Methods podcast transcript: Jane Gray on researching social change over time

Catherine McDonald 0:00
Hello and welcome to Methods a podcast from the National Centre for Research Methods. In this series as part of the EU Horizon 2020 funded Youth Life project, we're looking at how researchers can do better longitudinal research on youth transitions. I'm Catherine McDonald, and today I'm talking to Jane Gray, Professor of Sociology at the Social Sciences Institute at Maynooth University Ireland. Jane is the programme leader for the Irish Qualitative Data Archive and played a key role in the development of the Digital Repository of Ireland. And her research looks at families, households and social change. I began by asking her what drew her to those areas of study?

Jane Gray 0:40
Well, I started out being interested in how unpaid labour contributed to the development of industrial capitalism. So my earliest research going back to my PhD days was on the domestic linen industry. And I was interested in gender divisions of labour, and the contribution of unpaid work to the form that social and economic development took. And then following on from that, I became involved in a research project on suburban development in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger period, that period of economic growth in the 1990s and early 2000s, when there was so much suburban development in Ireland, and it really became apparent how important standard family relationships and how they varied across the life course, contributed to the form of suburban development. And then following on from that, again, I became involved in a major infrastructural, qualitative research project, which was called Life Histories and Social Change. And that project interviewed people from three birth cohorts in Irish society, and we used life story interviews as part of the research design. And again, that really central to my work on the project has been family relationships, intergenerational relationships, relationships of extended kin, and trying to understand the connection between those processes that occur at a micro level within our everyday lives and how they affect big patterns of social change, such as transformation, for example.

Catherine McDonald 2:13
And your research is longitudinal in the sense that it looks back, isn't it?

Jane Gray 2:19
In the main, that's true, the life histories and social change projects that I was just talking about, involves asking people in three birth cohorts within our society. So we interviewed people who are born before 1935, we interviewed people who are born between 1945 and 1954. And we interviewed people born between 1965 and 1974. And we asked them to tell the story of their lives up until the time of interview. Now, what's interesting about that project is that all of those research participants had previously taken part in a prospect of quantitative longitudinal panel, and the research design. While it is retrospective, it allows us to incorporate some elements of a longitudinal design, because we're able to compare life stories across the three birth cohorts. And we're also able to situate people's life stories within the quantitative data provided from the earlier study. On top of that, we also collected some formal data on people's life histories, we collected some event history data, and we also collected some social network data from each of the participants. So it's a mixed in, in a sense, it's a mixed method study design, but we really focus on the retrospective life narratives and life stories. Now, having said that, I was also involved in a European research project called Rescue, which was studying people's responses to the financial crisis and how they coped and adapted and showed resilience in response to the crisis. And that study had a kind of partial prospective longitudinal design insofar as we returned, and we interviewed a subset of the people who took part in the first wave of interviews, but with a fairly short longitudinal window. So at the moment, I'm hoping to find funding to actually go back and re-interview some of the original participants in the life histories and social change study who have very graciously granted us permission to recontact them and we interview them if that funding and those opportunities become available.

Catherine McDonald 4:28
I hope you get that funding because it sounds absolutely fascinating. So in our introduction, I mentioned your involvement with the Irish Qualitative Data Archive, and the Digital Repository of Ireland. Can you explain to us why you feel these initiatives are so important?

Jane Gray 4:45
Well, they're very important for a number of reasons. First of all, because they enable researchers to meet their obligations to make their data open and accessible for reuse by other researchers. I think they're important to especially the qualitative data archive and the ability to disseminate qualitative data. It's very important first of all, to ensure that kind of investment that funders and research participants and researchers have made in carrying out this research is maximised. So, formerly a lot of effort went into doing qualitative research projects that might have, you know, emanated in a couple of publications. And then all of the time and effort that went into collecting those data was essentially lost. And I think now, with initiatives like IQDA and the Digital Repository of Ireland, it becomes possible for data to have a second life to be potentially reused multiple times by other researchers, it allows for comparisons to take place, you know, across jurisdictions across studies over time. And I think for me, one of the things that is really important about it is that it raises the profile of qualitative research, it raises the seriousness of qualitative research and highlights how important it is within the public domain, and perhaps also, you know, ensures that our practices become as rigorous and transparent as possible. So I think there are a range of excellent reasons why these initiatives are so important. And then the last one, I think, which is not to be underestimated is the contribution that it makes to the historical record that these are, you know, in the latest recent social change study, many of our participants in the oldest cohort, those born before 1935, are already passing away and their voices, the way they use language, the stories they tell, the worlds that they grew up in, are being lost, potentially, except that their voices are still there and able to be heard by people into the future. So I think there's a lot of value in these kinds of initiatives.

