Designing chronic poverty research

Kate Bird 2011
Aim

Having looked at the power point presentation and read this briefing note and some of the recommended core readings you should have:

- A good understanding of some of the key issues in designing chronic poverty research using life history methods:
- Insights into:
  - How your world view will inevitably influence the way that you design and undertake your research
  - Some of the challenges involved in designing and undertaking life history research

Introduction

This Briefing Note introduces you to some of the issues that you will need to consider when designing chronic poverty research using life histories.

In Figure 1, below, we present some of the issues that researchers of chronic poverty must consider (Hulme et al., 2001). This illustrates that research on chronic poverty can have a range of different foci. It can explore the extent to which chronic poverty is driven by intergenerational factors, marginalisation and low status; shocks; adverse incorporation; position in the life cycle; position in the household or by adverse geography (e.g. location in a spatial poverty trap). Figure 2, below, shows that when we examine chronic poverty, we are looking at a poverty which is severe, multidimensional and long-duration. Figure 3 shows, graphically, the how people who are chronically, transitorily or never poor move above and below the poverty line.

Briefing Notes 2 and 3 go into greater depth about how to use life history methods, both alone and in combination with other methods. In the remainder of this note we focus on the following topics:

- using life histories to explore changes in well-being over time;
- developing research questions;
- how a researcher’s world view can affect research design;
- selecting methods;
- developing a project budget;
- designing research instruments;
- collecting data;
- building your audience’s needs into research design.

A good starting point when designing research is the CPRC methods toolbox. See http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Design.htm for the section on research design.
Using life histories to explore changes in well-being over time.

The diagrams below show how households can be categorised as being either chronically poor, transitorily poor or never poor. One of the challenges as a researcher is to know which of these categories a household or individual fits into, and then to explore why.

Panelised household data (where data on the same or similar variables has been collected from the same households or individuals at more than one point in time) is a robust way of examining poverty dynamics, however, it can not always explore multidimensional poverty adequately (often focusing on consumption or income measures) and can often be fairly weak in explaining why a change in well-being occurred and how a household responded to that change (decisions). It can also be poor at providing information about what took place between the moments of data collection. The Chronic Poverty Research Centre has found that life histories are extremely effective at exploring changes in well-being over time, although they, too, have a number of weaknesses:

- They are rarely collected in large numbers. So, it is difficult to say that results are nationally representative.
- They are expensive to collect and analyse, requiring well trained and experienced researchers (much initial analysis takes place during the interview process so it is difficult to delegate data collection to more junior team members).
- They can be poor at delivering reliable retrospective data about consumption, income and assets (see Briefing Note 3 for more information about some of the sources of bias), although that this can be overcome, with careful planning and the use of carefully designed and tested methods.
Figure 1: Chronic poverty research agenda

Why study chronic poverty?

What are the characteristics of chronic poverty?

Who are the chronically poor?

What are the causes of chronic poverty, and what processes facilitate entry into, or impede exit from it?

To draw attention to those likely to have benefited least, or suffered most, from contemporary development efforts; those for whom emergence from poverty is most difficult.

Policy Analysis and Recommendations

Toolbox
- Quantitative panel studies; poverty dynamics analysis
- Qualitative longitudinal studies (panel studies, life histories)
- Livelihood frameworks
- Participatory poverty assessments
- Risk analysis
- Vulnerability analysis
- Capabilities approach
- Mapping poverty and geographic capital
- Policy analysis

Permanent component of income/expenditure etc. below set poverty line
Long duration

Regular seasonal poverty/deprivation
Intergenerational (see Fig. 2)

Poverty based on adverse incorporation – the productive poor, e.g., bondol, indentured labour

Poverty based on position in life-cycle, e.g., older people, children, widows

Poverty based on health status, e.g., HIV/AIDS, impairment

Poverty based on position in household, e.g., older people, disabled, women, children

Poverty based on position in community or nation, e.g., marginalised; class or castes, tribe, ethnic group, religion, refugees, pastoralists, migrants/non-migrants

