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The Qualitative Longitudinal Research. An application to job insecurity in the life course.

Abstract

What can say a qualitative longitudinal analysis about changes in the lives of workers, about the historical processes associated with them? To what extent is related the individual level of these narratives with social transformation processes? The aim of this paper will be showcase an exemplary study of Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) from the analysis of labour markets' insecurity and its ramifications for social uncertainty, based on interviews and ethnographic work, and aim to further codify principles that could guide this methodological innovation. To get this strategy, we focused on three methodological axes: life course perspective- trajectories analysis and cohort analysis. All these three developments are elements of a paradigm change in the social science toward the greater primacy of context, temporality, and process, in the studies of individuals, groups, and social organizations.

Introduction

There is no doubt that qualitative research of many varieties has flourished on a global scale over the past twenty years or so. In this context, qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) represents an innovative area of approaches to empirical studies on the frontier of social science scholarship. In these sense, the most important contribution of QLR is how these techniques are enable to identify the meaning of temporal changes across lives and groups, and the exploration of how people interpret and respond to such

(social) changes. Nevertheless, because of the novelty of this line of work, it is truth that a coherent methodology underlying QLR remains to be fully articulated.

The aim of this paper will be showcase an exemplary study of QLR from the analysis of labour markets' insecurity and its ramifications for social uncertainty, based on interviews and ethnographic work, and aim to further codify principles that could guide this methodological innovation. The presentation will speak to multiple traditions, specially, life course perspective, as well as research lines that intersect with the study of trajectories and cohort analysis. This paper is part of a greater research about cumulative risks over the life course in Latin America. This greater research addresses the question of how institutional arrangements, the heterogeneity of occupational careers and individual conditions, shape the experience of job insecurities as well as the impact of social uncertainty on the life course. In order to answer those questions, we analysed the links between conditions and perceptions of job insecurity during labor trajectories.

The paper is arranged as follows: 1. A brief of the background and theoretical framework of the study; 2. The main methodological issues; 3. The specific research methodology; 4. Some of the findings; 5. And final thoughts about this methodological innovation to identify and explore some unresolved problems surrounding qualitative longitudinal researchs.

1. Background and theoretical framework

One of the most important features of the great majority of present-day globalized societies is that labor and social uncertainty are increasing and becoming more widespread as a result of the economic and cultural transformations that occurred during recent decades. The fact that labor insecurities are more pervasive casts doubts on the main regulations issued by the State, the labor market, and social organizations which had guaranteed access to minimum levels of social security to protect the livelihoods of a major portion of the population.

But during recent decades, global labor markets have undergone profound transformations in their composition and dynamics. The internationalization of economies has changed not only the kind but also the nature of labor relations, giving rise to a new type of work: not full-time, not protected, not regular, and not even salaried.

Recently, many studies have tried to explain the impacts and consequences of those transformations. The debate on informality, new marginality, social exclusion, vulnerability or precariousness attests to this. The main hypothesis of those studies is that these transformations are expressed in a fundamental modification of the social inclusion process by means of precariousness and individualization of work.

Increasing uncertainty about economic and social developments is a definitive feature of globalization in the majorities of economies. However, this does not impact all regions, states, organizations or individuals in the same way. There are institutional settings and social structures, historically grown and country-specific, that determines the degree to which people are affected by rising job insecurity. In this sense, we claim that there are path dependent developments within countries that modulate the relationship between job insecurity process and worker's (objective and subjective) life course.

2. Methodological issues

The analytical scheme of the research includes a comparative analysis at the contextual level –according to institutional and cultural differences between countries–, at the organizational level (differences in the size and kind of a firm and the sector to which it belongs), and at the individual level (differences, for example, in life course stage, human capital or gender). This comparative analysis includes two Latin American countries from two different classical welfare regimes: Argentina, which represents a “liberal regime” and Mexico, as an example of a “family- oriented regime”. Both countries differ with respect to the nature of their employment relations between employers and workers and they produce different national variations of occupational structures. Besides, for an understanding of historical differences within each society we compare three cohorts internally. To get this comparative strategy, we focused on three methodological axes: life course perspective- trajectories analysis and cohort analysis.