Catherine McDonald 6:50
And that leads us on quite nicely actually to talking about the relationship between theory and qualitative research. How do you view that relationship?

Jane Gray 6:59
Well, I actually don't really think that there is a profound difference in the relationship between theory and qualitative or quantitative or any other kind of research. So I think qualitative research has value, both in elaborating, evaluating, testing theory and also in developing new theoretical ideas. So I understand that it's frequently argued that perhaps the main role of qualitative research is to generate new theoretical ideas, but I don't personally believe that qualitative research is necessarily confined to that role. So I think it's iterative and dynamic the same as it is with any other methodology.

Catherine McDonald 7:36
And you mentioned earlier, when you were talking about the various studies that you've been involved with, that you engaged in mixed methods research, is there a model or a best plan of research methodology that you prefer to adopt? And if so, why?

Jane Gray 7:53
Well, my preference is definitely to try to bring together rich qualitative data with what I would call more formal data forms. So data such as social network shedules, or the event history calendar, it says we used in the Life Histories and Social Change Study. In the Rescue study, we use lifelines. And also, in another study that I was involved in The Enabling Resilience Study, we use both lifelines and echo maps. So I think there's a lot of value in bringing together the unstructured life narratives with these kinds of formal instruments to allow us to situate the stories that people tell us within sort of more formal accounts of chronology for example, or place or the web of social relationships that are embedded in and I think bringing those two forms of data together is really generative and rich in terms of allowing us to develop really interesting analysis and also to facilitate a good comparison that I think that's another reason why I think that kind of research design is really effective.

Catherine McDonald 9:04
And what sorts of research questions or issues do you see as best suitable for qualitative longitudinal research?

Jane Gray 9:11
Well, I think questions about qualitative longitudinal research designs are particularly valuable for you know, getting at mechanisms dynamics, or understanding the intersection, ideally, between what's going on in people's interpersonal lives and the big patterns of social change that are occurring in history within society. So for me, that's the sort of goal, the aspiration if you like, qualitative longitudinal research of the kind that I do, which is really looking at as much as possible fairly long term patterns of social change, and trying to understand how individual lives, interpersonal relationships really intersect with those bigger sort of macro social questions.

Catherine McDonald 9:58
And do you have an approach to comparison and generalizability? And if you do what, you know, can you share that with us? What is it?

Jane Gray 10:06
I think in most of my research, I have tended to adopt the sort of strategy of sampling by range, which means trying to ensure a diverse range of participants within a particular population, and to ensure that they're included in the study. Now, that's not I mean, I think there's a wonderful article by Mario Small about, I think it's called, "How many cases do I need?", I should go back, Catherine and find the proper reference for you. But he talks about how it's very important that we don't make the mistake of thinking that well, because I've got one, you know, minority female, and one, you know, heterosexual male and one sort of member of an ethnic minority, that we're somehow generating data that's representative in the statistical sense, because clearly, we're not. But by maximising the diversity within our samples, I think we can try to ensure that we develop hypotheses and explanations and arguments that facilitate and enable ongoing comparative work, if that makes sense. And then I suppose the other strategy that I use goes back to what we were talking about earlier, the idea of using formal methods to collect information that helps to situate people within certain social contexts. And again, it's very important not to make the mistake that this somehow makes the data representative in that statistical sense, but it does allow us to be intelligent about the kinds of comparisons that we're making. Now, I think that this is really a very important research question for the kind of work that I do. And I'm drawn to some extent and, and I think it's something that, particularly within more macro sociological work, for example, in political science, they've made a lot of progress on comparison in this way. And one of the things that I'm interested in, is bringing some of those ideas into making comparisons at the level of individual lives within more qualitative longitudinal research design, focusing on biographies. Again, as I mentioned, I think there's potential for us to think more about what we're doing when we're making comparisons, and how we can use comparative approaches to develop better kinds of arguments.

Catherine McDonald 12:21
And now we've been talking quite a bit in this series about attrition and the problem with attrition and retaining your participants when engaged in longitudinal research. I guess the majority of your research is retrospective, that isn't an issue for you, or am I wrong?