Poverty based on geographic location, e.g., remote rural areas, and/or mountainous areas, urban slums, zones of conflict

Structural factors, e.g., unequal relationships in economic (particularly labour markets and terms of trade), political and social spheres (i.e., social exclusion)

Multiple vulnerabilities
Low asset status

Ghacks (agro-ecological, economic, political, demographic)
Spatial poverty traps
Figure 2: Intersecting characteristics of chronic poverty

Source: Hulme et al, 2001
Figure 3: The chronic poor, transient poor and non-poor – a categorisation

*Depending on data availability poverty could be assessed in terms of household expenditure, income, consumption, a nutritional measure, a poverty index, a poverty score or an assessment of assets/capitals.

Source: Adapted from Jalan and Ravallion (2000). Note that terms are used with different meanings than in Jalan and Ravallion.

Figure 4: Categorising the poor in terms of duration and severity of poverty – some examples

Source: Hulme et al, 2001
Developing your research question

Key research questions are derived from the topic the researcher seeks to explore. For example, if the research aims to explore some of the contextual factors affecting the intergenerational transmission of poverty, a question might be “what is the relationship between women’s land ownership rights and outcomes in child well-being?”

It is likely you will have a principal research question and then a series of subordinate research questions. You should test these questions by asking yourself the following questions:

1. Is the question clear?
2. Is the question researchable?
3. Has the question already been answered? (conducted an effective literature review)
4. Has it been partially answered? If so, your review of the literature should clearly identify the gaps, and where/how your work will add something.
5. If so, what sort of data/evidence is needed to answer the question?
6. What sort of methods are needed to collect this evidence, store it and analyse it?

Important other questions are:

1. Who will be interested in the answer to this question (who is my audience)?
2. What kind of evidence will they find convincing?
3. What kind of communication strategy will reach them most effectively?

How your world view can affect research design

In the table below we show how some major schools of thought in social science research can affect your approach to knowledge and in turn, research design.
Table 1: How schools of thought influence research design and analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School of thought</th>
<th>Implications for research design</th>
<th>Implications for data analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positivism.</strong></td>
<td>Hypotheses testing using a range of research instruments (e.g. household surveys). Likely to prefer large sample sizes. May draw on participative methods, where their use can be proven to deliver robust results.</td>
<td>Use of analytical methods to develop robust findings, e.g. statistical analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Postmodernism.</strong></td>
<td>Likely to avoid household surveys and prefer qualitative methods.</td>
<td>Likely to use hermeneutic analysis. Unlikely to use statistical methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical theory.</strong></td>
<td>May draw on a range of methods and approaches</td>
<td>May draw on a range of methods and approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grounded Theory</strong></td>
<td>Most likely to use qualitative methods.</td>
<td>Likely to use hermeneutic analysis, amongst other approaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Positivism.** Positivist philosophy states that only scientific knowledge is authentic and robust as it is derived by testing theory using scientific method. Positivism is linked to reductionism, and as a result positivists tend to believe that all things are ultimately measurable.
- **Postmodernism.** Postmodernism questions the established paradigms and institutions and has contributed to the development of critical theory, deconstructionism, post-structuralism, post-Marxism and post-feminism. Postmodern philosophy is generally viewed as being open to new meanings and interpretations and highlights that meaning is influenced by subjectivity. It is strongly opposed to positivism in that it suggests that to assume that we are objective is not only self-deceiving, it can even be politically abusive.
- **Critical theory.** Critical theory is social theory which aims to both critiquing and change society as a whole. It contrasts with traditional theory which aimed to simply understand and explain. Critical theory is viewed by some as a radical form of Marxian theory which critiques positivist approaches (logical positivism and the positivist and authoritarian elements of Marxism and communism). It encourages the exploration of how past events have influenced the society and seeks to be multi-disciplinary (drawing on economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology). Critical theorists are interested in language, symbolism, communication and the construction of realities.
- **Grounded Theory.** Theory is a research method most often associated with the social sciences. It was developed as a systematic methodology which generates theory from data. When the principles of grounded theory are followed, a researcher using this approach will formulate a theory, either substantive (setting specific) or formal, about the phenomena they are studying that can be evaluated. There are different ways of applying Ground Theory, one tends to be linked with micro-sociological action theory and the other with macro-sociological action theory and a systems theory perspective. Some use Grounded Theory to analyse both qualitative material and the outcome of surveys and secondary sources (e.g. Glaser).
Selecting your methods

