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What ‘works’ when retracing sample members in a qualitative longitudinal study?

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Attrition represents a significant obstacle to overcome in any longitudinal research project. It is, perhaps, most keenly felt when the data collected are from a qualitative study, since, unlike quantitative longitudinal research, weighting factors cannot be applied to ‘correct’ for any biases in the achieved sample and even a small number of ‘lost’ respondents can equate to a large percentage of the original sample. It is perhaps because of qualitative longitudinal research’s (QLR) reliance on, generally speaking, smaller samples that few have been able to shed much light on which re-contacting procedures are associated with achieving higher rates of retention. In this article, using data from a fifth sweep of a larger but particularly challenging cohort of 199 former probationers, we explore the strategies which helped us maintain high levels of retention in a QLR study. The article contains many practical suggestions which others planning or undertaking similar studies may find useful.

Keywords: qualitative longitudinal research (QLR); retention; follow-up studies

Introduction

Whilst qualitative longitudinal studies have become popular, there have been few efforts to provide guidance on maintaining contact with cohort members over time. Often this is because samples are small, often non-deviant, and conducted by single researchers; consequently: (a) it is relative easy to keep in contact with sample members since there are few of them, and they have little reason to conceal their identities; and (b) small numbers do not readily enable researchers to distil lessons about ‘what worked’ in maintaining contact over years or decades. Herein we unpack lessons which may be transferable to other qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies. The sample size ($n = 199$) enables us to make suggestions about ‘what works’ which other QLR studies have not been able to.

We start by reviewing what is known about retention in longitudinal research, before describing our aims and objectives more thoroughly. We then outline the project and present our findings. We conclude with a consideration of ethical matters and suggestions for those undertaking QLR studies. Our aim is to distil lessons about how to most effectively re-trace sample members in QLR research. We begin by outlining QLR studies and what is currently known about maintaining QLR samples.

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What are QLR studies?

The hallmarks of QLR studies are a focus on change over time and on participants' relationship to, and understanding of, such change(s). There is a broadly shared understanding that QLR is concerned with the exploration of individual lives as they develop. To an extent, this makes QLR synonymous with the study of *change*. There are, of course, numerous subtle differences in the way QLR has been characterised and defined (Corden & Millar, 2007, p. 585). For McLeod and Thomson (2009, p. 64), QLR is open-ended and intentional that is, a QLR study is designed as such from the outset. By contrast, Gordon and Lahelma (2003) argue that QLR can evolve out of other research designs. Saldana (2003, p. 4) suggests that what makes a study longitudinal is not the length of time covered by the investigation, but the number of *waves* of data collection that take place. A practical requirement for QLR, according to Thomson and Holland, is 'continuity of funding and of personnel' (2003, p. 242). Regardless of these differences of opinion, a desire to identify and explore change over time is, for many, a defining feature of QLR (Corden & Millar, 2007, p. 529; McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 62; Saldana, 2003). This, for some, is the inevitable consequence of one characteristic of QLR: the intentional design of temporality into the study (Thomson, Plumridge, & Holland, 2003, p. 185). Involving repeated measurements and/or data collection from the same group or multiple visits to the same research location, QLR is the best way to identify and analyse the dynamic processes that impact upon individual lives (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 62).

This focus on change is unsurprising as a chief benefit to *any* longitudinal study is the opportunity to study relationships between particular phenomena as they unfold over time (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). Unlike cross-sectional studies, longitudinal methods allow researchers to track the influence of events and transitions at various stages, in some cases over several years. For us, the insights generated through QLR are important, since this body of research is concerned with the processes that characterise people's lives, and recognises the inherently 'messy' nature of individual narratives across the life course. In this respect, QLR researchers are open to the fact that individuals' opinions change or are re-evaluated, that previously unimportant experiences are given new prominence in light of a continually developing sense of self, and that past events can be linked to 'current' developments. In short, QLR permits the capture of these complex, subtly shifting facets of human existence.

