Options in Analysing Life Histories

Aim

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

- Should have a good understanding of how the selection of analytical methods and approaches is influenced by:
  - the goal of your research
  - the central research question of your research
  - epistemology and world view
  - your principle audience

- You should also have insights into how:
  - the way that you plan to eventually disseminate or communicate your research findings interacts with your choice of analytical method
  - knowing how your target audience views knowledge and evidence may influence your approach to data analysis.

Introduction

This briefing note discusses the range of ways in which data from life history interviews can be analysed. It introduces each of them, briefly, in turn and discusses the factors that may influence your choice of approach. It examines the different preferences that audiences may have, regarding some forms of data and analysis more accessible or robust and reliable than others. Finally it
discusses briefly how these preferences may influence your choice of method.

A good starting point, when thinking about data analysis is the CPRC methods toolbox, see our website which discusses this in greater detail: http://www.chronicpoverty.org/CPToolbox/Analysingdata.htm.

What influences method selection?

The goal of your research

Deciding what methods of analysis to use will become easier if you are clear about what you are trying to achieve with your research. Many researchers try to achieve more than one thing with their research, but it is helpful to identify the primary motivation. So, for instance is it to contribute to intellectual discourse; to enhance academic status/profile; to generate (or challenge) theory; generate evidence to contribute to pro-poor policy debates; to identify issues for programmatic development (e.g. for either advocacy or service delivery NGO) or to satisfy institutional incentives.

The central research question

Another important factor influencing the way researchers choose to analyse their data is our principal research question. Earlier on in the research design process, this will also influence the way that study sites and respondents are selected, the contextual information that is collected (e.g. from participatory exercises, survey data and secondary sources) and the way the researcher approaches life history interviews (sample size, time allocated to the collection of a single life history interview, the degree of structure given to each interview etc.).

When researchers turn to the analysis of their data, the question they seek to answer will again influence their approach. For example, if they wish to understand the differential impact of trade policy changes they are likely to need to have a large sample, with respondents of different ages, of both genders and selected from both urban and rural areas, from different agro-climatic zones, well-being groups and livelihood groups. When analysing the data, they may wish to analyse the material thematically, exploring whether trade-related shocks have influenced livelihood choices, income and consumption levels and approaches to risk and investment. If they wish to explore the impact of alcohol dependence on poor households they may wish to select respondents purposively and explore both livelihood and well-being outcomes along with narratives and explanations, using hermeneutic analysis.

Epistemology and world view.

Personal preferences, world view and epistemological/philosophical position has a high degree of influence on research design. It influences the choice of research question, the approach to data collection and the choice of analytical methods. See Table 1, Briefing
Note 1 on Designing Chronic Poverty Research Using Life Histories, where this is discussed in greater detail.

**Audience**

Finally, the way that research is analysed and disseminated is influenced by the researcher’s perception of their principle audience. Do they hope that their work will be read and used by other academics; by donors and the international community; by policy makers; by the media; by the informed general public or by ‘interlocutors of the poor’? This is likely to influence not only the ‘dissemination vehicle’ for our research, or the way we present our results (case studies; graphs, tables and statistics; graphics; uninterrupted text; text supported by a judicious mix of case studies, statistics and referencing of the international literature) but also our choice of analytical method. Looking back at Figure 7, Briefing Note 1 on Designing Chronic Poverty Research we can see that different groups of people are likely to be more or less convinced by different types of evidence and data. This may influence whether we decide to adopt hermeneutic analysis or the statistical analysis of data contained within life histories.

Figure 7 shows that people with Group A tendencies (likely to be positivists?) will tend to prefer analyses that provide a thorough overview or insights into particular thematic areas. They are likely to want the analysis to answer questions of how much/ how many, how severe and how often. They might like to see life histories used to support analysis which identifies a causal chain (e.g. particular shocks or life events generate long-term reductions in well-being). However, people with Group B tendencies (likely to be post-modernists?) will tend to prefer first person narratives. They will like to see people’s own words in quotes and analysis accompanied by case study boxes. They might like to see life histories used to highlight the dignity that people living in poverty have, despite their adversity.