2.1 Trajectories Analysis

Trajectories are socially available ways of being, or, in another words, they are sequences of roles and experiences. In these sense, they have a historical- temporal component but also a methodological component. As such, it is a tool that supports the representation of meanings (methodological component) located in one's own

biography (historical-temporal component). The reconstruction of trajectories allows us to connect representations of life (narratives, biographical forms) with social reality (actions, practices), both anchored in structural situations.

To do this, the main components of this reconstruction are the transitions in the life course as moments of biographical changes. In general, transitions often involve changes in status or identity, and thus open up opportunities for behavioral and social change. At the same time, these changes are considered from the bifurcation of individual, social and historical temporalities. In this sense, the most important thing to consider in trajectories analysis for qualitative longitudinal research is the constant juxtaposition of these three time frames: the time of ego, the time of his position in the world and the time the world prints on him. The complex interplay of time, historical and situational context, and individual agency is the concern of trajectories analysis. All these concepts (trajectories, transitions, events, timing) reflect the temporal nature of lives, where time operates at both a sociohistorical and personal level.

If we think that the perceptions and experiences of insecurity have changed (increased and diversified), it should be noticed, nowadays, more unstable labor trajectories, with multiple transitions between different employments; more episodes of long-term unemployment combined with a permanent presence of precarious and informal jobs; and, in general, life-histories that show some regularity and permanence of job instability in the trajectories of workers. To do so, it has to be considered a diachronic dimension of the problem: as a process rather than a particular state of situation.

So, the timing of job insecurity is a nodal condition for an empirical understanding, to the extent that its main properties are associated with the discontinuity, irregularity and instability of working conditions. Job insecurity process force to think social dimensions from temporal dimensions because is the regularity and persistence of instability that structure its shape. By observing the trajectories, identifying the transitions from one job to another, recognizing the events that make up turning points in each, it becomes feasible to unravel the modulation of the time in the process of job insecurity.

In brief, the analysis of trajectories is important for this qualitative longitudinal research because they incorporate the temporal dimension of the social phenomenon.

2.2 Qualitative Cohort Analysis

The second axis of this methodological strategy of QLR is the cohort analysis. From the perspective of the life course, how people think the social world around them may depend on what was happening in the world at the time they were growing up. There is always a shared cultural identity that sets them apart from other generations. In this sense, cohort consists of a specific age group of people who have shared a common historical experience during the same interval of time. Cohorts, in effect, link age and historical time.

One hypothesis of research indicates that the experiences of job insecurity have changed in the last decades from structural changes in the labor market, especially those related to the accumulation model and the integration of regional economies into globalized patterns of development. To observe these changes, the main criterion of analysis has been the identification of cohorts to distinguish three key moments in the history of social and economic transformations of each country:

1. A first cohort of workers who was born in the classical period of import substitution in LA (from the fifties to the seventies). These workers consolidated their labor trajectories in a moment of great economic expansions and finished their occupational careers in a period of economic crisis and important changes in the pattern of accumulation.
2. A second cohort of workers who was born during the eighties' crisis and which the consolidation of their occupational careers occurred in the new model of accumulation.
3. And a third cohort of workers who "consolidated" their occupational careers in the "crisis" of this new model of accumulation.

If there is any temporal change in the experiences of job insecurity, each of these cohorts of analysis should mean differently their perceptions of uncertainty.

In brief, while trajectory analysis is important because of the temporal dimension of longitudinal studies, cohort analysis is important because of the comparative dimension (of change) of this QLR.

2.3 Life course analysis

Finally, the third axis of this methodological strategy is based on the life course perspective. We view life course both as a theoretical orientation and as a methodological strategy. In this sense, the main theoretical relationship between life course and QLR is that individual lives are linked to social change. Through this tool we tried to unravel the changes in the way of experiencing job insecurity understood as a process that is taking shape along occupational careers. This type of observation implies, therefore, a processual, dynamic, longitudinal and retrospective understanding of job insecurity.

All these three developments (trajectories analysis, cohort analysis and life course perspective) are elements of a paradigm change in the social science toward the greater primacy of context, temporality, and process, in the studies of individuals, groups, and social organizations. So, once clarified the three major axes of this methodological strategy, let see the research methodology itself.