What we know about maintaining contact

There are few studies which document in detail issues relating to retaining cohort members in QLR studies, partly for the reasons outlined above (see also Leibrich, 1994, p. 613). Harocopos and Dennis's (2003) study followed-up 100 crack-cocaine users for 18 months and provided little description of the techniques employed or their success rates. Similarly, Ward and Henderson (2003) followed 30 young care leavers for six months but offered few definitive statements about what assisted re-tracing efforts. Desmond, Maddux, Johnson, and Confer (1995) include a useful list of 10 strategies (derived from a literature review) which had proven effective in retracing former patients who had been treated for drug problems. They suggest (amongst other things) informing respondents they will be re-interviewed, providing

sufficient incentives to be re-interviewed, logging follow-up activities, making use of institutional records, keeping follow-up interviews brief, making the locations for re-interviews as convenient for sample members as possible and allowing ample time and resources. Their own experiences also suggest that having a team experienced in designing follow-up studies from the outset was a key element in the success of their own study (which recorded a 98% follow-up rate after 12 months). Leibrich reported that she learnt not to give up looking for someone until she was sure that they had died, emigrated or had deliberately ‘disappeared off the face of the Earth’ (1994, p. 615). She also stated that having access to electoral and BMD (births, marriages and deaths) records, allowing sufficient time to find sample members, and using every available technique she could think of ‘worked’ (1994, p. 617). There is, of course, much to be gained from accounts of follow-ups undertaken for quantitative studies. One study which provides key data on this, and is especially pertinent for us (given that it involves what may be termed ‘working class’ men and their involvement in crime) is that the Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development. Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, St. Ledger, and West (1990, p. 131) report that telephoning or writing to sample members via their last known address, visiting them at work, searching NHS records or telephoning their wider family were amongst the most successful retracing techniques.

Our contribution

We commence our paper by outlining the different outcomes which we were interested in (i.e. locating, contacting and interviewing cohort members), and the principle concerns of this paper. Having outlined the sorts of activities which we undertook, we report the frequency with which we undertook them, before considering which activities were associated with success. We explore the extent to which these correlates match those activities which we felt were ‘break-through’ moments in locating, contacting and interviewing cohort members. Following this we reflect on the ethical and practical considerations involved in following up members of a cohort of former (and current) offenders over a 15-year period. We conclude with suggestions for those planning similar follow-up studies.

We focus on three different outcomes, namely sample members who were:

- (1) ‘located’ (we were able to identify whether they were still alive, in prison or in the community – in effect ‘where’ they were);
- (2) ‘contacted’ (we spoke to them, or we are sure that we were able to get a message to them); and
- (3) ‘interviewed’.

As noted above, our principle interests therefore are in:

- (1) describing the activities we undertook; and
- (2) making objective (i.e. quantitative) assessments of the success rates of our retracing efforts and reflecting on ‘break-through’ points.

It is important to bear in mind, in keeping with Farrington et al. (1990), that we did not allocate activities randomly. This is real world research – we focused on getting the job done – and some activities were only tried when other measures failed

to produce results. Nevertheless, we hope that this account will be of use to those designing new QLR studies or planning to recontact respondents previously interviewed.

Tracking progress on probation

Between October 1997 and April 1998, 199 probationers aged 17–35 years old commencing supervision in six English probation services were recruited into the study.¹ The aim of the study was to explore why people stopped offending and the role played in these processes by probation supervision. Details of the research can be found in Farrall (2002), Farrall and Calverley (2006) and Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe, and Calverley (2014). The first three sweeps of interviews (published as Farrall, 2002) took place between autumn 1997 and spring 1999, and the fourth sweep between October 2003 and July 2004. Farrall (2002) provides a brief summary of the characteristics of the sample in terms of their age, gender and ethnic composition. The fifth sweep of interviews took place between March 2010 and February 2013. Herein we use data from the fifth sweep.

