**Introduction**

Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) enables qualitative data generation over a period of time, with particular emphasis placed on the processes by which changes occur ([Smith, 2003](#_ENREF_66)). It offers the potential to investigate how policy plays out in the context of people’s lives and allows researchers to explore both intended and unintended outcomes of welfare interventions (Lewis, 2007). Welfare conditionality, which combines compulsory engagement with various interventions in an attempt to move social welfare benefit recipients into work and/or promote the cessation of problematic behaviour, with sanctions for non-compliance, is now an established part of many welfare regimes. An interest in how social policy attempts to alter human behaviour - the explicit goal of welfare conditionality - provides a strong and clear logic for researching its effectiveness and impacts through and across time (Corden and Millar, 2007).

Over the past twenty years, the UK has seen successive rounds of changes to social security benefits, which have been rooted in arguments about a perceived need to end cultures of ‘welfare dependency’ and encourage and/or compel people to ‘do the right thing’ by moving from ‘welfare’ and into ‘work’ (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Watts et al. 2014). Welfare conditionality has been a key element in many nations’ social security reforms since the 1990s (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). At the time of writing, the international advance of welfare conditionality continues apace (Levy, 2004; Lindsay, 2018), despite a limited and (at best) contested evidence base about its effectiveness in delivering the promised behavioural change (Watts et al. 2014). This is exemplified with work-related conditionality, which is underpinned by the policy assumption that the threat, or application, of ‘sticks’ (i.e. benefit sanctions), in tandem with assorted ‘carrots’ (e.g. efforts to incentivise paid employment, make work pay, programmes of mandatory support), will encourage claimants to change their behaviours and facilitate transitions from welfare and into work.

As academics interested in these policies, in recent years we have been drawn to qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) as a methodological approach, which is well placed to engage with and unpick the processes and consequences of the intensification and extension welfare conditionality within social security. QLR facilitates an exploration of the lived experiences of change, or the lack of it, over time, with the related opportunity to observe and analyse the interplay of structure and agency in people’s lifeworlds (Holland et al, 2006). QLR has gained in prominence and popularity in UK social policy analysis (see e. g. Corden and Millar, and is currently being employed with increasing frequency (e.g. Andersen, 2019; Scullion et al. 2019; Stinson, 2019; Millar et al. 2020). Here, we reflect on our experiences working on two UK focussed QLR studies, which both aimed to draw out the potential of this methodology to better understand processes of behavioural change triggered by welfare conditionality.

The Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change study (hereafter WelCond) and The Lived Experiences of Welfare Reform Study (hereafter LivedEWelfare) both – albeit in quite different ways, and at very different scales of enquiry – sought to uncover how the policy framing of welfare conditionality intersects with (and is perhaps disrupted by) individuals’ lived experiences, and the consequences of this policy approach. QLR is here generative of theory, bringing time, process and change to the centre of the theoretical project ([Holland et al. 2004](#_ENREF_32)). In both our studies, there was a contrast drawn between policy intent and presentation and the lived experiences for claimants directly affected by welfare conditionality (see Dwyer, 2018; Patrick, 2014, 2017). The temporal picture of welfare reform theorised by the UK Governments (e.g. DWP, 2016) often clashes with that experienced at the micro-level by individual claimants. Following brief introductions to the two studies, we reflect upon the possibilities of bringing time to the centre of our methodological approach, and also our theoretical framework, before discussing differences in scale between the two studies. We conclude with a discussion of the rich, and still not sufficiently exploited, potential with QLR for social policy analysis.

**The WelCond and LivedEWelfare studies**

This article offers methodological reflections from two qualitative longitudinal studies: LivedEwelfare (led Patrick) and WelCond (rf. [www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk](http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk) led by Dwyer). LivedEWelfare began its research life as a doctoral study, is conducted by a sole researcher in a single research site and utilises a smaller sample size over a longer time span than WelCond. LivedEWelfare in many ways typifies a traditional in-depth qualitative longitudinal study, seeking to exploit the opportunities the method presents for finely grained, temporarily informed insight into the topic of study. By contrast, WelCond was novel and groundbreaking in scale, which was motivated by a desire to combine depth of understanding over time with breadth of policy coverage. This very large-scale study involved dispersed teams of researchers undertaking qualitative longitudinal interviews in locations across England and Scotland. Despite the two policy studies’ differences in scale, both took welfare conditionality as a central concern. They each also employed qualitative longitudinal methodologies to consider the varied impacts of conditionality over time and if, how and why the sanctions and mandatory support within the UK’s welfare system inhibited, triggered and/or sustained behaviour change, among social security benefit recipients.