Once researchers have decided what their primary motivation is and who their principle audience is, they will have to decide whether to make the theory underpinning their selection of method explicit, or whether to leave it implicit.

**Presentation style influences analytical method**

Our preferred research output (dissemination product/ ‘communication vehicle’) and our choice of presentation style will be largely influenced by the goal of our research and our principle audience. The way in which we choose to analyse our life histories will have a subtle interplay with our preferred approach to disseminating the results of our research.

Possible outputs might include:

- Verbal briefing at a breakfast meeting with a senior decision-maker
- TV/ radio clip/ programme
- Blogs
- Verbal briefings
In order to be successful in getting research results placed by the mass media you tend to need to be able to say how severe and issue is, how widespread it is and what the likely outcome will be. It is difficult to give this type of information from the in-depth analysis of a small number of life histories. In-depth hermeneutic analysis of a life history narrative is unlikely to (on its own) deliver policy recommendations. On the other hand, many will be most convinced by an argument if it presents both analysis and argument supported by examples – this is where in-depth analysis of a number of life histories can be illuminating. And the analysis of life histories can, themselves, deliver important findings and researchers can use other sources to provide answers to the scale, severity and duration questions.

Sources of knowledge and evidence

Different target audiences are likely to trust different sources of knowledge or evidence. Some will prefer outputs by well-known organisations (e.g. the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, the World Bank, Oxfam), well known authors (e.g. Martin Ravallion, Robert Chambers) or well respected publications (e.g. the World Development journal). They may have an instinctive distrust of certain data sources (e.g. NGOs - “NGOs collect evidence to suit their argument. Their outputs aren’t robust.”, or academics - “intellectuals are self-indulgent. They write for fame and glory. I can’t be bothered reading their stuff”) and certain types of evidence (e.g. household surveys “everyone knows that the enumerators make up the answers. Anyway all they do is count stuff, they don’t explain cause or process”, or case studies “they do not provide nationally representative results and are purely anecdotal”).

It is useful to be aware of these different positions if you are trying to persuade a wide range of types of people and interest groups.

Limitations of your research

Researchers very rarely have carte blanche when designing research. The design is affected by a range of constraints. For example time, financial and other resources, and the skills of the research team. These inevitably affect the analytical approach that chosen and the researcher’s approach towards the dissemination and communication of their research results.
Options in analysis

Identification of trajectories

Life histories which contain information about access to productive resources; access to goods and services; income; consumption; well-being; livelihoods; investment and risk can be explored for change over time. Peter Davis has done this very successfully in his work on Bangladesh. See Table 1, below.

Table 1: Idealised well-being trajectories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>trajectory direction</th>
<th>trajectory pattern</th>
<th>depiction</th>
<th>number of cases (out of 90)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>level</td>
<td>smooth</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving</td>
<td>smooth</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declining</td>
<td>smooth</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>level</td>
<td>saw-tooth</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improving</td>
<td>saw-tooth</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>declining</td>
<td>saw-tooth</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declining</td>
<td>single-step</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declining</td>
<td>multi-step</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Davis, 2006:10

These idealised trajectories were developed from the results from a large number of life history interviews. Some samples of individual's well-being trajectories are shown below.
Figure 1: Declining well-being (smooth) (Anwar Hossain)

- Independence War 1971
- Mother died
- Daughters married
- Attempt to murder case against respondent: 4 bigha land sold to pay for case
- Travelled to Calcutta for medical treatment
- Illness 1978-2001
- Land owned: 25 bigha --> 20 bigha --> 10 bigha --> 4 bigha --> 2 bigha --> 1.25 bigha
- Daughter married 2001 Tk. 21,000 total cost

Figure 2: Improving well-being (smooth) (Jehangir)

- 1971 war
- Married in 1980
- Started work with NGO in 1988
- Sister married in 1995: parents and all five brothers contributed to costs
- Fairly secure job with NGO
Figure 3: Improving well-being (saw-tooth) (Moznu)

Figure 4: Declining well-being (saw-tooth) (Amir Hossain)
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Figure 5: Declining well-being (single step) (Sephali – illness and death of husband)

Source: Davis, 2006

Development of typologies

Rather than focusing on trajectories, the researcher may be interested in identifying typologies, for example, the aim may be to identify high dependency ratio households who are land rich and explore the differences of their life experiences, in comparison to high dependency ratio households with limited land holdings and low dependency ratio households (both with and without land). Some of this basic division into typologies might be done during the sampling process (purposive selection or random stratified sampling of respondents), but some might require the information that is gained through the in-depth process of life history interviewing.