A wide range of methods are available for research. As indicated above, the method you use will partly depend on the question you ask, pre-existing primary or secondary data, gaps in the existing evidence, the skills and preferences of the research team, time, resources and the preferences of the key audience. A number of methods will be introduced during subsequent sessions of ODI in-house training. Therefore this note does not discuss data collection methods, storage or analysis. Below are listed some of the options available.

- **Primary data collection**
  - Focus group discussions
  - Structured/ semi-structured/ unstructured key informant interviews
  - Participant observation
  - Life histories and family studies
  - Political and institutional analyses
  - Participatory tools
  - Surveys (household, individual, firms etc.)

- **Data analysis**
  - Content analysis
  - Discourse analysis
  - Narrative analysis
  - Thematic analysis
  - Econometrics
  - Statistical analysis
  - Modelling


A portfolio of methods is available for researching poverty and chronic poverty. See the CRPC methods toolbox (see http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Index.htm).

The CPRC has a strong preference for using Q-squared (Q2) methods, which combine and sequence panel data and life history methods whenever feasible. Ideally, these should involve the sequenced and combined use of panel data and life histories. For more on Q2 methods for chronic poverty research, see Baulch and Scott ,2006. See Sections 1.4 and 2.3.2 of the Resource Pack.

Questions for research design

When designing chronic poverty research, using life histories, researchers need to ask themselves a number of questions. These include:
• Should life histories be used on their own or as part of a Q2 approach?
• What approach should be adopted to choose the study site?
• Should the site(s) be representative of the country, or be purposively selected by remoteness, poverty severity experienced, livelihoods of inhabitants – or some other characteristic?
• How should sample design and respondent selection be approached?
  o Random or purposive (if purposive what criteria of selection should be used?) (ethnic mix, gender mix, wealth group mix, age mix?)
• How should ethical issues be tackled? (See the Resource Pack, section 3.3.2 on ethics)
  o How should interviewing certain categories of people be approached (children, people living with AIDS, conflict affected households physically/mentally/sensorially impaired people etc.)?
• How will the sample size for this study be determined? (See Box 1, below)
• How can life history methods be used to research poverty dynamics, chronic or intergenerational poverty? (See Box 2, below)
• What are the pros and cons of developing an interview checklist versus eliciting the full life story of the respondent? Box 3, below, contains an example of some of the questions that might be asked in a life history interview.
• Key questions and themes: how much should the interview be directed by the researcher and how much should it be free flowing? (See Box 3, below, for a sample checklist)
• Length of interview - how in-depth? 1 hour, versus many repeat visits over days, weeks or months
Box 1: Thinking about sample size

How many life histories should we aim to collect (from each site/ in each country)? Should we go for depth or coverage? Focusing on the life story of one individual or family may illuminate much about the processes of chronic poverty but may not be enough to convince policy makers, who are normally more interested in coverage. In order to convince policy makers that the issues identified are representative, a broader or larger sample is preferable. This entails a compromise with regards to depth, but (depth may be important for us to understand processes, coverage may be useful to convince policy makers that the issues we identify are representative - compromise necessary?)

Box 2: Using life histories to research poverty dynamics, chronic and intergenerational poverty

When collecting life histories, researchers may structure the interview process quite loosely, initially asking broad and open-ended questions. In some settings (e.g. India) an interviewee may respond at length, with a great amount of detail and several digressions. In other contexts (e.g. Uganda) the interviewer may need to ask a great number of direct questions and to give numerous prompts to encourage the narrator to tell their story. Either way, after the event the researcher will want to analyse the interview. They may write it up as a story with a sequential flow and a few isolated themes. In doing this the interviewer themselves chooses what to emphasise and what to ignore.