Jane Gray 12:38
Well, funnily enough, as one of the things that has come up for us is people withdrawing from the study even quite some time after they had originally consented to participate. That hasn't happened to a large extent, it's not that significant numbers of people have done so. But there is always the potential for people, and it is very much their right. And we tell them that to withdraw from the study if they wish. And part of the process of asking people, for example, if we could recontact them to interview them again, most, you know, we had really a surprising number of people agreeing that yes, they would like to be contacted. But we also had one or two people who wanted to be removed from the whole study. So we actually had to withdraw cases from the archives. So that does happen as well, even within the kind of research design that I've been involved with.

Catherine McDonald 13:29
And do you have any tips about how to retain people or how to learn or whether persuade is a word I should use? But how to encourage people to take part?

Jane Gray 13:38
Well, I think it probably doesn't apply very much to the kind of research that I have done. But I would say that, you know, very clearly, the more that you can really involve people in the research to, you know, keep them informed to assure them that their contribution is valuable to make them interested in what it is that you're doing. I think clearly, that's critical to keeping people involved and to retaining them.

Catherine McDonald 14:03
So moving back into sort of the process of your study, once you have the data, how do you go about analysing it? And why do you take the approach you take?

Jane Gray 14:14
I think I've used a range of different approaches to analysis. I do think that really, I often try to think about cases, we've been talking about that a lot, you know, that question, what is this a case of? So trying to understand, looking at each of the contributions to the study, you know, where do they fit within the overall population of people that we're studying? And try to perhaps situate them within that population in terms of where they fit within the kind of wider social world and social context. So that's one approach that I take, but I also take the approach of just jumping in and sort of reading people's interviews, you know, more inductive approach developing themes and concepts as I go along. So, I suppose see I use a range of different approaches. I've also used sort of somewhat formal approaches trying to cluster responses, according to the kinds of answers that they give. Recently, I found the work that some of the colleagues, I think, in the Youth Life project, Susie Weller, and Emma Davidson and Rosalind Edwards and Lynn Jamieson and their work on big qualitative data recently, I've been finding the approach that they've suggested to be quite helpful. In terms of thinking about assemblages of data. I'm really interested in this idea, how can we bring together qualitative and qualitative longitudinal data from multiple studies and try to, they have some very interesting suggestions about how that might be possible. And I found that really interesting and generative to do as well. So really, yes, it's just trying to, I suppose, and maybe some people listening to this will think I am a bad qualitative researcher, because perhaps in a way, I'm more of a comparative researcher, I'm trying to figure out, you know, what is this a case of? And how can I compare the narratives and stories that people tell across different social settings and across different social groups? So that tends to be the question that I'm always asking, when I start reading transcripts, and analysing people's stories. I don't know if that's a good answer. But that's what I do.

Catherine McDonald 16:24
So hearing you talk there about, you know, having the data and just jumping in, I literally pictured you jumping in, you know, having all this data at your fingertips. It makes me want to ask though, do you have a favourite part of the process? Or do you enjoy it all?

Jane Gray 16:40
That's a very interesting question. I often find it quite daunting, to be honest, the initial sort of reading and coding of transcripts, I find reading people's whole stories quite emotionally draining, I have to say sometimes as well. So to some extent, the part that I find most comfortable is when I can attain some distance from the stories that people are telling, when I can start to organise the different codes and themes and categories into a sort of more kind of abstract assemblage of ideas before trying to develop a sociological argument from them. So that's a very personal response. So I suppose that diving in is the scary part and the demanding part, and sometimes the emotionally draining part. And to some extent, the more enjoyable part for me. And it's probably my personality is when I can move past that to start thinking about the stories more abstractly and analysing them more formally.

Catherine McDonald 17:40
So that's really interesting. And then I guess it's not surprising to hear that it's emotionally draining when you have the data in front of you. Because obviously, it goes without saying these are people's real lives that you're dealing

with. Sort of on that, have you ever faced any particular ethical dilemmas? And if so, how have you dealt with them?