The LivedEWelfare study focuses on generating finely grained insight into experiences of welfare reform over time. Initially funded by the ESRC, a forthcoming fifth wave has been funded by the British Academy. A small sample of individuals (single parents, jobseekers and disabled people) have been followed since 2011 as they experience and respond to welfare reforms and increased welfare conditionality. As a baseline, all those interviewed for the first time were either going through (or expected to experience in the next six months) benefits changes introduced by the 2010 Westminster Coalition Government. To date, there have been four waves of interviews (2011, 2012, 2013 and 2016), with a fifth planned for 2020. Of the 15 participants followed longitudinally (out of a total initial sample of 22) - contact was sustained with 14 for the first three waves of interview, while 12 were interviewed for a fourth time in 2016. In sustaining contact with participants over time, an emphasis was placed on occasional contact between interviews, through telephone, text message and social media – there is of course a delicate balance between trying to sustain engagement and ensuring people have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at a time of their choosing (see Patrick, 2013). The interviews conducted for LivedEWelfare have generated a long-view of welfare reform as the researcher walks alongside individuals directly affected by recent changes to the benefits system (Neale, 2019). The explicit aim of the project is to document experiences of welfare reform and to contrast policy narrative and rhetoric, with how it is experienced on the ground.

Funded by the ESRC, WelCond 2013-2018 was a large collaborative research project involving teams of researchers from six universities. The study had two key objectives. First, to advance understanding about the role of welfare conditionality in promoting and sustaining behaviour change among a diversity of welfare recipients over time. Second, to consider the particular circumstances in which the use of conditionality may, or may not, be practically and ethically justified. The project aimed to address gaps in existing knowledge by establishing an original and comprehensive evidence base on the appropriateness and efficacy of conditionality across a range of social policy fields and diverse groups of welfare service users (WSUs).

Following wide-ranging literature/data review the team embarked on extensive qualitative fieldwork to generate new empirical data including 52 semi-structured interviews with policy stakeholders and 27 focus groups with frontline welfare practitioners. Central to WelCond, was a large, repeat qualitative longitudinal, panel study undertaken with a diversity of WSUs subject to different types and degrees of welfare conditionality variously implemented via the UK’s social security, anti-social behaviour, social housing and homelessness systems. A QL component was specifically chosen to allow for development of a dynamic understanding of the impacts and effects of welfare conditionality firmly grounded in the experiences of those directly subject to it. This enabled an understanding of how and why, over time, welfare recipients’ choices and actions may potentially be influenced by personal factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, changes in family circumstance (Corden and Millar, 2007) and, importantly, the application of specific sanction or support initiatives.

A total sample size of 400 respondents (i.e. eight groups of 50 respondents) was initially envisaged. However, a subsequent condition of funding required the expansion of each group to 60 respondents, giving a total sample of 480. Following the introduction of UC in 2013, the WelCond QL sample consisted of nine different groups (panels) of WSUs purposively sampled according to specific criteria. These were recipients of working age social security benefits (jobseekers, lone parents, disabled people, Universal Credit claimants), homeless people, social tenants, individuals/families subject to anti-social behaviour orders/family intervention projects, offenders and migrants. In total, 1,082[[1]](#endnote-1) interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2017, with each respondent interviewed up to three times, at on average yearly intervals, across a 24 month period. Repeat interviews took place in 11 locations in England and Scotland and typically lasted between forty and ninety minutes (rf. WelCond, 2018 for further details).

To summarise, both studies are interested in the application and effectiveness of welfare conditionality, both utilised QLR to benefit from the flexibility enabled from this methodological approach, despite differences in design and scale. We now draw together some key methodological reflections, starting with the rich possibilities of bringing time to the centre of the methodological and conceptual frame when exploring the impacts and effectiveness of welfare conditionality.

**The value of QLR: bringing time and behaviour change centre stage**

To capitalise on QLR’s potential, it is important to think of time as both a vehicle and object of study (Henwood and Shirani, 2012). Engagement with and focus on time should govern both the methodological approach and also the conceptual concerns of the study. Following people over time and thinking conceptually about how they experience and live through time provides scope to explore changes that may be occurring, consider how they arise, and explain how and why there may be diverse outcomes for different members of a sampled population (Lewis, 2003; Saldana, 2003; Neale, 2019). As Corden and Millar (2007 :529) explain:

*Having people look back over time can provide insight into how they perceive and explain their actions, given the opportunity to discuss and reflect. Following people forward over time provides an opportunity to explore how and why people make the individual choices that add up to particular cumulative trajectories, and more specifically to understand the ways in which people respond to and use social and welfare services.*

In the case of welfare conditionality, we have already noted the methodological rationale for following people over time to tease out how individuals’ lives change (and are changed) in response to behavioural conditionality and benefit sanctions. Beyond this, it is also valuable to explore how experiences of welfare conditionality impact on how individuals think about their past, navigate their present, and plan for and imagine their futures. Here, the future is an especially rich terrain (Adam and Groves, 2007) as we can begin to uncover the ways in which processes of welfare conditionality may interfere with (or potentially enhance), future planning and activities most likely to lead to individuals’ longer-term ambitions being realised.

