Reflections on using life history approaches

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What is the life history research method?

- Life histories are generated from qualitative research, interviewing individuals about their lives
- Not one approach, but several
  - Biographical research
  - Life histories
  - Family histories
  - Oral testimonies
- Structured, semi-structured, unstructured
- Can have different aims and be underpinned by different epistemological approaches and theoretical standpoints
  - Focus on narrative, story-telling and language
  - Focus on perceptions of/ interpretations of truth and reality
  - Focus on social relations
  - Focus on empirical exploration of the narrator's life (and the connected lives of household members)
- Interviews can produce
  - Facts (may be generalisable – same pattern revealed by many cases, may be useful as part of a Q2 exercise)
  - Validation of theory
  - Narrative (respondent’s unique viewpoint)
Why use life history methods in your work?

• Provides insights into long-term change (social, economic, political)
• Analysis of panel data provides an alternative – but few national panels exist, and they rarely help explain decisions and processes
• Places people at the heart of research
• (Development-related research requires work to contextualise these individual accounts with an exploration of wider economic, social and political factors)
• Allows for the exploration of complexity and inter-relationships (between people and phenomena)
• Allows counter-intuitive findings to emerge
• Generates powerful case studies – useful in policy engagement
Advantages

• Experienced qualitative researchers can quickly & successfully add life history methods to their ‘toolbox’
• Powerful method
  – particularly when used in combination with other approaches
  – Generates fascinating (and often unexpected) insights
  – Allows for the counter-intuitive to emerge
  – Produces a wealth of rich data
Easy to use badly, challenging to use well (1)

• When using life history methods you will face a number of questions about research design
• The outcome of your research is strongly influenced by
  – researcher’s disciplinary background, skills, preferences and world view, interpersonal skills - building rapport/ interest in story telling
• When you have ‘collected’ a life history, whose truth is it? Whose narrative?
  – Does it accurately reflect the facts of the life as lived?
  – Does it emphasise the issues and experiences that the interviewee thinks are important?
  – Does it emphasise the interests and priorities of the interviewer?
• Life histories provide detailed micro-evidence
  – Is it anecdotal? It is unlikely to deliver nationally representative statistics, but has other strengths
• Resource hungry
  – Needs a relatively large amount of (expensive, experienced) researcher time – at each stage
Easy to use badly, challenging to use well (2)

- Analysis = a challenge
  - bias to outliers? (good stories)
  - life history transcripts/ interview notes are not raw data, already part analysed (during interview)
    - the skills of the interviewer are crucial
    - using life history interviews collected by someone else can be difficult – implications for comparative study?
  - quality of further analysis and write up depends very much on the researcher
  - huge volume of material - which approach to use? why? – driven by skills, preferences, audience
  - process of analysis not always clear (uncovering ‘the truth’ or harnessing other people’s stories to tell the tale you want?)
- Presentation of results - decisions to make (which audience to convince, on what issue)
‘A truth’, ‘the truth’
– parallel narratives (1)

• Gunga Bai, Kirchali village, SW Madhya Pradesh, India

• Both give the image of an outcast – but she was seen in the middle of the village with a group of other older women, laughing and talking
‘A truth’, ‘the truth’ – parallel narratives (2)

• Older woman, Buwopuwa, Mbale District, E Uganda
  – Story 1: Widowed at 19. Husband was violent so decided to never remarry. Returned to father’s compound. Was given a tiny piece of land. Built her hut, where she lived all her adult life. After initial tension, got on well with her brothers. Had a quiet life, growing crops and relating to her sister-in-laws.
Building rapport
- or overstaying your welcome?

• Life history interviews are long (repeat visits or get it done in single sitting?)
• Not everyone has a story “ready made”
  – culturally specific (e.g. India versus Uganda)
  – some people have to be coaxed to talk
  – some people are difficult to shut up!
• Not everyone enjoys telling their story
  – depends on the nature of the community (Zimbabwe)
  – may uncover/ resurrect a distressing past (….and then what?) (empowering or exploitative?)
Selectivity

- post-hoc rationalisation (by respondent)
- recall bias - retrospective (positive or negative) gloss on events
- bias caused by mood/ level of rapport with interviewer
- selection bias (of themes) by interviewer
  - witchcraft *versus* poverty trajectories and intra household relationships - death of livestock and several members of the extended household (ascribed to witchcraft). As an interviewer, I focused on how the death of the interviewee’s father and loss of livestock affected household well-being, his relationship (as a child) with his new step-father and the long run impact of the shock
  - friendships and sources of happiness *versus* events/ cause and effect
  - issues amenable to development policy (e.g. asset thresholds) *versus* social policy issues (e.g. domestic violence, household fragmentation, mental illness)
Responding to the accusation of anecdotalism

• Difficult presenting results to some audiences
  – Not nationally representative
  – No measures of statistical significance
  – So, they don’t accept that the results are valid/ robust
• How to get around this?
• Accept that there are different schools of thought about what constitutes evidence
• You won’t persuade everyone, but life histories can be used to collect data about tangible facts (e.g. asset ownership, inheritance practice) as well as perceptions (relative well-being), processes (how a livelihood shock resulted in coping, asset holding and poverty outcomes) and the perceived options/ choices of a household and decision-making processes
• Using Q2 analysis can allow you to
  – use case studies from life histories to illustrate (or challenge) findings from panel data
  – explain why certain correlations in the panel are important
  – explain household decisions
  – explain why certain events lead to certain outcomes