Jane Gray 18:00
So I should point out that the research projects that I've been involved with have all involved multiple colleagues. So for example, we've talked a lot about Life Histories and Social Change. And my colleague Sean Ó Riain and Aileen O'Carroll at Maynooth University, were also lead investigators on that project. And we continue to work together on the project. And I suppose some of the ethical issues that have arisen, the main one, I think, has been questions about people's capacity to give consent. And this is for me, personally, I'm not speaking for my colleagues here now,. I always feel this as being something of a dilemma. So sometimes, people will give consent to do the interview for their interview to be used for research sometimes also for to be archived. And perhaps they, you might have questions subsequently about, you know, how well they understood how the data would be used, about the kind of information that they shared. And also, particularly when we were working with older people, for example, about their capacity really to give the consent for the data to be used. And so sometimes you feel you have to use your judgement about whether or not transcript is suitable for archiving, for example, for reuse, or whether it shouldn't be included in the research database. And for me, personally, though, there is a flip side to that dilemma, which is that it's really important that we're not patronising people that you know that we acknowledge people's ability and right to volunteer information to participate if they wish. So sometimes I worry that we become so concerned about ethics and safeguarding, of course, those are really important concerns that, you know, it's really important, on the other hand, not to be patronising to participants to acknowledge their right to choose whether or not they want to participate and what they want to contribute. So for me, that's the kind of ethical conundrum that I think often comes up with the kind of in depth qualitative research that I've been doing. You also suggest what advice we would give, I don't think that there is ever going to be a clear rule about any of these kinds of questions. The best advice I can give is to have people to talk through with them and to share ideas and to collectively come up with the best decision that you can make. And of course, now, we have much more supports available within universities from research ethics committees, research offices, librarians, specialising in research. So I think compared to when I started out, the kind of resources that are available for people in navigating these kinds of ethical questions are much wider than they used to be. So that's all good.

Catherine McDonald 20:44
When it comes to writing up your research, again, is there any advice that you would give?

Jane Gray 20:49
I suppose the main advice really is to try to think about where the research is going to be published and how it's going to be disseminated. So how you write up your research will probably vary depending on you know, whether you're preparing a journal article, whether you're preparing a scholarly monograph, whether you're preparing, you know, a report or other kinds of findings for a wider audience. So I think it's very hard to come up with a kind of general answer to that question, because different kinds of audiences will want to see different things in your write up. And so I think you have to really think about the audience is the broadest advice that I can give, particularly when it comes to academic publishing, trying to find the right outlet for your research, you know, where it's going to be most favourable to the kind of research findings that you've generated and the kinds of research that you've done?

Catherine McDonald 21:42
Absolutely. And I guess, understand the audience that you're writing for?

Jane Gray 21:46
Exactly. Precisely.

Catherine McDonald 21:49
So one final question, then Jane, what would you say to the early career version of yourself?

Jane Gray 21:56
This is a very interesting question. I think it really depends on whether or not you're focusing on strategic career goals, or whether it really comes down to the passion that you have for for what you're doing. And both are obviously important. If you're being strategic, if I were being going back to my early career self and being strategic, I would have done a better job of making connections, of developing networks. I would have chosen a research question that was part of a growing topic of interest rather than one which has turned out was kind of reaching the end of its cycle, I would have been much more strategic about, you know, the places that I studied, the time period that I studied, the connections that I made in my career in terms of you know, who I was working with, because all of those things are really important if your main goal is to be really successful, as a scholar, and as an academic. On the other hand, I don't think there's any point in doing what we do if you don't have a passion for the questions that you're asking, and for the kinds of research that you're carrying out. So another part of me would say that that's really, really vitally important, because honestly, we could be doing something else. But sometimes, unfortunately, the questions that you're asking the research that you're doing, might not capture the scholarly imagination might not capture the public imagination. So you've got to work really hard to continue to believe in it yourself and to continue to drive it forward and to carry it into the future. So I think the advice I'd give to an early version of myself is to maybe try to do a little bit of both, but honestly, to continue to work on the things that are really important to you personally, because that's at the end of the day, the thing that makes us do what we do.

Catherine McDonald 23:45
My thanks to Professor Gray. The Youth Life project is funded by the EU horizon 2020 Research and Innovation programme, and it's a Twinning initiative between the Universities of Southampton, Tallinn and Bamberg, and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute. You can find out more about the project at euqualimix.ncrm.ac.uk. This was a Research Podcast production. Thank you for listening and remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts.

Further Reading

Small, M. L. (2009). `How many cases do I need?': On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. Ethnography, 10(1), 5–38.