A significant obstacle to retracing participants was the passage of time between the interviews. For those participants who had only taken part once before (i.e. at sweep one), 12 or more years had passed since they had any contact with the project and even for those interviewed most recently a gap of six years represented a significant obstacle to relocating them. The reasons for these difficulties are straightforward enough to identify. Telephone numbers change, people move home, emigrate, change their names (via marriage or other legal processes), lose contact with friends and family members, might be institutionalised (imprisoned or residing in psychiatric units) or die. The passage of time also meant that some of our sample had forgotten their previous involvement in the project. Reminding them of their involvement required using the details they had given previously to persuade them that we could be trusted. In tracing sample members we relied on the following sources:

- the contact details they had given us during the previous fieldwork, including their home address and telephone numbers and those of friends and relatives;
- probation records (which were searched repeatedly);
- prison records which were searched in early-2010, early-2011, late-2011 and spring 2012;
- local area telephone and electoral roll databases (www.192.com);
- local newspaper websites; and
- Facebook (an online social networking web site, see www.facebook.com).

We also checked online BMD records (www.findmypast.co.uk) for all sample members (using all of their known aliases²) in order to establish whether individuals had died, got (re)married or, in some cases, had children. Even when we located participants, however, issues of making contact remained a problem. Quite understandably, responding to our attempts to get in touch was not a high priority for many who received letters, phone calls or email messages. Letters went, if not unread, then unanswered. Phone calls were not always returned due to lack of money for phone bills or the cost of calling mobiles, and messages left with family members were not always relayed. In some cases, feeling depressed or ‘having too much going on at the time’ explained why some did not initially respond. Some cohort members had

poor levels of literacy. Persisting in efforts to contact them was therefore important. Indeed, several interviews were secured by the simple task of repeatedly visiting an individual's last known address.

Data

Table 1 reports the outcomes of our retracing efforts. Our estimates of the number of activities undertaken follows Farrington's counting procedures (Farrington et al., 1990). Specifically, two telephone calls to a person, or three visits to a person's home *on the same day* would only be counted once. This underestimates the number of activities undertaken. Similarly, different activities were undertaken at earlier or later stages of the re-tracing process, and so activities with low success rates may have been tried as a matter of course for all individuals, or were tried only when all others had been exhausted.

In all, we interviewed over half of the sample ($n = 104$; 52%³), which was 56% of those people we could reasonably expect to interview (not counting those dead, overseas or in psychiatric institutions). There were a small number of individuals whom we made no effort to retrace, since they had died prior to the fieldwork or for other reasons.

Six people refused to be interviewed. Four of these were street offenders (burglars, robbers, or those handling stolen goods) who were still offending, and some were on probation or in prison at the time of our approach. There were seven people who did not reply to our messages. We are certain that these people were the 'right' individuals, since we often contacted them via Facebook (which often had a photo of them) or at their previous addresses. Of these seven, two had very limited offending careers (and so may not have felt that they had anything left to tell us). Of the remaining five, all of whom had longer offending careers, three we knew had further convictions, whilst two appeared not to have been reconvicted (but may still have

Table 1. Fieldwork outcomes.

	<i>N</i>	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Interview completed	104	52.3	52.3	52.3
Refused interview	6	3.0	3.0	55.3
Untraceable	40	20.1	20.1	75.4
Known to have left UK	3	1.5	1.5	76.9
Died	7	3.5	3.5	80.4
Contacts refused to co-operate	2	1.0	1.0	81.4
Declined as 'had desisted'/'was a long time ago'	7	3.5	3.5	84.9
Agreed, but missed interview	3	1.5	1.5	86.4
Decided not to interview at sweep5	1	.5	.5	86.9
Unfit to interview (in psychiatric hospital, too ill, etc.)	2	1.0	1.0	87.9
Silent refusal ('found', but did not reply)	7	3.5	3.5	91.5
Suspected to have died	2	1.0	1.0	92.5
Located in CJS (since 2008) but not able to contact	15	7.5	7.5	100.0
Total	199	100.0	100.0	

been offending). There were another seven people who we located and spoke to, but who said that they had stopped offending prior to the fourth sweep interviews and had nothing further to tell us about why they had stopped offending – the key focus of the research project. None of them had any convictions since the fourth sweep.