Box 3: Sample life history checklist:

- Full name of interviewee
- Age
- Where would they say they were in the village/ community – in terms of wealth/ well-being – compared with others (put into a category)? (This is to compare with evidence from a household survey or wealth ranking exercise, if you have such information)
- When and where they born
- Does he/ she remember the ‘compound’/ homestead/ house that he/ she grew up in, as a young child?
- Can he/ she describe it physically (get physical description of building(s))?
- Can he/ she describe the household
  - number of people
  - relationship to each other (e.g. any workers living as part of household? any relatives?)
  - siblings - number of siblings, birth order of siblings, their sex and date of birth?
  - parent’s marriage (polygamous or monogamous)?
- How did the compound (homestead etc) they lived in as a child compare with the one they live in now (better? worse? how much better or worse?) (This is to make a judgement of their change in well-being over time. Take photograph(s) of interviewee and compound at end of interview – can send copies later, as gift)
- What level of education did their parents have?
- What assets did their parents have when they were a young child (land, trees, livestock, buildings, machinery & other productive assets, furniture & other household assets etc)?
- What were their parent’s livelihood activities when they were a young child?
- What kind of chores/ work did they do when they were a child? Were these different to the chores that other children in the household were expected to do?
- Did they go to school?
- When did they leave school? Why?
- What is the best thing that they can remember from their early childhood?
- What is the worst thing?
- What is the best thing that they can remember from adolescence?
- What is the worst thing?
Designing Chronic Poverty Research

- Were there any important changes in their parents’ livelihoods, asset holdings or in the compound (homestead etc) or household composition during their childhood?
- Are there any other important things that they would like to mention about their childhoods?
- When did they get married?
- How did they meet/choose their husband/ wife/? How was their husband/ wife chosen for them?
- What was the process around getting married?
- Did they move community to be with their new husband/ wife?
- How did life change when they married? (assets, income, livelihood activities, consumption, well-being)
- Did they have children? (if yes, how many? sexes? dates of birth?)
- What are the things that stand out from the early years of their married life (good things, bad things)?
- What livelihoods did they develop?
- What are the key events between then and now?
- How did these events change their level of well-being?
- How did they, and their household, respond to these events?
- What stands out most when they look back on their adult life (good things, bad things)
- How did their parents home/ compound/ standard of living compare with their home/ compound/ standard of living now?
- Tools to help record a life history
  - Use a time line to 'map' changes in well-being during their life, and the key moments associated with those changes
  - Use proportional circles to show graphically changes in well-being before and following certain key life events (draw the first circle and ask the interviewee to draw the others, with reference to the first) (e.g. when you were a small child, after your father died, when you were newly married, when all your children were grown up, now)
  - Use a 'bar chart' to show whether the interviewee was very poor, poor, non-poor or rich (or other locally relevant distinctions) at key points in their life.

Developing a project budget

Developing the budget for a project can be daunting, particularly if there are a number of variables which are uncertain at the outset. The issues that should be clarified before starting work are:

- Sample size (number of respondents)? This will influence the time spend in the field.
- Number of research sites? This will influence the amount of contextual data that has to be collected, and the number of focus group discussions (etc.) that have to be repeated, as well as in-country travel costs.
- Use of complementary methods? For example, will the research adopt Q2 methods? Will PRAs (or focus group discussions) be undertaken? If so, how many and where?
- Use of secondary data? If so, how will it be collated? How will it be analysed?
- Size of research team (staff costs) for data collection, data analysis and write up?
- Travel costs - international and domestic flights, car hire, any other travel-related costs?
- Accommodation and subsistence costs?
- Process of data storage and analysis?
- Number of outputs, drafting process?
Designing research instruments

It is important that research instruments are carefully designed and piloted. Researchers using life history approaches may choose to guide their interviews with a checklist, or they may decide that the interview should be completely unstructured. Alternatively they may have some issues that they seek to uncover in all interviews, but the way that they achieve that differs from interview to interview.