For example, Susan in the LivedEWelfare study recounted how her longer-term ambitions – to secure paid work as a teaching assistant – were interrupted and made more difficult by the demands associated with the conditional regime:

*The Work Programme people were getting impatient with me as I was getting interviews but no job…The woman who was running the office told me that I needed to get a job ASAP, that I needed to start looking for any job, especially care work because Teaching Assistant [TA] jobs were very competitive because of holidays. I felt so demoralised, I started to doubt myself and the decision I had made to pursue that [TA] job, which I chose to do because of being a single mum. I started getting anxious every time my appointment was coming up. At some point I believed that I was never going to get it. (LivedEWelfare, single parent, written communication).*

Both studies generated compelling and rich data detailing conditionality’s perverse effects. Participants were often occupied in the present with complying with the mandatory conditions of their benefit receipt which meant they did not have the time or opportunity to plan effectively for the future. Immediate pressure to achieve more demanding job application/work search requirements, coupled with people’s strong desire to avoid the punitive effects of a benefit sanction actually made the stated key policy objective of behavioural conditionality (i.e. moving social security benefit recipients off welfare benefits and into paid employment), less likely. Similarly, benefit office staff and others delivering mandatory training and support were regarded as being primarily focused on ensuring compliance with compulsory benefit claim conditions rather than helping people into work. The WelCond study found that people were necessarily preoccupied with meeting the short-term conditions of their claim, rather than engaging in more effective, longer-term, future-orientated, appropriate job search.

*My job was solely to prove to that woman [Jobcentre Work Coach] that I had applied for so many jobs and that was it... Whether they were suitable for me, whether I was suitable for them, whatever it didn’t matter. (Universal Credit recipient, WelCond, wave b).*

Essentially, welfare conditionality often encouraged a culture of counterproductive compliance that reduced the time available for more meaningful job search and training activities likely to make people more employable in the future.

Following people over time enabled us to explore how the consequences of this counter-productive compliance played out in practice. Adrian, a young jobseeker, was subject to repeat benefit sanctions, and did not find work throughout the period of the study. At several LivedEWelfare interviews, he reported the perverse consequences of benefit sanctions and the ways in which this then impacted negatively on his work search activities:

*Sanctions affect my search for work as you find yourself searching more for food than a job. Then when you do find a job interview I have had to travel there and back on an empty stomach. It is a traumatic experience that has caused some mental issues that I never had before sanctions. No nutrition for the brain is like trying to start your car with no petrol inside. It’s not going to work. (Adrian, LivedEWelfare, 2016).*

For Adrian, sanctions (and the subsequent loss of income) created immediate pressures to find something to eat (routinely by accessing emergency food provision), which interfered with and prevented him from having more time available to seek work, while also reducing his capacity to find work because of not being adequately fed. Following Adrian over time illustrated the cumulative, incredibly negative impact of sanctions, which also adversely affected Adrian’s mental health and self-confidence.

Analyses from both the WelCond and the LivedEWelfare projects clearly evidence the deeply negative impacts of sanction backed welfare regimes over time; particularly for vulnerable people with complex needs who often disengaged with statutory support altogether (rf. Welcond, 2018; Patrick, 2017). For example, the ever-present threat of a sanction regularly triggers and exacerbates existing anxieties and illnesses, often for people who are already struggling with mental health issues (Dwyer et al. 2020).

*It felt like there might be even more sanctions in the pipeline. I just went into meltdown for several weeks actually where I couldn’t function… All I could think of was the enormity of the struggle, to get out of this nightmare, get the sanction overturned, appeal the sanction, deal with the fresh threat of sanctions. (Disabled person, WelCond, wave a).*

In the LivedEWelfare study, the focus on time was supported by co-producing timelines with participants[[2]](#endnote-2) (see Hanna and Clayton, 2012 for more discussion of using timelines in QLR). These physical visualisations of time (mapping past, present and future) enabled the researcher and participant to return to the timelines at later interviews to consider how a participant’s projected future had in fact materialised. Figure One details a young jobseeker, Robert’s, timeline.. During the research period, he moved into and out of work and was subject to repeated benefit sanctions, which were often the result of misunderstanding rather than his deliberate refusal to comply with work-related demands.