Seven people had died, and another two we strongly suspected had died, but we could not be certain that these two were ‘our’ sample members. Fifteen people we found in criminal justice system records, but could not contact. Letters sent to these people via probation went unreplied. Only two family members or friends refused to help us. Three people had left the UK prior to the fifth sweep, or were reported to have left by family members. In some cases we were unconvinced by claims that they had left (for example, they had recent convictions), in which case they were either listed as ‘found in the CJS’ or as ‘untraceable’. There remained a sizable ‘rump’ of 40 untraceable people. Often this was because they were ‘one-off’ offenders who gave few contact details and who had moved home, or we suspect they may have used several aliases (as already noted, our sample used several aliases).

Table 2 lists all of the activities undertaken to find the sample members. One can see that we needed to undertake 1271 activities in order to secure 104 interviews (excluding the four people for whom no effort was made). This equates to just over 12 activities per completed interview. If we include all those we had some contact with (whom we spoke to but they refused, who missed interviews, or were found to be unfit to interview) the average is just under 10 activities per person (1271/129).

Telephoning sample members involved using the contacts given at earlier sweeps, or new numbers given to us by their family or friends or uncovered in searches of other records. Similarly, we wrote to sample members at the addresses they had given us previously, as well as to new ones given to us by family members, friends or found following other searches. Visiting their homes followed a similar pattern. Facebook messaging a person involved a slightly more complex process. We searched for specific people, looking for ‘nicknames’ as well as full names, places individuals associated themselves with and any friends or family members we knew of. In some cases re-reading previous interviews yielded information which

Table 2. Activities for all cases.

	Responses		Percent of cases
	<i>N</i>	Percent	
No efforts made	4	.3	2.0
Phoned	121	9.5	60.8
Wrote	114	8.9	57.3
Visited home	124	9.7	62.3
Facebook search	54	4.2	27.1
192.com search	189	14.8	95.0
BT.com search	66	5.2	33.2
Births, marriages, deaths (BMD) search	67	5.3	33.7
Contacted family/friends (any technique)	122	9.6	61.3
Ministry of Justice search	200	15.7	100.5
Local probation area search	194	15.2	97.5
Offered more money	20	1.6	10.1
Total	1275	100.0	

was crucial to securing an interview. For example, one sample member mentioned being interested in stock-car racing during earlier interviews. Someone with their name was found on Facebook; their profile picture was of a stock-car, and turned out to be the person we were seeking. Another case had not been seen since sweep one and had been so drunk during the interview that he had not been able to give any contact details. However, having an unusual surname aided the search, and we located him living in a town many miles away from where he had been recruited (a close reading of the interview with the probation officer uncovered that he had close connections with that town), and an interview was completed within a couple of weeks. Thanks to Facebook messaging, in this instance, we went from a search about to be abandoned to an agreement to be interviewed in around 30 min. We also made extensive use of 192.com, which allowed us to search electoral rolls, telephone directories and company records. We also used British Telecom's online search facilities. BMD, available at findmypast.co.uk, is a search tool used by genealogists for tracing great aunts and the like. However, the records run up to 2006 and allowed us to identify some people who had died, got (re)married or given birth. This suggested either new names (for remarriages) or new locations for our searches. We also identified about half of those we later classified as 'known to be dead' and verified all other reports of death using this facility. Because our sample members were asked to give the details of friends and family members with whom they expected to be in touch in the future we could trace some people through this technique. We also searched the Ministry of Justice's prison and probation records, which helped us to trace some people. Finally, we made a note of all cases who were offered more than the standard £20 'thank you'; these people were offered additional money either because suspected that they would respond positively to the additional money or being treated as 'special' or because they openly asked for more.

