants are free to choose not to continue their involvement. In this regard, the element of time in QL research, and the flexibility this gives in the field, is an important resource. Participants can choose to opt out temporarily, with the option to rejoin a study at a later date. This is a commonly reported occurrence, and seems to take the pressure off participants when the timing of fieldwork may not mesh well with changing circumstances in their lives.

The efforts needed to sustain relationships ethically in long term field enquiry are substantial. At the same time, a clear exit strategy is needed to bring the research to a satisfactory close (Morrow 2009). Marking the closure of a project (or the current phase where there may be a follow up) is particularly helpful where participants may have built up relationships within a project and developed a distinctive identity as part of a long term study. Closure may take the form of a sociable event or gathering, related to the research, to which the participants are invited. Within Timescapes, public exhibitions and dissemination events were used for this purpose. For the ESRC Enduring Families project, an anthology of young people’s views was proposed by the participants, and produced by a children’s charity in consultation with them. Copies were distributed to the participants in what became a lasting memento and fitting conclusion to the study (Neale & Flowerdew 2004). Such events and outputs, however, take foresight, time, effort and funding; a pro-active strategy can help to build these resources into a study at the design stage.

Sustaining ethical relationships: Reciprocity and professional ethics

The developing relationship between researcher and research participant is a crucial consideration in QL research, where fieldwork may take place over many months or years. Methodologically, this requires consideration of how to maintain a sample over time. Ethically, the question becomes one of how to sustain and nurture relationships in a manner that builds trust and reciprocity, but does not lead to over dependence, intrusion or neglect, to the detriment of either researcher or researched (Birch & Miller 2002; Morrow 2009). The process entails finding a balance between two ethical principles. The first is the need to build some level of reciprocity and participant support into research practice, as part of an ongoing ‘gift’ relationship. The second is the need to maintain the boundaries of a professional research relationship over time, and a clear focus on the professional nature of the researcher role (Hemmerman, 2010; Hammersley & Traianou 2012).

Across the Timescapes network, individual projects and researchers, working with different substantive topics and constituencies of participants, balanced these principles in varied ways; there is no prescriptive approach that works for all researchers in all research contexts. The balancing act, however, may become a challenge when working with hard-to-reach and vulnerable participants, as Hemmerman (2010) shows:
The Timescapes Intergenerational Exchange project involved repeat interviews with grandparents on a low income housing estate. In such settings, trust can be fragile and subject to change over time. There was a need to be continuously flexible and ‘field ready’ to gain access, while sample maintenance became a continuous process of frequent, informal visits that ran the risk of intrusion. Responding to need in such settings may lead to over-involvement in the provision of support. Prior to an interview, it was not uncommon for the researcher to help with the washing up and go to the corner shop to buy milk. The usual boundaries of relationship maintenance were severely challenged in this study and issues of emotional risk were heightened for the researcher. The project raised questions about the ‘depth’ of access that should be maintained with disadvantaged groups and the need to clarify the limits of researcher support at the outset (Hemmerman, 2010).

The question of how much and what kind of support may be legitimately provided - and received (Kelder 2005, Patrick 2013) - as part of an ongoing, reciprocal relationship needs to be worked out in relation to local circumstances and contexts:

In her affiliated project on the lived experience of welfare reform, Patrick (2012) shared basic information about her life with participants, and gave some rudimentary benefits advice, based on her experience as a welfare rights adviser. This was seen as a central part of the reciprocal offer; it would have felt un-ethical to refrain from providing such advice when it would materially benefit the participant. Developing a degree of personal involvement and trust to sustain supportive relationships outweighed the potential drawback of influencing participants’ experiences of welfare. On one occasion the researcher accepted a small gift from a participant to mark a special celebration. At the same time the researcher made clear the limits of her own capacity to provide any additional support or to maintain relationships beyond the end of her project. She also made clear her limitations in influencing welfare policies as an outcome of the project – something that had initially motivated some of the participants to take part in the research. Patrick also took the time to support the ‘gatekeeper’ organisations that had helped in sample recruitment. She attended key events and gave reciprocal help with their broader programme of work, becoming an active supporter of these stakeholder organisations over time (Patrick 2012, 2013).