Researchers may devise some tools in advance which will aid in the interview process. For example asking respondents to complete a block graph to indicate comparative well-being at key points in their life (see Figure 1, below). A similar process can be undertaken by asking respondents to draw proportional circles, with each circle representing the respondent’s total level of well-being at a particular point in their life. The full life history can be represented with a detailed well-being map\(^1\), drawn by the interviewer, in cooperation with the respondent (see examples below).

---

\(^1\) Based on the work of Peter Davis. See Davis, 2006.
Figure 5: Proportional circles indicating relative well-being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a small child</th>
<th>As a young adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Proportional circle for child" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Proportional circle for young adult" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After death of husband</td>
<td>Now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Proportional circle for after death" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Proportional circle for now" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6: Well-being map – collected in Zimbabwe, 2006.

- Parents separate
- Live with grandparents & mother
- Poor relationship with step-father
- Leave Zimbabwe. Go to Zambia in search of birth father
- Meet Zambian relatives. They are very welcoming, introduce extended family & provide start-up capital for enterprise
- Unable to find birth-father – has migrated again
- Buy first plot & build
- Bought Landrover
- Bought second Landrover
- Bought & improved 4th property
- Buy 2 plots and build
- Mother sick – sold assets, returned to Zimbabwe
- Sold remainder of assets. Move children to Zimbabwe. Wife has no papers & cannot move. Stays behind.
- Use capital on health costs. Mother dies.
- Wife dies. Capital exhausted on funeral costs. Lose house to sister
- Move to Plot Shumba
- Army & police harassment
- Disabling stroke
- Food aid

Timeline:
- (1943) 2 yrs
- 5 yrs
- 25 yrs
- 33 yrs
- 43 yrs
- 62 yrs
Collecting data

Briefing Note 2 discusses collecting data using life history methods in more detail. See also the annotated bibliography on life history methods, included in this resource pack (Ojermark, 2007). The CPRC Toolbox presents a range of information about data collection (see http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Collectingdata.htm). This Resource Pack introduces a number of research manuals for participatory research (see Section 3.4.2).

Building your audience’s needs into research design

The audience that a researcher is trying to reach can influence every aspect of research, from sample size and choice of research instrument through to mode of analysis and choice of final product (communication tool/ dissemination vehicle).

Different audiences are likely to be more or less convinced by particular types of evidence and data and are likely to find some arguments more appealing than others. A simple but useful typology has been developed by Ravi Kanbur, which divides people into two groups, those that like material that appeals (principally) to their heart and another group that prefers material that appeals (principally) to their head (Group A and B, see below).

Figure 7: ‘The nature of disagreements’ within policy processes/spaces’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A: the Finance Ministry Tendency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The current economic reforms are likely to lead to greater inequality in rural areas…this is defensible as there is no other alternative” (Anonymous).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Finance &amp; Trade Ministries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economic analysts, economic policy managers and operational managers in the IFI’s and the Regional Multilateral Banks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• National banks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trade and manufacturing associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Academics: many (not all) economists trained in the Anglo-Saxon tradition – e.g. overseas economics advisors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group B: the Civil Society Tendency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“the neoliberal model has been proved right…it is now about integrating a human perspective…need to add on a people-centred focus” (MoGLSD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“there is no-one in Uganda currently articulating a model of pro-poor growth…it just isn’t happening” (NGO director)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social sector ministries: Health, Education, Gender etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some aid agencies, or sections/members thereof: UNDP, UNICEF, DANIDA etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• NGOs: operational and advocacy based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Academics: most non-economists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key dimensions of difference
- Level of disaggregation
- Time horizons
- Market structure and power

Implications
- differences in power and capacity between these actors
- different ideologies

Source: ideas presented in Kanbur (2001)
For more on communicating your research results see Section 11 of the Resource Pack on ‘presenting life histories’.

**Reading**