Outcome measures

We present three outcome measures. We do this since there are various stages in the successful completion of follow-up interviews, and we wished to explore the extent to which one could be unsuccessful (in that no interview was completed), but also 'successful' in that data could still be generated about the person and their life which could be used to inform one's thinking on the substantive issues. Our three outcome measures were:

- 'locating', 'contacting', or
- completing an interview with a sample member.

'Locating' an individual means discovering where they were living, or whether they were dead or living overseas. This included face to face contact with them or contact with a friend or family member, or the identification of an individual's location remotely (via Facebook, for example). Table 3 reports how successful we were on this measure.

In all we 'located' over three-quarters of the sample. Our second measure, detailed in Table 4, was 'contacting' a sample member, which refers to meaningful dialogue (in person, by letter, though an intermediary, such as a probation officer or

Table 3. Sample members ‘located’.

	Frequency	Percent
Not located	45	22.6
Located	154	77.4
Total	199	100.0

Table 4. Sample members ‘contacted’.

	Frequency	Percent
Not contacted	67	33.7
Contacted	122	61.3
Not applicable	10	5.0
Total	199	100.0

relative, over the telephone, by Facebook or text message) with a sample member resulting in either an agreement or a refusal to be interviewed.

Of course, this is a harder outcome measure to do well with: finding that someone is in prison or living outside the UK is not the same as speaking to them, and so by this measure we only successfully contacted just over 60% of the sample (65% if one excludes those known to be dead or suspected to have died). The most crucial of all of the outcome measures for us is interview completion (Table 5).

Excluding those 15 that we could not interview (as they were dead or overseas or too ill to be interviewed), we interviewed 104 out of 184 (56.5%). By cross-tabulating the three outcome measures reported above (Tables 3–5), with the efforts undertaken (Table 2), we are able to assess which procedures most likely to associated with locating, contacting and interviewing sample members (Table 6).

Table 6 summarises 33 individual 2×2 crosstabulation tables, and reports the *p*-value for each table and whether or not the relationships in the table suggested that the activity was positively (or negatively) associated with sample members being located, contacted or interviewed. Whilst this is not ideal, it does allow us to quickly summarise a lot of data.⁴ From Table 6, we see that:

- Telephoning and writing ‘worked’: those cases in which phone calls and letters (or emails) were sent were likely to result in both successful contacts and completed interviews. In some respects the relationship between locating an individual and phoning or writing is spurious: we could only write or call people we had located, although in some instances calling old numbers or writing to old addresses provided new leads.
- Contrary to what one might expect, visiting people was associated with not locating, contacting or interviewing them. Visits were often made when no working phone number could be found and/or when letters had gone unanswered. We also visited neighbouring houses to see if neighbours knew of the whereabouts of the person we were looking for.
- Messaging people via Facebook was not associated with any of the outcomes at a level which was statistically significant.
- Using the BT and BMD records was largely unsuccessful. However, these efforts were only used when other routes were unsuccessful and, as noted above, BMD searches did help us to identify people who were dead and whose death we might not have known about otherwise, thus saving time.

Table 5. Sample members interviewed.

	Frequency	Percent
Not interviewed	80	40.2
Interviewed	104	52.3
Not applicable	15	7.5
Total	199	100.0

Table 6. Comparing activities and outcomes.

Activities	Outcomes		
	'Located'	'Contacted'	Interviewed
Telephoned	.004 +	.000 +	.005 +
Wrote	.000 +	.000 +	.002 +
Visited home	.002 -	.000 -	.000 -
Facebook search	.225 -	.461 +	.273 +
192 search	.131 -	.202 -	.060 -
BT search	.000 -	.000 -	.000 -
Births, marriages, deaths (BMD) search	.000 -	.000 -	.000 -
Contacted family/friends	.130 +	.019 +	.005 +
Ministry of Justice search	.645 +	.053 +	.105 +
Local probation area search	.403 -	.502 +	.316 +
Offered more money	.124 +	.305 +	.008 -

Note: Cells contain p -values based on crosstabulation tables. '+': Positively associated with the outcome, '-': negatively associated with the outcome.