The longer the time frame for QL research the greater the likelihood that participants will need or request some form of support (or seek to reciprocate themselves). From the outset, therefore, there is merit in being open and realistic about the levels of support that can be provided and the likely outcomes of the research (best framed in terms of ‘hoped for’ rather than ‘anticipated’ outcomes, see www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk). This helps to ensure that participants’ expectations are not raised inappropriately, either in the short or longer term (Morrow 2009). Re-active strategies are also important to address unanticipated issues around reciprocity and professional research relationships as they arise:

The Timescapes Young Lives and Times team offered advice to a young participant who had expressed a wish in successive interviews to go to University; the advice led him to register for a degree. This may have influenced his life chances – a key theme being explored in the research, yet the principle of reciprocity overrode this methodological consideration (Lau Clayton 2012). Subsequently, the team received a request from a social worker to provide a character reference for another participant, who was facing a custodial sentence. This raised difficult questions for the research team: what did they know and not know about the participant beyond the confines of the research relationship? On the basis of such little knowledge, how could they vouch for the moral reputation and conduct of the participant in a legal context, and what additional responsibility would that place on the team in the longer term? How could they respond without breaching confidentiality? What did they owe to the social worker, who was a partner in the research process and with whom the
team also had a reciprocal relationship over time? Keeping within the bounds of the research relationship, the team felt unable to provide a character reference, but they wrote a letter of support, outlining the valuable and sustained contribution that the participant had made to the research.

Whatever strategies and solutions are adopted in response to such dilemmas, if the boundaries of reciprocity and professional research relationships are clearly defined this can help to ensure that the purpose of the research is not misconstrued by participants, and that the line between ‘research’ and ‘intervention’ is not breached (Morrow, 2009).

**Representing lives over time: Confidentiality and Authenticity**

Finding ways to represent people’s lives in the production and display of research data is an ethical issue in all social research. The representational process comes into play in varied contexts: the production of field notes and case histories; academic presentations; publications targeted at different audiences; the preparation and display of varied forms of data: on websites, in archives, and in public exhibitions; and media reporting. All researchers feel responsible for participants, but inevitably these feelings strengthen in long standing relationships and over time, where these relationships run on and are ‘live’ during the processes of analysis and dissemination. The pressures can create mixed effects, both a great commitment to handle people’s accounts of their lives with utmost care, combined with a great sense of responsibility to get voices heard so that their stories count.

Most discussions on this topic focus on published outputs and how they may pose risks to people’s lives, futures, reputations and relationships (Morrow 2009). Less attention has been paid to how participants are represented in the analytical production and display of data – these are phases of the research process that are extended and become more visible in longitudinal research. Ethical practice here requires a balance between two competing sets of principles – the need for confidentiality and the more recent drive towards authenticity (Wiles 2013). On the one hand identities need protecting through altering data or placing controls on its use. The issue is heightened where data are sensitive, where participants are vulnerable and where they are drawn from identifiable localities. In comparison with most cross sectional interviews, the accumulation of personal, biographical and geographical details, e.g. references to local landmarks, groups or institutions through multiple waves of data, increases the risk of disclosing identities. On the other, there is a growing move towards preserving the integrity of people’s accounts, enabling their lives to ‘count’ in authentic ways. Over-anonymising can strip a dataset of its integrity and diminish its intellectual meaning and scientific value, to the detriment of the primary team as well as for re-users. Some of the challenges in working across these competing ethical principles are illustrated below.

Case histories constructed from multiple waves of data gathered over time are important analytical tools in QL research, but their construction requires careful deliberation about the ethical representation of lives. This theme was explored in some detail in the Timescapes Making the Long View project (Henderson et al, 2012):