INSERT FIGURE ONE

In his first interview, he set out his hopes for the future which were notable in their brevity and modesty. As a care leaver, Robert was not in contact with his family but was very close to his two dogs. His hopes were that his dogs didn’t die, and that he was able to continue to look after them despite a low income. By 2016, Robert was homeless and living with a friend while he looked for work. We returned to his timeline and he explained, with great sadness, that he had had to give up his dogs when he lost his home as a direct consequence of a benefit sanction.

*Sanctions are horrible aren’t they. They need to scrap them or rename them to something else (laughs). No food money, no rent… I’ve lost my flat cause of it and I’ve lost my dogs cause of it, so it’s affected me more than what it normally would have, if I hadn’t lost my flat I wouldn’t have lost my dogs, it wouldn’t have affected me as much. (Robert, LivedEWelfare 2016).*

The repeat QL panel study within WelCond was fundamental to understanding how, and why, the core components of conditionality (i.e. benefit sanctions and engagement with mandatory support), triggered varying outcomes and trajectories for participants over time. Repeat cross-sectional analysis of the different waves of interview data enabled the generation of rich longitudinal case narratives (Holland et al. 2006) which explained how, and for whom, behaviour change occurred (or was absent) across the study’s timespan. Harry’s case for example graphically illuminated a central key finding of the WelCond project. Specifically, that benefit sanctions do little to enhance people’s motivations to seek, prepare for, or enter paid work; rather they routinely trigger a host of profoundly negative personal, financial and behavioural outcomes that push some, particularly the most vulnerable claimants, away from collective social security provisions.

‘Harry’ was in his forties and suffering from depression when first interviewed on WelCond. . Following a reassessment of his long-term benefit claim he was found ‘fit for work’, placed on Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) and made subject to full active work search and training requirements to maintain eligibility to benefit. At this first interview he was homeless and sleeping on the streets after an initial benefit sanction led to rent arrears and ultimately eviction. He did not qualify for hardship payments and had not received any social security benefit for several months due to a further six month benefit sanction subsequently being applied for missing mandatory Job Club training. Told by the Jobcentre that they might lift the sanction if he resumed at the Job Club he attended again but missed some further appointments because he had *“got no money and I have to spend most of my time running around trying to find something to eat.”* Re-interviewed 24[[3]](#endnote-3) months later, having lost a tenancy in the interim period, he was back sleeping on the street. Faced with the prospect of repeated and escalating benefit sanctions Harry disengaged entirely from the social security system to avoid the stress that it triggered which, in turn, exacerbated his depression. At our second interview he remained destitute and reliant on charitable provision for food and peace of mind.

*Homeless, living on the street… they decided I wasn't sick or whatever so they took me off income support, put me on jobseekers. Then that all went wrong and I got sanctioned and then I got made homeless… I couldn't pay the rent because I was sanctioned… my rent ended up backing up and because my head was all over the place I just couldn't deal with it.**(Harry, WelCond, wave a)*

*[Two years later] I don't claim benefits… I just don't want to know. Too much of an headache… you never know from one week to the next whether you're getting paid and it's just proper stress… pointless. ‘Do it. If you don't, you're sanctioned.’... I don't sign on anymore... They say, it encourages people to go to look for work. It doesn't…* [I’m] *Quite lucky sometimes. I get my breakfast at [homeless charity]… The only place you get any kind of help are charities. (Harry, WelCond wave b)*

Rather than moving Harry off welfare and into paid work, the application of conditionality led to prolonged periods of entrenched homelessness and destitution and, ultimately, a decision to walk away from the social security system entirely. Harry’s case highlights the more extreme outcomes that welfare conditionality can engender but this kind of behaviour change is far from unique.

In direct contrast, on the very rare occasions where conditional benefit systems did engender moves into work longitudinal analysis of the data generated in the repeat interviews with WSUs consistently highlighted that the provision of meaningful and appropriate support, rather than the threat or application of benefit sanctions, was pivotal in triggering, and sustaining moves into paid work. Word limits prevent fuller discussion of a positive case narrative here but interested readers should refer to ‘Joy’s’ case (see WelCond, 2019 : 26). The cases of individuals such as Harry and Robert both illustrate the ways and extent to which qualitative longitudinal case narratives enable researchers to better understand relationships between welfare conditionality and behavioural change, a key concern of social policy and an example of the methodology’s great possibilities..

**Questions of scale – contrasting LivedEWelfare and the WelCond projects**

Although both qualitative and longitudinal in their orientation and methods, what most clearly sets the LivedEWelfare and WelCond studies apart are their very different scales and timespans. We now consider these key differences and highlight various possibilities and challenges these divergent approaches to QLR engender. The LivedEWelfare study demonstrates the possibility and potential of adopting a qualitative longitudinal approach within the confines of doctoral study. Markedly, in the case of LivedEWelfare, the doctorate coincided with two periods of maternity leave, and this enabled the durations between interview waves to be extended. It was a – perhaps rare – incidence of caring responsibilities and demands enabling rather than acting as a barrier to academic research. LivedEWelfare involves just one researcher (Patrick), who has conducted all the interviews and analysis alone. The LivedEWelfare project is about to conduct a fifth wave (delayed at the time of writing by the COVID-19 pandemic). This will create a longitudinal timespan of ten years, a rich and detailed data set of lives lived through, and altered by, successive rounds of welfare reform.