- Whilst contacting people's family members or friends was not associated with locating sample members ($p = .130$), it was useful both for making contact with and interviewing them. This is possibly because we needed to contact a lot of friends or family members to locate an individual, and hence 'statistically' it is not associated with successful location (akin to the Princess and the Frog phenomenon, whereby the Princess has to kiss 'a lot' of frogs to find her Prince). Often, however, family members and friends gave us new leads.
- Searching criminal justice agencies' records was less useful than one might imagine. Such records were sometimes incomplete (or wrong). However, it was a good way of identifying some people who we would not otherwise have found, such as those who were homeless or in prison. It made sense to search these records several times. This was necessary because the amount of time people spent in the criminal justice system was often brief.
- Offering more money did not work. This was often an act of desperation on our part – we had contacted a sample member, but they had declined (or were equivocating) and we felt that offering more money might help. However, while there were some people who responded positively, it did not work often.

Another way of assessing 'what worked' was for us to identify those activities which were 'break-throughs' in locating⁵ an individual. By 'break-throughs' we mean the activity which made a difference to whether or not we found them. Sometimes these activities were upstream from actually speaking to the person first hand. For example, being told by a relative that the person we were looking for lived in a

different city provided a new lead. These are accordingly rather subjective assessments. Here we compare the percentages of activities in Table 2 with the ‘break-through’ activities in Table 7. We made 121 phone calls (9.5% of activities, Table 2) whilst looking for people, but these were the ‘break-throughs’ in 15 cases (10.9%, Table 7). This suggests that phoning ‘works’ in that it accounts for a greater percentage of ‘break-throughs’ than average (10.9% plays 9.5%). This also accords with the analyses presented in Table 6.

Similarly, writing to people (8.9% of activities, Table 2) was felt to be the ‘break-through’ in 20 cases (14.5%, Table 7). This too is in line with Table 6. Writing letters, even if they were not replied to immediately, made phone or face-to-face encounters easier as the respondent was expecting a visit or call. Although visiting people’s homes was not found to be positively associated with any of the outcome measures in Table 6, there is some evidence to suggest that it was still useful: it represented 9.7% of activities (Table 2), but was the ‘break-through’ in 15.2% of cases. Facebook messaging appeared relatively unhelpful (Table 6), but whilst it comprised 4.2% of activities (Table 2), it accounted for 10.9% of ‘break-throughs’. Contacting families and friends represented 9.6% of activities (Table 2), but 29.7% of ‘break-throughs’. Again the usefulness of this approach was supported by the analyses reported in Table 6.

On the other hand, whilst we searched for 189 sample members via 192.com (14.8% of activities, Table 2), this yielded only three ‘break-throughs’ (2.2%, Table 7), suggesting that this was a less ‘effective’ strategy. This was confirmed by the analyses reported in Table 6. Likewise, BMD searches represented 5.3% of activities, but only 2.9% of ‘break-throughs’. That said, by itself ‘192ing’ an individual was often the precursor to another activity. As such, the strength of 192.com searches was that they frequently helped us *confirm* where someone was by verifying previous addresses and sometimes helped us track them (because people they were living with turned up elsewhere and they were with them). Criminal justice system searches also constituted a large proportion of our activities (Table 2) but yielded low success rates (Tables 6 and 7). This is in part because everyone was searched at some stage preceding and during the fieldwork (and some were later found to be dead or no longer living in the UK).

