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The Possibilities of Narrative Analysis for Paradata: An Historically Situated Exploration

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This HUB-NOVELLA collaborative research project aimed to provide new insights into the methodological utility of analysing paradata by bringing together the focus on paradata from quantitative analysis with epistemological interest in qualitative research and how researchers are implicated in their analyses. It did so by analysing the marginalia recorded by field interviewers on paper questionnaires completed for Peter Townsend's influential *Poverty in the United Kingdom 1967/68* study (PinUK).

Objectives:

- Explore the possibilities of narrative analysis for micro level marginalia from a sub-set of the archived PinUK survey material
- Extend understanding of secondary narrative analysis with data not collected for this purpose.
- Place the historically situated narrative analysis in the context of analysis of macro level data of the archived material.
- Explore ethical tensions for survey interviewers and the implications for contemporary survey fieldwork.
- Pursue the potential of this project for informing a framework for the collection and understanding of contemporary paradata, with an informed 'Community of Interest'.

Methodology

Peter Townsend's survey aimed to define and measure poverty and played a pivotal role in redefining poverty. A sample of 3566 households were recruited, comprising 9584 household members in 630 parliamentary constituencies and four 'special areas'

Since paradata were not the focus of the Townsend study, an initial task of the Possibilities of Paradata (POP) study was to map the paradata in the booklets. Since POP is a small scale study and narrative analysis is time and labour intensive, it was not possible to analyse all the booklets that contained paradata. The research team selected 69 booklets including particular geographical areas represented in the original study ('special', seaside, affluent, minority ethnic migration).

An initial thematic analysis was conducted by the whole research team before dividing up the analyses so that most booklets were thematically analysed by two researchers. Six booklets were then theoretically sampled for narrative analysis (by area, interviewer and type of household). Two of these were collaboratively analysed and the other four were analysed by pairs of the research team before being discussed by the whole team.

The project took a constructionist perspective, viewing participants and researchers as meaning making within particular socio-historical contexts and so as co-constructing the paradata. The narrative method employed involved close reading of all the booklet

paradata, with attention to the genre of 'story' constructed by the interviewer and how the interviewer positioned his or her self narratively, as well as shifts in voice and tone. The dynamics of the narratives were also examined to see how they were built up and repeated, and inconsistencies and non-sequiturs. The technologies employed during the PinUK period were pen and paper. This allowed the analysis of graphic data, such as placement on a page and punctuation.

Findings

A substantial minority of interviewers wrote paradata on the booklets, and coders and checkers frequently added their own paradata, so that there were sometimes multiple sources of paradata on booklets.

Thematic analysis

The analyses showed that the PinUK paradata could be typified in seven ways:

Amplifications of the codes, noting figures and computations of income, benefits, expenses and background clarification, and/or direct quotes.

Justifications of coding decisions or lack of coding.

Explanations related to the substantive focus and coding.

Evaluations of informants' characters or their claims. The evaluation of character discussed individual personality or household characteristics, emotions and material resources. The evaluation of claims discussed the veracity of the information given by informants.

Debriefing. This was mostly comments on the research focus to the core research team. Some appeared to be 'offloading' explanations to the self. Some were exchanges between interviewers and the core team.

Standpoint. Interviewers commented on the wider political context, the general or local social situation, or presented an active voice that went beyond contemporary expectations for the fieldworker role.

Much of the paradata in the booklets constituted amplification, justification and explanation and provided insights into the issues with which quantitative paradata analysts are concerned.

Narrative analysis

The study showed that it is possible to conduct narrative analysis on paradata from the PinUK study. It helped to illuminate the historical specificities of the period in which the interviews were done and the ways in which the interviewers' concerns impact on how they pursued and interpret the survey responses.

The narrative analysis provided important insights into the interview process and informants' stories. It added important nuances to the thematic analysis in showing that the same theme could be addressed through different genres and positions. For example, one interviewer wrote paradata that could be analysed as a 'flash fiction' narrative, vividly presenting a series of short stories of the informant's life. These were directly addressed to the core research team and read as advocacy. Another presented a story of the struggles and manners of the apparently wealthy, using an ironic tone and presenting layered

meanings in ways that we considered reminiscent of the genre of Jane Austen novels,. Another presented a narrative of the household that could be read as Shakespearian tragedy.