The team constructed extremely long longitudinal case histories, from cumulative waves of data gathered over a decade, and sought to give an authentic voice to participants while protecting them from exposure. Thick descriptions were included that drew directly on the participants’ own words and styles of speaking – thereby making the voices of the participants explicit. The researcher too was included in the data, with both researcher and the research process became increasingly reflexive over time. The case histories raised awareness of all the voices to be woven into the accounts - the participant, the researcher and other analysts within the team, and revealed the changing reflections and interpretations of both participant and researcher over time.
Given the longer time frames for QL research, there is more scope for participants to encounter data about their lives, sometimes with unintended consequences. It is common, for example, for researchers to capture a version of a past or present life, or an imagined future, and take this version back to participants at a later date, for example through recursive interviewing (Thomson 2012). These time frames are not fixed in people’s lives but continually open to re-interpretation as individuals selectively remember, change plans or modify aspirations (cf. Miller, 2000). Revisiting past or future selves may be rewarding and interesting for participants but it may also carry emotional risks if participants are confronted with versions of their lives that they reject or no longer wish to identify with.

An example is provided by Walkerdine in her longitudinal study of ‘Growing Up Girl’ (Walkerdine et al. 2001; Pini & Walkerdine, 2011; personal communication). Participants in the final phase of the project were invited to use video diaries to generate unmediated data about their everyday lives. The rationale was that this would be less invasive and more empowering for the young women, enabling them to ‘show’ their lives rather than necessarily speak about them. However, some of the young women from disadvantaged backgrounds were uncomfortable with this exercise and, on playing back the material they had recorded, chose to delete much or all of the content before handing the tapes back to the researchers. How the young women were represented in the videos generated a sense of shame about their accents and surroundings, and a wish not to appear ‘common’ to their academic audience.

A further example, from the Timescapes Young Lives and Times project, shows another way in which a disjuncture may occur between researcher representations of a life, and the perceptions of participants:

Participants were invited to attend a public exhibition of data drawn from their interviews. Photographs of the young people were displayed with faces blurred. However, a video box evaluation of the event, held later in the day, revealed that participants disliked their identities being obscured in this way – they wished for their lives to count, in an authentic manner. Learning from this feedback, in a follow up exhibition the team consulted with participants over the display of data from their interviews and how best to strike a balance between authentic details and revealing sensitive and possibly negative information. They were able to reconcile the messages from the research with an ethically acceptable representation of the participants’ lives (Wiles et al. 2008; Lau Clayton 2012).

Balancing confidentiality and authenticity in the production of research data is clearly complicated where there are ongoing relationships of trust and respect between researcher and participant. Indeed, as the examples above show, they raise a broader issue about the status of research data – whose data is it, which ‘voices’, and which versions of events carry authenticity? (for both researcher and participant interpretations may shift over time).

There are no easy answers to these questions, but it is clear that tensions may exist between opting for the authenticity of gritty realism (showing it like it is), or altering or ‘massaging’ data in ways that may sanitise it and give it a more positive gloss for the benefit or protection of participants (Alldred, 1998; Wiles et al. 2008). Greater consultation with participants over how they wish to be represented in different contexts may offer one way forward, ensuring that the issues around identification and authenticity can be fully explored, and decisions jointly reached (Wiles, 2013). While participants may want greater public recognition for their accounts, this process may also become a burden, taking them reluctantly into a process of reflexive interpretation of their lives that they may find uncomfortable. Great care is needed in discerning where participants stand on these issues. More broadly there is undoubted merit in preserving some degree of ‘fit’ between the accounts given by participants, and the accounts produced by researchers –what the Oral Historians in Timescapes call the principle of shared authority (Bornat 2012).
Ethical sharing and re-use of QL data

The gradual growth in the secondary analysis of qualitative data since the 1990s has given rise to extensive epistemological and ethical debates about qualitative data sharing and re-use (see for example, Kelder 2005; Bornat 2005; Bishop 2009; Bornat et al 2011; Mauthner 2012, Mauthner & Parry 2013 forthcoming; and Bishop 2013 this volume). For research participants, the issues revolve around the perceived risks of exposure, exploitation, or mis-representation of data about their lives; and how consent can be obtained for unknowable future uses. For researchers, the issues focus on the potential disregard for their labour and skills in data production, and risks to their professional standing in opening up their data for scrutiny (Hadfield 2010). The timing for ‘letting go’ of such data is an important ethical consideration when primary researchers are engaged in making original contributions to knowledge. Underlying these ethical considerations is the epistemological issue of how far primary researchers have a privileged understanding of data and of the needs of participants, borne of their direct contact with participants, and their experiential knowledge in the field (Mauthner 2012).