Once a basic typology has been developed, an analysis of the life histories of people conforming to one or other ‘type’ can be done to explore patterns. For example are all high dependency ratio households with limited landholdings food insecure? How do high dependency ratio households correlate with AIDS affected households and elder-led households?

Thematic analysis

Life histories can also be analysed thematically. A careful reading of life history interview transcripts can provide the researcher with insights into recurring themes. If the sample is small these can be written up without the use of computer programmes (see Figure 2 below, and Bird & Shinyekwa, 2005) but for larger samples programmes which help to store, code and retrieve quantitative data are helpful (see below).
Figure 2: The thematic identification of the interlocking drivers of chronic poverty in rural Uganda

Case studies

Many life history researchers use case studies to a lesser or greater extent to illustrate their work. They can be used to illustrate an argument developed using a range of data sources (see Bird et al., 2004) or can form the centre of a paper (Hulme, 2004). They might be initially developed in much the same way as themes are identified (see above), but may also involve in-depth hermeneutic analysis (see below).

Hermeneutic analysis (of full interview transcript)

Hermeneutic analysis focuses on attempting to analyse and understand the text (transcript) produced as a result of a life history interview. A researcher using a hermeneutic approach will attempt to extract meaning and build theory from their interpretation of the life history text.
Essentially, hermeneutics involves cultivating the ability to understand things from somebody else's point of view, and to appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced their outlook. Hermeneutics is the process of applying this understanding to interpreting the meaning of written texts.

In the last two centuries, the scope of hermeneutics has expanded to include the investigation and interpretation not only of textual and artistic works, but of human behaviour generally, including language and patterns of speech, social institutions, and ritual behaviours (such as religious ceremonies, political rallies, football matches, rock concerts, etc.).

Hermeneutics explores the meaning of patterns of speech and the social institutions (etc.) that the language used by a respondent indicates. This form of analysis seeks to understand the point of view and 'inner life', and to highlight the first-person perspective of the respondent.

Advocates of this approach claim that life histories cannot be studied using positivist scientific methods and tend to be anti positivist. They suggest that by exploring the transcripts of life histories, the texts themselves (the use of language, the imagery used in the narrative) will reveal something about the social context of the respondent and provide the researcher with an opportunity of sharing the experiences of the respondent. For example, Behar (1990) suggests that the life story should not be seen as a neutral tool which can be used to demonstrate wider phenomenon. Instead, the researcher should interpret the interview transcript using the same cultural themes that the informant used when constructing their story (Behar, 1990).

Statistical analysis

Some life histories can deliver quantitative information (numbers of children, years of education, asset holdings, income, consumption etc.) which can be analysed using statistical and econometric approaches. However, for findings to be robust, respondents will need to have been selected using a rigorous sampling approach and the process of interviewing will need to have been regularised in some way (e.g. through use of interview checklists).

Computer packages to help with analysis

There are a number of computer packages that can help with both the qualitative and the quantitative analysis of life histories. Here we focus on just two, NVivo and STATA (see below). We introduce these packages in greater detail elsewhere in this Resource Pack.
NVivo

NVivo is described by its designers as being ideal for anyone who needs to examine or make sense of information and is used by a wide range of disciplines. The programme uses Microsoft Windows XP as an interface, making it easier to learn than many other programmes. It is a powerful programme, enabling researchers to code and analyse life history transcripts, to link these transcripts and coded sections to sound files, household survey (and other quantitative data) and to various forms of secondary data.

(See [http://www.qsrinternational.com/products/productoverview/NVivo_7.htm](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products/productoverview/NVivo_7.htm))

STATA

STATA is a powerful statistical package which enables researchers to do regressions, multivariate analysis and various other forms of statistical analysis useful in the analysis of life history and biographical data.

(See [http://www.stata.com](http://www.stata.com))

Reading list