3. Research methodology

The study is based on extensive life-history interviews with workers in two cities of Mexico and Argentina of three cohorts. During a complete year (2009) fifty-eight in-depth interviews were collected (twenty-nine in each contexts of study) based on a flexible guide of topics. Each person was interviewed two times, in three-to four hours sessions using open-ended questions. In addition to the interviews, we also constructed a demographic history for each individual. We then linked this sequential information into a time-life line, reconstructing the individual's life history chronologically, in relation to age and historical time, which enables us to compare the different life trajectories of the sample. Regards to the sample and given the methodological design of research, it was necessary to collect information on greater heterogeneity in terms of employment status, job position, occupation, social background, age, education, income, gender, etc. Our interviews therefore involved the same combination of sex, socioeconomic backgrounds, work conditions and intergenerational quotes for each context.

The interviews were conducted through what can be loosely described as a narrative biographical method to explore participant's careers over their life course, with a focus on labor trajectory. This involved asking participants to map out their entire work history and subsequently focusing on key moments in their career and social,

historical and biographical timing related to those events. In this sense, we used biographical narratives of career histories as an anchor to explore changes in insecurity perceptions and experiences across generations (or cohorts). This primary source of qualitative data enables us to construct trajectories' typologies, which, at the same time, enables the identification and meaning of temporal change in job insecurity across workers and exploration of how people interpret and respond to such change in the labor world.

4. The analysis process

The next question of the project surrounded about the operationalization of job insecurity. And a feasible and practical way to observe the concept as a process that takes into account the timing of various events is through the observation of the duration of certain working conditions during the entire trajectory of workers.

So, Firstly we consider whether the occupation time is greater or less than the unemployment time along the entire trajectory. If there is a time of unemployment, in turn, is considered the frequency (how many times has the worker been unemployed) and duration (how long he has been unemployed).

Second, during the time of occupation, we considered how many occupational transitions had the worker during his career and how long has each of them.

Third, we took into account if the time of formality is higher at the time of precariousness. For these, we considered: income level, social protection and indefinite work contract (for salary workers).

Finally, as we wanted to weigh the direction of the process towards higher or lower levels of insecurity, we consider whether the majority of these events occurred in the first or in the second half of the length of occupational careers.

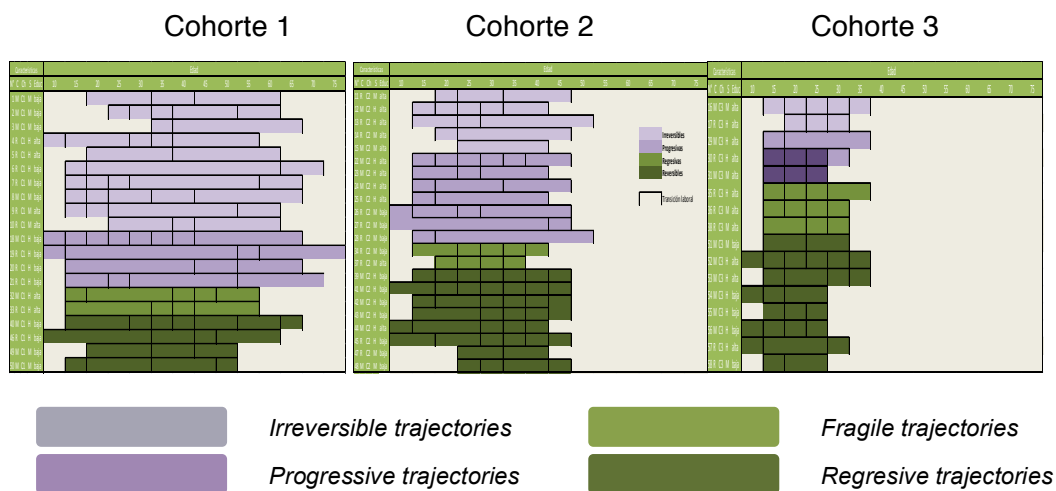
In general, there are four types of occupational careers that indicate the metamorphosis can experience the trajectory in terms of occupational transitions according to the combination of all these previous variables:

1. *Irreversible trajectories*: when the total time of the occupational career is more stable than unstable.
2. *Progressive trajectories*: when the total time of the occupational career is more stable than unstable but the greatest amount of instability events occurred during the first half of the length of the trajectories.
3. *Regressive or fragile trajectories*: when the total time of the occupational career is more stable than unstable (or the same) but the highest amount

of instability events occurred during the second half of the length of the trajectories.