For QL research, these issues are equally pronounced. The open ended time frames for QL research mitigate against archiving and data sharing in a context where there is no clear point at which primary analysis (by the original team) ends, and secondary analysis (by others) begins. Where data are archived, the primary researchers may find themselves working concurrently with secondary users, who are asking different questions of the data and producing different interpretations. In this context, flexible time frames for ‘letting go’ of data may be needed. Indeed, there remains a deep ambiguity about the right moment to archive, when QL data are inherently provisional, contingent and in process.

Taking the potential overlap of research endeavours into account is necessary in the ethical sharing and re-use of QL data. It sharpens the need for stakeholder models of archiving, that can engender trust and respect between primary and secondary researchers, and meet funder requirements to share data as a means of broadening evidence and advancing knowledge (Neale & Bishop 2012b). As Mauthner and Parry (2013 forthcoming) observe in relation to the Mass Observation Archive, it is possible to work with a relational approach to data sharing, which values unedited materials, and accords respect to the data generators (in this case, public recorders whose accounts are unmediated through researchers), including acknowledging the emotional challenges of ‘letting go’ of personal documents.

Such considerations underpinned the development of The Timescapes Archive – a digital resource of QL data gathered from the network of projects. The objective was to give primary researchers a more active and transparent role in the archive than they had hitherto been accorded, as a way to reconcile their needs more effectively with those of secondary users, and with the funding requirement to create this resource during the life time of the programme. A stakeholder approach was seen as a way to minimise risk to participants and primary researchers, while still enabling access for secondary use. A variety of strategies were used as outlined below.

Informed consent for archiving. We revisited this issue and sought to tease out precisely what it is that participants in a longitudinal study can consent to. Framing consent around the infrastructure and arrangements for re-use – by whom, under what conditions, and with what safeguards to maximise confidentiality and respect for people’s accounts - is feasible, since these dimensions of re-use can be specified in advance. The other dimension of re-use, however, relates to the interpretations that researchers produce – whether through cumulative analysis by primary teams or secondary analysis by a wider pool of researchers. This is much more difficult to specify in advance and is not, therefore, viable as the basis for seeking consent. Attaining ‘interpretive’ consent is not usually seen as an issue. Very few researchers consult their participants about their interpretations, and participants do not assume a monopoly on how data about
their lives should be interpreted. They may have some input on this matter in participatory or action research, which is founded on principles of empowerment. But the production of new knowledge is more usually seen, among both researchers and participants, as the task of the researcher, who is in a position to place individual accounts in the context of a wider dataset and a wider body of scholarly evidence.

Despite unknowable future interpretations, participants are generally positive about their accounts forming part of a social historical resource and contributing to documentary evidence about important social issues. The vast majority readily consent to donating their accounts to scientific research, both now and in the future through the medium of the archive, and see no distinction between offering their accounts to the teams gathering the data and a wider pool of professional researchers (Kuula 2010-11: Weller 2010; Neale & Bishop 2012). Kuula’s research on participant perceptions of archiving revealed that, ‘... Participants perceive open access to research data for other researchers as self evident.’ (Kuula, 2010-11: 15). This was certainly our experience within Timescapes where over 95% of participants consented to archiving.

Re-thinking the ethics of consent in this way may help primary researchers to move away from what may be an unnecessarily protectionist stance in relation to their participants. A useful strategy here is to adopt generic or enduring models of consent, which allow for the development of unspecified forms of analysis and interpretation as a research project unfolds. This is the form of consent sought in medical research and it has obvious utility for longitudinal enquiry (ESRC 2010; Neale & Bishop 2012b).