With regard to sampling, an initial sample of 22 was purposively reduced to 15 on the basis of those who were most likely to experience changes to their benefit over time, the central focus of the project. The small-scale approach taken offers several clear advantages not least the extent to which it is possible to sustain participant engagement and build very strong and effective relationships between researcher and participants. Over the course of the project, participants became used to welcoming Ruth into their houses (and indeed into their lives), and sharing updates on how they were faring with benefit changes and movements into (and often back out of), work. These relationships improved over time, as mutual trust and confidence in anonymity assurances became embedded. This led to participants sometimes sharing things in later interviews that they had not revealed in earlier research encounters. For example, in her third interview one participant disclosed a history of sex work as part of her efforts to get by. Another, a jobseeker, spoke more fully and openly about his mental health challenges at each subsequent interview (Patrick, 2017). The strengthening of the relationship between researcher and participant, and the ways in which this further strengthened the research is a great merit of qualitative longitudinal research, and one which is harder to exploit in larger studies, where you have teams of researchers conducting the interviews.

Further, the approach taken in the LivedEWelfare study enabled Ruth to adopt participatory methodologies – and incorporate a participatory dimension (see Dole Animators, 2013), something which was not possible in WelCond due to its size, breadth of focus and complexity of design. Here, arts-based methods were employed, with all participants invited to work collaboratively with the researcher and animator to make a film documenting their experiences of welfare reform. In a process of co-production, eight participants from the study came together in a series of workshops: creating new opportunities for impact, policymaking engagement and further strengthening relationships between participants and the researcher.

For the LivedEWelfare study and especially its dissemination and impact, this participatory aspect has been critical and has been significant firstly in ensuring the active involvement of participants in the research, but also in reaching wider and new audiences. The film which was made out of this participatory element of the study (Dole Animators, 2013) has been viewed over 16,000 times, arguably meaning it has been more widely seen and engaged with than any of the formal academic outputs produced by the study. Critically, this participatory approach is especially suitable for projects that are on a small-scale, and was itself made possible by the close research relationship established between the sole researcher on the study and participants.

Inevitably, some of the advantages of the small-scale approach tie into its limitations and these are perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the challenges of research relationships developed over time and between one sole researcher and participants who meet several times over many years (see also Patrick, 2013). As noted above, such relationships create great possibilities to sustain engagement with participants and also minimise attrition rates between interview waves. However, it simultaneously creates ethical challenges around the blurring of researcher-researched boundaries. Undoubtedly a difficult balance needs to be struck between developing research practices that effectively sustain engagement and build trust without perhaps leading to a relationship where the participant can become over-dependent on the researcher. With repeated research interactions, as the level of personal involvement between researcher and participant increases, it is important to ensure that some professional boundaries are maintained while allowing opportunities for researcher disclosure and reciprocal offers of help and assistance to flow from researcher to participant (Hemmerman, 2010). There are also inevitable emotional risks and ethical challenges where the nature of the repeated interactions can lead to a deeper and more complicated relationship being created compared to one off research encounters (for further discussion see Author 2, 2012; Neale, 2013; Neale and Hanna, 2012). Managing this was not easy, and required careful reflection and continual reconsideration of the strategies employed. Ultimately, working over time with repeated contact between researcher and participant greatly multiples the ‘emotional labour’ that the research demands of all involved in the research (Sanders, 2008). Arguably this additional labour is well rewarded in the strengthened and detailed research encounters that are often an outcome of effective QLR, regardless of the scale of a particular study.

Given that WelCond was considering welfare conditionality across a range of welfare domains (including, social security, housing, anti-social behaviour policy and the criminal justice and migration systems), its QL panel study was one of the largest of its type undertaken to date. This ambition and the fact that the large research team (variously between 18 and 20 members), was dispersed across six UK universities bought with it several challenges. The logistics of recruiting nine panels of appropriate respondents across 11 locations in England and Scotland as required, and then organising and successfully and safely undertaking the fieldwork were formidable. Many resultant challenges were mitigated by establishing agreed collective research procedures, data bases and protocols. For example, each respondent was paired up to a specified researcher at wave a. Moving forward, whenever possible, the same researcher undertook any following repeat interviews with ‘their’ allocated respondents. This helped build up researcher/respondent rapport and enabled the researchers to use any knowledge that emerged from a previous interview to focus and inform discussions in any subsequent interviews.