Table 7. What worked in ‘locating’ sample members?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent
Telephoned	15	7.5	10.9
Wrote	20	10.1	14.5
Visited home	21	10.6	15.2
Facebook search	15	7.5	10.9
192.com search	3	1.5	2.2
Births, marriages, deaths (BMD) search	4	2.0	2.9
Contacted family/friends	41	20.6	29.7
Ministry of Justice search	8	4.0	5.8
Local probation area search	11	5.5	8.0
Subtotal (where activity was undertaken)	138	69.3	100.0
No effort made	4	2.0	
Untraceable	57	28.6	
Subtotal (unsuccessful)	61	30.7	
Total	199	100.0	

Ethical considerations

Fieldwork such as this involves many ethical considerations, not least knowing when to cease pursuing someone even when we knew their address or phone number. In keeping with Farrington et al. (1990), our ethical considerations operated at two levels. We owed it to both sample members and the wider research community to behave ethically. Had we not pursued our sample members so doggedly, we would not have secured so many interviews, and this might have biased our findings. We used a ‘two “no”s rule’: if someone declined to be interviewed we waited a short while and approached them again (often this resulted in agreements to be interviewed), but if they declined again we stopped pursuing them. We did this because an individual’s mood may influence how they respond to a request from a stranger. We always explained that we wanted to give everyone as many chances to become involved as we could and that (at the second ‘no’) we would not re-contact them. Often we found that those we contacted appreciated both our persistence (it signalled that they were important to us) and our explanations of why we had re-contacted them (bias in research findings, our inability to replace them with another person in a follow-up study). We also found that, in some instances, failing to reply to us, breaking off contact or initially refusing to be interviewed was due to circumstances beyond individuals’ control, such as changes in working arrangements, family formation and home moves. One man we initially spoke to very early on, but who broke-off contact, was interviewed some 18 months later, and explained that his wife had recently given birth and he had been working shifts when we first contacted him. For another, an initial agreement coincided with redundancy, and when we re-contacted him later he readily agreed to be interviewed. Thus, ethics meant a careful balancing act between making sure we were able to produce first-class research and treating sample members with respect.

We were also fortunate that our School’s Research Ethics Committee took a sensible, ‘real world’ approach to our fieldwork, and did not impose a limit to the sorts of activities we could undertake, or the number of times we could approach people. Colleagues elsewhere have told us of situations in which their ethical review board has limited the number of times they could call at an address and speak to people (even if the person spoken to was not the person they wanted to interview and there was no way of ensuring that they would relay messages), or insisted that addresses were only written to, rather than visited in person. Such limitations, whilst sounding ‘reasonable’ to an ethics committee, do not reflect the realities of fieldwork, and ought in our opinion to be challenged.

Conclusions

Based on the foregoing analyses and our reflections on the process of retracing sample members, we would advise anyone embarking upon either a fresh QLR study or a phase of re-contacting an existing QLR sample to do the following:

- *Keep contact sheets for each case*; listing the addresses of people they feel they are likely to keep in contact with. Try to focus on family members where possible, since friendship circles can change and friends may be similar to the sample member, so any problems faced in re-contacting the sample member may also be faced with their friends. Impressionistically, sisters seem to remain

in touch with siblings more than brothers. Parents can become estranged from offspring, but grandparents less so (however grandparents may die sooner, so consider the age of the sample and their relatives). Update/confirm contacts and collect new contacts at each sweep.