New forms of Data Sharing. In exploring the ethical interface between primary and secondary research, another Timescapes strategy was to set up data sharing workshops across small groups of projects. These occurred between waves of fieldwork and were guided by clear ethical protocols on data confidentiality. Researchers could bring their data into conversation with related datasets across varied samples, interrogate them afresh through different disciplinary and substantive lenses, and then revisit the field armed with new insights and questions to explore (Irwin et al. 2012; cf. Bornat 2005). The researchers were simultaneously primary and secondary analysts, in a collaborative process of data exchange that was unmediated through the archive - data sharing in its more literal sense. Ethically speaking this was a beneficial process. There was little sense in these practices of a wholesale ‘letting go’ of data, or of secondary researchers ‘running away’ with datasets in a way that could be detrimental to the primary team or participants. This was a productive way of working across the primary/secondary interface that relied on trust and collaboration between different teams of researchers.

A stake in the archive. A more ambitious and far reaching strategy for navigating the primary/secondary interface, was to give primary researchers a greater stake in the Timescapes Archive and in the long term use of their datasets. In a stakeholder approach, archiving becomes an integral part of the research process rather than an administrative task that is ‘tacked on’ to the end of a project. As well as serving the longer term needs of secondary users, the Timescapes resource supports the cumulative analysis of primary researchers while a study remains ‘live’. For example, researchers receive advice on the methodological and ethical construction and management of a dataset as their projects progress, and, can safely store data in the resource for cumulative analysis over time (Bishop & Neale 2010; Neale & Bishop 2012a and b).

Controlling Access Crucially, depositors are able to control use of their datasets in the digital resource through a system of access controls. Data placed on restricted access can only be re-used with the permission of the primary team. This is a ‘belt and braces’ addition to the standard archiving practices of password protected registration for bone fide researchers, securing informed consent, and altering or hiding identities, which as shown above, may bring some drawbacks (Neale & Bishop 2012b for further discussion of these strategies). Controlling access gave added protection to the primary researchers and became the cornerstone of ethical archiving under Timescapes.
**Relationships and Re-use.** Giving primary researchers a greater stake in the archive can also foster better and more productive relationships between primary and secondary researchers (see Bishop, this issue, for an extensive discussion of this theme). Primary researchers have a great deal to offer secondary users. While QL researchers do not have prior ownership of research data, or a monopoly on interpretation, the contextual knowledge that they build up over time is extremely valuable. Secondary research may well be aided where re-users can work with this dynamic and build relationships of trust with the data producers. The literature in this area tends to focus on the ethic of care that secondary users owe to primary researchers - whose work is assumed to have been completed. Re-users are enjoined to avoid criticising what they may discern as outdated findings or outmoded ways of researching, and to be aware of the different cultural and intellectual environments in which classic datasets were produced (Johnson et al 2010). The rationale that is increasingly adopted is to be ‘better with/because of’ – rather than better than - those who came before us’ (Bornat et al 2011). The ethical responsibilities of secondary users, however, should not detract from their own equally valid ethical claims. Secondary analysts have their own integrity, which is founded on intellectual rigour. They need well produced and fully contextualised datasets to work with; they need to be free to ask their own research questions of the data, engage in distinctive modes of analysis, and produce their own interpretations, even where these run counter to primary understandings. The work of secondary analysts is best seen as an enhancement of primary research rather than a challenge or threat to it, and the endeavours of data re-use deserve respect and support from the primary researcher. In other words, for QL research, where primary and secondary use may overlap, the ethic of care needs to run in both directions.

The ethos of qualitative data sharing is perhaps more advanced in the UK than anywhere else (Neale & Bishop 2010-11), yet challenges remain. Effecting a broader cultural shift in ethical data sharing and archiving requires further effort, encouragement, time and diplomacy, with on-going commitments to training and capacity building and work with professional associations. A continuing engagement with ethical debates over the re-use of data, and the bringing together of new evidence to inform this debate is particularly important (Bishop 2009).