The recruitment of a large and dispersed number of participants (a good proportion of whom routinely faced deep social exclusion), bought allied challenges. Aware of the attrition that can occur in QL studies (rf. Saldana, 2003), from the outset we employed a range of techniques, to enhance retention rates. For example, collecting multiple respondent contact details such as phone numbers, Twitter names, Facebook pages and asking respondents to share the contact details of, close friends/family members or personal support workers as alternative routes for potential re-contact. However, as the project unfolded, several local support organisations, which we had recruited participants through, closed due to loss of funding as austerity measures started to bite. This impacted negatively on the team’s ability to secure repeat interviews, particularly with some of the most socially excluded participants. Ultimately, we achieved a retention rate of 70% between each wave due again mainly to the persistence of the project team. Perhaps, inevitably, due to the size of the sample and limited duration of the panel study WelCond researchers were not able to develop the depth of researcher/respondent relationship sometimes possible in smaller studies of a longer duration. This is perhaps one of the clearest examples of where there is a trade off between scale of a qualitative longitudinal study, and the possibility to closely continue to follow the same participants over time; as the study gets bigger, arguably the level of sustained contact with participants is inevitably likely to decline.

**The analytical effort**

Alongside exciting possibilities, QLR brings with it real challenges with regard to the analysis of generated data (Neale, 2019; Millar, 2007, Henderson et al, 2012). Researchers working through time need to describe, explore and theorise their data both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Millar, 2007). Effective analysis requires an account of each case over time (diachronic analysis), as well as an exploration of themes emerging from each wave of data generation (synchronic analysis), demanding both within-case and across-case analysis (Corden and Nice, 2006; Thomson, 2007). In developing empirically grounded explanatory accounts it is also important to consider the relationship and patterns between the different cases across and through time – a demanding prospect which requires a robust, flexible and iterative analytical approach (Holland et al, 2004; McLeod and Thomson, 2009; Neale, 2019).

While QLR analysis is time consuming and demanding it provides exciting opportunities for reflexive iterative analysis (i.e. “visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understandings” (Srivastava, and Hopwood, 2009 :77), which is fully rooted in the data and evidence generated in the repeat research encounters (Holland et al, 2004). Within QL studies It is possible to analyse early waves of interviews and then to revisit and reconsider early themes and interim findings in more detail at later waves. This is a great advantage of the methodology as it enables the organic emergence of analytical themes and findings, which can then be explored further across the full sample in later interviews. It also helps ensure that experiences and elements of the area of study that are important to those being interviewed can be uncovered as they emerge over time, even if they were not identified as significant during the design of the research.

For example, at the first interviews for the LivedEWelfare project, Ruth asked about how things had changed for those affected by welfare reform. She expected to hear about increased conditionality and the impact of sanctions and reduced income. However, what she did not anticipate, but what came through very strongly from her interviews with lone parents, was the difficulties created by changes in payment frequencies, and how the shift in payment of Income Support (from weekly to fortnightly) was making the budgetary effort harder still (see Patrick , 2017). This emerged from her analysis of the first interviews, and she was then able to explore it further in the second and third wave of interviews by including a question specifically about payment frequency in her topic guide. This generated rich and highly policy relevant data on Universal Credit, a new benefit being rolled out in the UK, which is moving to monthly payments by default, and so extending the budgetary period over which people are expected to manage yet further.

Given that QLR data is generated across time, an iterative approach to data analysis also enables researchers to re-analyse and re-interpret their data at a number of time intervals (Hughes and Emmel, 2012). Revisiting earlier interview waves for a second, third or even fourth time can generate new analytical findings, especially as the researcher’s understanding and interpretation of the data is often deepened at each re-analysis. There are clear differences in how this iterative approach is conducted when contrasting the LivedEWelfare and WelCond study. For example, with LivedEWelfare the researcher could return to and re-immerse herself in the data frequently, and became familiar with all of her participants and their experiences over time. The vast amount of data generated by WelCond made similar levels of in depth understanding across the entire data set virtually impossible. Additionally, the potential for ‘data asphyxiation’ (Pettigrew,1995), as the team grappled with the sheer volume of data generated needed to be addressed. To tackle these issues WelCond adopted a twin track approach to data management and analysis. A ‘top down’ common coding schema was developed to enable a systematic and structured approach to data management and maximise analytical consistency between team members, and across the three waves of data analysis. This consisted of eight top level thematic codes (i.e. 1. Biography, 2 Sanctions, 3 Support, 4 Impacts/outcomes, 5 Strategies, 6 Aspirations 7 Ethics arguments and 8 Ethics principles) developed to comprehensively cover WelCond’s central themes. Each top code was further differentiated into up to 10 refined associated sub codes. All the repeat interviews were then coded into a shared framework matrix in NVivo. Columns provided summaries of data coded to each specific code/sub code across the three waves of data collection cross referenced to each individual WSU. Each cell in the resultant matrix grid represented the intersection of the data from a single WSU coded at each wave of interview, to each analytical theme. This approach was complemented by further, ‘bottom up’, analysis of data generated in the repeat interviews undertaken with each of the nine sampled WSUs groups. This analysis was devolved to the sub teams of researchers assembled according to their specific areas of policy expertise.