- *Review ‘cold cases’*; get someone else to review previous activities. In our study this role was mainly performed by SF, but AC (who had conducted most of the sweep four interviews) was also called upon for his insights.
- *Do not establish time limits to securing interviews*; this was important as it sometimes took many months of searching to secure interviews. The downside of this is that the initial months of data collection required BH (who did the bulk of the interviews) to juggle numerous cases simultaneously.
- In the main, but not exclusively, we established the rule that the *person who had traced, located, and contacted a sample member was the person who would interview them*. This enabled the building of rapport, for example, by being able to agree mutually convenient times to meet on the basis of previously communicated information about personal routines, or remembering that someone needed to collect their children from school at 3.30 pm.
- *Perform the approach in a professional manner*; try (wherever possible) written approaches like letters or Facebook. Part of the task is conveying quickly that ‘this is not a scam’. Giving a few personal details (the name of previous probation officer or parents or spouse) without breaking confidences was helpful to confirm that we were bona fide. The importance of written approaches cannot be overestimated; these ‘primed’ sample members for other approaches. Letters also made doorstep conversations easier and helped to convey a sense that this was a coordinated project.
- There was also the value of a *‘team’ approach*. In some instances initial caution on the part of cohort members was dissipated by reference to a wider team and the funding agency (The Leverhulme Trust) which conveyed the message that this was a serious research project rather than a scam or ‘lone wolf’ predator. This was particularly important as there was a widely reported case of a sexual predator who had groomed victims via Facebook during the initial phases of our fieldwork. Being able to offer an interview with a female interviewer was important in this respect.
- Even ‘unfruitful’ search techniques ought to be pursued as these are sometimes the ones which are successful with ‘hard to reach’ individuals such as homeless people.

There were some things we did not do, but which others may consider. We did not send out birthday and Christmas cards (this was impractical, since there was no funding to pay for contact between sweeps). Nor did we photograph sample members to aid re-contacting as Hagan and McCarthy (1997) did. Their sample was of homeless people who may have been known to other homeless individuals but either not by name or not by the name they were known as to Hagan and McCarthy. On reflection, we would have liked to search criminal justice records more frequently than we did. Sample members were sometimes ‘in’ the criminal justice system for short periods of time and occasionally this meant that leaving even four months between official record searches meant we missed a chance to contact with them. This had resource implications for criminal justice staff, of course. One thing we did not do was to give up: we just keep going until we had exhausted every last lead. In late

2012 (having started searches in March 2010), we eventually ceased fieldwork efforts. In January 2013, one further individual finally came forward for interview.

There are several additional issues which those planning further QLR studies should bear in mind. We found that we had a bifurcation into 'easy to find' individuals, who were either stable people on the electoral roll with phones etc. and who were not offending (and could be reached via telephone or home visits), or those still on probation, or in prison (and could be reached via the criminal justice system). Both of these groups were fairly easy to find. As such the 'really hard to reach' were those who fell between these two groups (i.e. with some limited involvement in the criminal justice system, who may occasionally be convicted but not on the electoral roll, etc.). Researchers planning QLR studies ought to think about who will be the hard to find individuals in their own studies and draw up plans for minimising attrition in such cases. Finally, it must be remembered that no two studies are alike, so researchers need to remain flexible; one cannot simply replicate our methods and expect them to be successful with a different cohort.

Herein we have reviewed the efforts which we undertook to locate, contact and re-interview a cohort of men and women, some of whom had not been seen for more than 10 years. Because of the size of our sample we were able to do what many qualitative researchers are unable to do; namely to assess statistically the success of the various activities we undertook in helping us to maintain a relatively low rate of attrition. Minimising attrition is a central concern in longitudinal research and we hope that our experiences might go some way to ensuring that others are able to maintain high levels of contact with cohort members, regardless of the nature of their substantive research interests.

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Notes

1. The interview covered social and personal circumstances, the obstacles faced in stopping offending, the degree to which probation supervision might help with these, episodes of further offending and desires to change. Follow-up interviews revisited these topics and explored other topics including victimisation, feelings of citizenship, everyday emotions and time-space budgets.
2. The 199 men and women provided us with 213 aliases. This is almost certainly an under count, since individuals may have started using new names.
3. A 105th interview was completed in early 2013 after one cohort member we had long given up on got in touch offering to be interviewed.
4. For those unfamiliar with *p*-values, the cut offs are .05 (which means that the strength of the relationship is so strong that the chances that it occurred by chance is 5%), .01 (ditto, but 1% chance) and .001 (.1% chance). Lower *p*-values indicate a more powerful relationship.
5. Because locating was always the first step, and because of those located ($n = 154$) 79% were contacted, and because of those contacted ($n = 122$) 85% were interviewed, we focus on only the break-throughs to locating an individual.

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