**Resolving Ethical Dilemmas**

The discussion above suggests that stakeholder ethics has particular value in the context of Qualitative Longitudinal Research, where a greater range of research relationships become visible and need to be sustained and navigated over time. The examples given above illustrate the ways that researchers may combine broad sets of principles with situated ethics to create bespoke solutions and practices. This is also reflected in the final example presented below. This documents how ethical dilemmas may be resolved through consultation and the sharing of good practice, illustrating the reflexivity that Timescapes researchers have employed in their ethical practice (Wiles 2013). It also reveals how the issues outlined above, relating to on-going consent for archiving, family involvement, confidentiality and the ethical representation of lives, may merge in complex ways as a study progresses:

In 2009, Edwards and Weller consulted with their advisory group and the Timescapes team on an ethical issue that had arisen in the Siblings and Friends project (Weller and Edwards, 2012). Following the unexpected death of a teenage participant, who had given verbal consent for archiving, the team considered whether further consent was needed from the family and whether any data could be made available to family members in a way that would not violate confidentiality or cause harm. A strategy was worked out in the context of knowledge about the young man and this particular family. The team visited and consulted with the young man’s mother. Following this discussion, the mother was presented with a CD of selected recordings from her son’s interview material – those relating to positive aspects of his life, such as his hobbies and work ambitions, and that did not reveal sensitive information. The mother was also able to record her memories of her son, which now form part of the
archived material. The process of consultation in this case was documented on the Timescapes website (Edwards and Weller 2011). The discussions reveal the varied moral principles prioritised by different researchers, with different implications for courses of action; and how these considerations meshed with the situated knowledge held by the team.

Given the extended time frames for QL research, there is an increased likelihood that ethical dilemmas will arise in unforeseen ways as a project unfolds. These dilemmas may take many forms, and may relate to changes in the research environment or unanticipated changes in the circumstances of researchers, participants or other stakeholders. It is helpful, therefore, to have strategies in place to re-actively address and respond to such dilemmas as and when they arise. Several models have been formulated (reported in Wiles, 2013). A ‘belt and braces’ model (based on Israel & Hay, 2006), would include: clear identification of the problem and the stakeholders involved; assessing the context for decision making, including the longer term implications and consequences of alternative courses of action for all; considering this situated knowledge against a backdrop of ethical principles; consulting with researchers or research networks; implementing a course of action; and reflecting on the issue and the outcome and what may be learned from it. Documenting these processes for sharing with others is also useful; the Timescapes Knowledge Bank for Research Ethics (www.timescapes.ac.uk/knowledgebank) is designed to facilitate this process.

The domain of applied ethics is about making difficult choices in situations where no unambiguous options exist (Bishop 2009). The longer time frames for QL enquiry magnify these challenges. However, time also operates as a resource, giving flexibility over the research process and the timing of decision making for both participants and researchers. A concern with research ethics is seen in some quarters as ‘ethics creep’, a gradual move towards highly regulated systems, or, alternatively, a growing pre-occupation that runs the danger of overriding or overwhelming the substantive focus of a study (Wiles, 2013). However it is simply not possible to take ethics out of the equation or side-line the issues they raise (Wiles 2012). On-going dialogue and effective communication between the key stakeholders are necessary elements in the ethical conduct of a study. Allowing time for these processes is essential if QL research is to be grounded in the principles of justice, respect and the avoidance of harm.

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Biography

Bren Neale is Professor of Life Course and Family Research in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds, specialising in policy-related research on the dynamics of family life, divorce, childhood and intergenerational relationships. As Director of the ESRC Timescapes Initiative, Bren has contributed to advances in Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research methodology across academia, government
and the voluntary sector. She has established an infrastructure for scaling up QL evidence across projects (The Timescapes Archive) which is currently funded to 2014 (ESRC Changing Landscapes, with Kahryn Hughes). Under Timescapes she set up the Following Young Fathers study, which she now co-directs with Carmen Lau Clayton (ESRC 2012-15). She is a founding editorial board member of an international journal: *Families, Relationships and Societies* (Policy Press. 2012- ). In 2010, she was elected as a member of the Academy of Social Sciences in recognition of her work in developing Timescapes.

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1 Relationships within QL research teams also merit further attention. Such relationships may operate over considerable periods of time, with implications for the career trajectories and academic livelihoods of contract researchers. This suggests the need for some flexibility in research roles and for senior staff to ‘pass the mantle’ over time (Neale et al, 2012).

2 Indeed, the distinctions between primary and secondary use break down in this context, when primary researchers are engaged in revisiting their data over time, in new historical contexts and in relation to changing scientific knowledge.