In both studies, NVivo was used to manage and process our data. However, the WelCond study did encounter some problems with the software’s ability to cope with the amount of data the project produced. Furthermore, in order to ensure data security all team members had to access a common project file held in a secure shared server of the lead university’s IT system. In combination with the size of the project, this often led to slow functioning of the software and frustration among the research team. Despite these limitations, the framework matrix in NVivo developed by the WelCond team was particularly helpful because it enabled the display of case, by theme, overtime analyses that were linked to, and grounded in, the accounts of the WSUs. This allowed the research team to look across the entire data set and bring the cases into conversation with each other, developing a dynamic grounded analysis of the data across and through time (Thomson, 2007).

Markedly, despite the differences in size of the projects and the fact that one was a sole-researcher project, and the other involved researchers across six universities, both adopted similar analytical strategies, using a framework approach to facilitate the “systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes” (Ritchie and Spencer, 2011 :5)Across both studies, tables, in the case of LivedEWelfare, and a framework matrix in NVivo outlined above for WelCond), were employed to enable the respective researchers to identify critical junctures that triggered or inhibited change over time (synchronic analysis).These informed the subsequent development of longitudinal case studies, which were adopted to detail unfolding individual narratives over time (supporting the diachronic analysis).

The value of these longitudinal detailed case studies is illustrated in the earlier consideration of the experiences of Robert and Harry. By developing detailed pen pictures in the case of LivedEWelfare and indicative longitudinal case studies WelCond, it was possible to closely follow the contours and changes of people’s live through time, and then, through this analytical work, develop detailed new insight into the (often perverse) consequences of the application of welfare conditionality. This diachronic analysis was conducted across both studies in parallel with thematic synchronic analysis, made possible by the adoption of the framework approach in WelCond and a thematic analysis using NVIVO in LivedEwelfare.

Undoubtedly, it was easier for the LivedEWelfare project to look across the sample, and to develop immersion in the full data set. For WelCond immersion in the entirety of the data is an ongoing but formidable challenge. The analysis of QLR data is undoubtedly complex and challenging but ultimately – and in the cases of both projects reported here - rewarding:

*Building case and thematic data into an integrated whole, discerning how time is implicated in these processes, and gaining insights into the rich kaleidoscope of unfolding lives, takes the researcher into realms of lived experiences that are invariably unexpected and arresting. Whatever the challenges, it is an intensely rewarding process. (Neale, 2019 :119).*

**Concluding discussion: the potential for social policy in taking a qualitative longitudinal approach**

As the findings from WelCond and LivedEWelfare illustrate (Dwyer, 2018; Patrick, 2017), there are rich possibilities with centring in on time methodologically and conceptually when undertaking social policy research. QLR provides the potential to tease out the dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural factors which may act to aid or constrain opportunity and choice (Corden and Millar, 2007; Henderson et al, 2006; Wright, 2012). All this is core to the concerns of social policy, and thus makes it a methodology of especial relevance and utility to the discipline. The current and continued behavioural turn in social policy has seen policymakers favour interventions that are closely focused on trying to engineer and promote behavioural change (Dwyer2018;). Researchers engaging with these interventions will find QLR an invaluable approach to adopt, capable of assisting their efforts to understand how they are experienced and their impacts. It is a method ideally, and arguably uniquely, suited for teasing out how people engage with and respond to policy interventions and the resultant presence (but also absence) of change(s) in affected individuals’ lives (Corden and Millar, 2007). This is clearly demonstrated in the example of welfare conditionality, where both WelCond and LivedEWelfare were able to illustrate the lived experiences of these interventions through time, and the extent to which, all too often, conditionality was causing adverse effects and failing to promote the desired outcomes (, Dwyer, 2018; Patrick, , 2014, 2017;Wright and Patrick, 2019 ).