4. Reversible trajectories: when the total time of the occupational career is more unstable than stable during the entire trajectory.

From the empirical location of these constructed types in each cohort the following results of analysis were found:



The main result of this figure is the shift (or transition) of irreversible trajectories in the first cohort of analysis (the oldest) to reversible trajectories (and therefore much more insecure) in the last cohort (the youngest). That is, youth are increasingly vulnerable to insecurity across both countries and, probably, the greatest losers of globalization: what this kind of trajectories said about these changes? How people view their own lives and how they perceive changes in their individual life courses?

5. Some findings

The analysis in Argentina and Mexico reveal significant similarities and differences in job insecurity perceptions.

The first response that becomes evident in interviews between young workers, although much more clearly in Mexico than in Argentina, is workers' familiarity with social transformations. Changes take place, but are not perceived; risks are unwanted,

but are taken for granted; uncertainty occurs, but without turning into an historical disaster.

Despite this generalization, we can note marked differences in ways of coping with job insecurity in each of these countries. In Young workers' discourse, references to institutions are much stronger in Argentina than in Mexico, albeit those institutions have been greatly weakened in recent years (or perhaps precisely due to that).

Argentine Young workers define work security in terms of principles of social solidarity and, thus, in their narratives, social protection becomes a claim for rights. In Mexico, on the other hand, despite a strengthening of institutions compared to a weakening in the case of Argentina, in the accounts of workers of the third cohort, we fail to come across the idea of work security as a social right, but rather as an individual aspiration.

This difference in the manner of perceiving job insecurity between young people is directly associated with the type of relationship each of these countries establishes between economy and society. Historically, Mexico has had very weak social protection systems in comparison to Argentina. In the former, we find a prevalence of job insecurities associated with informality and poverty that are mainly internalized in families through the principle of reciprocity. That is because in Argentina, cohorts are less kinship oriented and have had a greater exposure to institutional agencies over their lives. So, they are inclined to view public agencies as sources of support than cohorts in Mexico, who had relied more exclusively on kinship assistance.

In both societies there is a tendency towards the individualization of job insecurity. Particularly among younger and male workers, job insecurity is experienced in a personalized manner. But Individualization impacts differently in each country. Unlike their Mexican counterparts, Young Argentine workers construct their job identities more intensely via continuous returns to the past. The failure of institutions to guarantee social security appears in the narratives as a demand for social rights, with minimal levels of individual responsibility. The legacy of government social policies and of the welfare regime modulates workers' expectations and does not allow these social protections to disappear from social representations, where they are still collective aspirations. These narratives reveal that life course patterns that were once relatively standard are now crumbling. Perhaps due to this, experiences involving job insecurity in that country entail a greater sensation of being unprotected or of desolation than in Mexico, where we more readily note that historically, job insecurity has been taken for granted.

In Mexico, the internalization of insecurity is much more direct, and this occurs through socially constructed guilt and sense of responsibility (or the well-known phenomenon of “risk privatization”): “It’s my fault because I didn’t stay in school long enough”.

Certainly, trends toward the individualization of the life course clearly bring new freedoms but they also, especially in Latin America, bring new responsibilities and insecurities. In this scenario, personal failures, in particular, become no one’s fault but one’s own.

In this individualization process, we also find important differences between cohorts. In the older cohorts, workers attribute their job insecurity processes to external economic factors. Between them, the most significant turning point in their occupational career occurred at the end of their trajectories, just before the retirement. At this point, the opportunity structure changed as a result of changes in the accumulation model. Consequently, their chances for post-retirement employment diminished considerably, rendering them helpless.

On the other hand, members of the younger cohorts tend to attribute greater significance to internal events and to family conditions as causing job insecurity. Their main turning points occurred at the beginning of the labor trajectory. So, these workers had experienced greater disruptions in their work lives over their entire career. For them, interchangeable bouts of employment and unemployment or frequent job changes are the normal and expected life course pattern. The younger cohorts do not view sporadic periods of unemployment as major turning points. A continuous occupational career is rarely part of their expectations or reality. In working class youth, both in Argentina and Mexico at twenty first century, “disorderly careers” in which people experience frequent discontinuities over their work lives, are considered normal.

All these reflect a long-term historical process leading to the individualization of the life course. That means that the experience of time at work is more contingent and less predictable than in other spheres and periods.