Some interviewers positioned themselves as sceptical detectives, attempting to uncover whether informants' socioeconomic circumstances were as they portrayed them and exploring disjunctions between what people say and what they do, to make inferences about interviewees' moral culpability.

Others treated informants' accounts as jigsaw puzzles, where household income and outgoings had to be pieced together to make sense. For example, one set of paradata consisted of brief notes, with no names or relationships presented in ways that depersonalised both the 'informant' and the interviewer. Other interviewers positioned themselves as dispassionate observers. Some presented counter-narratives that challenged social prejudices of the time. Yet others told stories in factual, social campaigning styles that evoked sympathy in the readers.

Some paradata narratives appeared to function to position the interviewers as good fieldworkers. Some of these were presented as direct reportage, demonstrating efforts to obtain a complex household history and arrangements. In one case, the interviewer presented four voices in the paradata, three for 'informants' and their own, separated into different colours of ink and kinds of writing. In another case, the interviewer presented contrasting narratives of themselves as a competent, diligent interviewer and the informant as incompetent and difficult. In some cases interviewers staked claims to thoroughness and expertise, defending themselves against the possibility that the coders would disagree with them.

Since the narrative analyses were conducted on interviews conducted by different interviewers, the POP study cannot comment on the extent to which interviewers had particular and consistent narrative styles across interviews.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues were raised for both the PinUK research and the POP research. From the POP team perspective, the issue is that interviewers could not have foreseen the possibility of having their accounts analysed and so could not give consent to be included as participants. For the PinUK study, the ethics issues raised include the following:

- the potential impact of interviewers taking an unsympathetic or sceptical approach;
- whether consent was freely given and fully informed, particularly where follow-up interviewers were employed to convert refusals. Some paradata indicates that informants did not always understand why the interviewers had come;
- some paradata indicates that interviewers were constructing themselves as thorough because they had overridden interviewees' reluctance to continue answering questions. This raises issues of how ethics and data quality may be linked, in that some paradata indicated that interviewers persisted until informants responded in some way.

It is important not to take an anachronistic view here in that these ethical issues were not generally recognised by the social science community in the 1960s. However, they have some resonance for contemporary survey researchers.

Early and anticipated impacts

The POP study has met its aim and objectives. It has added value to ESRC investments and produced more outputs than anticipated, through the successful bid for an ESRC Cross-Investment project: *Poverty in the UK: Advancing Paradata Analysis and Open Access* (NCRM Hub Southampton / NCRM NOVELLA Institute of Education / Townsend Centre Bristol), and links to UKDA's 'Digital Futures', that has enhanced and extended the collaborative project. Two further additional outputs from POP are the index of the survey areas, codes and research team and field interviewers produced for the UKDA PinUK online archive and collaboration with the UKDA Digital Futures initiative to photograph and digitise the PinUK booklets.

To date, POP has published short articles for the *ESRC NCRM MethodsNews* (Winter 2012) and the Social Policy Association newsletter (2014). A Working Paper for the NCRM website on how to undertake narrative analysis of PinUK survey booklets is currently in preparation and journal articles on the relationship between the typology of the paradata and the narrative analysis and on ethics are planned. There have been POP presentations at the NCRM Annual Centre meetings in 2012, 2013, 2014 and a conference paper at the paradata conference organised by POP and Leicester University researchers (Leicester University, December 2013). There will also be a session on POP for the 6th ESRC Research Methods Festival, in July 2014.

A Community of Interest meeting has been held to discuss the ways in which analysis of qualitative data may give insights into issues important to quantitative analysis of paradata. A second COI meeting is planned in conjunction with the cross-investment project.

In summary

The POP research has been important in clarifying how survey practice and understandings of poverty shift over time. It has also made more visible the skills and commitments of the interviewers who collect the data and that these can impact on the data collected, introducing differences into survey responses. These issues continue to be of relevance to contemporary survey research.