What is clear from earlier discussions, however, is the evident consequences that flow from adopting different scales of enquiry – as exemplified in contrasting the small-scale LivedEWelfare with WelCond’s large qualitative longitudinal panel study. Despite the positive potential of upscaling qualitative longitudinal methods, as illustrated by the WelCond study, inevitably as sample size and complexity of design increases, there is a trade off in terms of explanatory depth. Neale (2019) draws a contrast between two distinct types of longitudinal study: the epic, large scale study, which commonly adopts a quantitative approach, and the intimate, small-scale longitudinal study, which, as in the LivedEWelfare, typifies qualitative longitudinal enquiry. Perhaps, WelCond represents an ambitious attempt to build a hybrid model, that is large-scale but retains the rationale and explanatory potential of smaller-scale QL studies. In contrast, the adoption of the traditional small-scale QLR enquiry in LivedEWelfare created additional possibilities for the use of innovative, and genuinely participatory, methods.

A further advantage of taking the long/er view is that it better enables researchers to engage with changes in the policy landscape over time. In turn, this facilitates a longitudinal exploration of the impacts of social policies on personal circumstances, and how these impacts are themselves differentially experienced based on different individual circumstances. With a cross-sectional approach, a one-off encounter which provides only a ‘snapshot’ (Berthoud, 2000) at one point in time can make it incredibly difficult to disentangle the various personal issues and policies that are impacting individual lives. By working across time, it becomes more possible to unpick the various structural factors and policy interventions impacting on individuals’ present lives, and how these then affect their anticipated futures (and are reflected in their past lives).

Relatedly, a longitudinal design enables an engagement with new policies and interventions, which are implemented during the research, even where these were not a focus of the original study[[4]](#endnote-4). This extends the scope for research to be timely and policy relevant. For example, during the course of the LivedEWelfare study the programmes of work-related support provided to disabled people have undergone significant change. Given the longitudinal design, it has been possible to explore people’s experiences of the newer programmes, and to contrast these with their experiences of earlier interventions.

As there is an ongoing relationship between the researcher and participants, there are also possibilities to employ participatory approaches and include participants in dissemination and impact activities. This can help extend research’s reach by engaging new audiences, as was the case with the LivedEWelfare study and its Dole Animators[[5]](#endnote-5) element (Dole Animators, 2013). There is also scope to work in partnership with policymakers and practitioners over time in innovative and exciting processes of knowledge co-construction (e.g. see the Following Young Fathers Project (Neale, 2019; Tarrant and Neale, 2017)). Finally, there are opportunities to aggregate findings from QLR studies where they have a common focus, as has been trialled with the LivedEWelfare and WelCond studies (see Wright and Patrick, 2019).

While QLR has great (and still often untapped) potential for generating impactful, rich and highly policy relevant data and findings, it can be difficult to persuade policymakers and key stakeholders of its rigour, especially when compared to quantitative methods and what is still thought of as the gold standard: randomised control trials. Further, social researchers often operate in a context in which policymakers sometimes appear hostile and uninterested in research which does not align with their favoured policy approach and practices (Monoghan and Ingold, 2019). But this applies to all research methodologies, and so does not of itself undermine the potential of QLR.

Reflecting on her experiences undertaking both cross-sectional and longitudinal qualitative enquiry, Tess Ridge (2015) drew a contrast between going from owning a black and white television set (when conducting one-off interviews) to the joy of having a colour television set (when following people over time). This metaphor captures the great power and possibilities in QLR, which enables rich, detailed and finely grained data to emerge that is capable of illustrating most accurately and fully the contours of individuals’ lives and how these are influenced, shaped and constrained by policies and interventions (Neale, 2019). The QLR design was absolutely central to both the WelCond and LivedEWelfare studies, which show – albeit at different scales and over different time periods, in *full colour,* the varied impacts and often adverse effects of welfare conditionality over time.

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1. This figure is made up of 481 respondents who took part in wave a interviews, 339 of whom took part in a second wave b interview and 262 who completed a third wave c interview. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Timelines were not used in the WelCond study. They would have generated additional data management and analysis tasks for the project team which, due to sample size and the dispersed multiple fieldwork locations, was already stretched to the limit of available resources. Instead WelCond wave a question guides initially focussed on getting WSUs to outline their personal stories and reflect on key issues and events that had previously impacted on their lives and personal work and welfare histories. Towards the end of each interview guide a series of questions and prompts then focussed on WSUs’ future aspirations. Prior to re-interviewing WSUs in subsequent waves, researchers revisited discussions in previous transcripts and asked then individuals to reflect on their earlier stated aspirations and any changes or events that had occurred in the interim period that had impacted on their ambitions. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We were unable to locate Harry for an initial repeat interview after a year but managed to locate and re-interview him in our third and final wave of repeat interviews 24 months on from our first discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For example, a new cohort of Universal Credit recipients was added to the WelCond repeat QL panel study following introduction in 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Dole Animators project involved participants from the LivedEWelfare study taking part in a series of workshops with the researcher (Patrick) and an animator to create a short film documenting central findings from the project in an accessible and engaging way.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)