Conclusions

In both societies there is a tendency towards the individualization of job insecurity. Particularly among younger and male workers, job insecurity is experienced in a personalized manner. But Individualization impacts differently in each country. In this individualization process, we also find important differences between cohorts.

This preliminary comparison of job insecurity within a life course perspective in Argentina and Mexico reveals considerable differences among cohorts in each society, as well as similarities that cut across both countries. While cultural differences in the subjective construction of job insecurity are significant, the common experience of cohorts in response to shared historical transformations may transcend them. In both communities, the location of a cohort in historical time was the most significant factor in identifying its members' perceptions. So, the similarities as well as the differences can be explained from a historical and cultural perspective. They are, thus the products of the interaction of time and place.

In both contexts, for the three cohorts, labor trajectories were shaped by external economic and social constraints imposed by the crisis. These external events affected labor trajectories not only at the point in their lives when people first encountered them: they indirectly shaped the subsequent flow of occupational careers over their life course.

Finally, what can say a qualitative longitudinal analysis about changes in the lives of workers, about the historical processes associated with them? To what extent is related the individual level of these narratives with social transformation processes?

Firstly it is a qualitative analysis. And qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. In this sense, this kind of longitudinal analysis should be subjected to the same general criteria of quality and validity posed by those methods where samples are selective, teoretical, purposeful, etc. and not tempted to evaluate their problems in accordance with the requirements of quantitative analysis.

Second, it is a longitudinal perspective. This involves observing the diachronic dimension of an object of study, through follow-up (especially in terms of changes and continuities) in time. For this type of analysis we must take into account two types of basic considerations. The first is the age of entry into an event and the second one is its duration. Taking into account both aspects, it is posible to control the influence of age on the duration of the trajectory.

Third, we are using a retrospective technique. This implies, among other things, that we are working exclusively with survivors of each cohort. Therefore, it is, somehow, a selection bias to the extent that we considered, exclusively, people who survived in the local labor market, not knowing what happened to those individuals in each of the cohort who died, who migrated or who left the labor market. The cohort members excluded from the sample, for example those eliminated by migration, usually

have not had the same behavior to the phenomenon under study as the other members of the cohort (survivors).

Fourthly, there is the problem of right censored data. That is, while the first cohort of the study can be seen for thirty years, the last cohort (the youngest) is watching only for an average of fifteen years. This means that the time of exposure of the phenomenon is different in each case. Furthermore, it is impossible to know what will happen to these kids when they will reach the same ages as the previous cohorts. That is why we need, at the same time, an intra cohort perspective, an inter-cohort perspective and a cross-sectional view of all the age strata.

As a fifth warning, the cohort analysis is permanently a juxtaposition of age, cohort and period effects. The age-period-cohort model recognizes that these are all important causal factors. Generally speaking, it is necessary to concede that social change could be due to the operation of all three of these factors at once without knowing, which is more powerful.

Finally, the retrospective observation relies on the memory of respondents. This implies a central question: How much past, a history life supports? Unlike the claims of some methodological perspectives, this research does not consider that the recurrence to the memory may generate inaccuracies. Respondents do, in every interview, a work of memory management, according to their possibilities and freedom of communication. As such, it matters what they say, how they say and why they say (like all their denials and silences), and in that sense, the criterion of truth / falsification of the story becomes fruitless.

In this study, we anchored our methodological strategy onto three analytical axes of LQR: cohort analysis; life course perspective and trajectories analysis. Is that the best way to Access to LQR?

Qualitative longitudinal research deviates in several crucial ways from existing work on the field of social change (and globalization). First, it takes an empirical approach. Among the vast amount of social change studies in sociology, there are few attempts at constructing testable hypotheses or systematic empirical examinations of how these changes impact the life course of individuals. Qualitative longitudinal research allows us to generate clear hypotheses and empirical evidence about how social change impacts the lives of people.

A second difference is that qualitative longitudinal research brings the individual back into social change. This approach shows that it is essential to combine individual level models of action with institutional explanations modulating by the complex angle

of timing. It forces us to develop a multi level temporal conception that links global transformation to impact at the institutional and individual level, at the same time.

All these issues provide a future agenda and allow us to rethink and codify complex principles that could guide this methodological innovation.

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