

## THREE

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4 **Time in mixed methods longitudinal**  
5 **research: working across written**  
6 **narratives and large scale panel**  
7 **survey data to investigate attitudes**  
8 **to volunteering**  
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17 **Introduction**  
18

19 The aim of this chapter is to explore the methodological and analytical  
20 challenges thrown up by an ongoing study that has been reusing and  
21 combining longitudinal qualitative narrative and quantitative survey  
22 data to research individual attitudes to voluntarism between 1981 and  
23 2012.<sup>1</sup> This period represents a time of economic and social policy  
24 change encompassing recession and cuts to public services; followed  
25 by relative prosperity and increase in investment in public services; and  
26 then the most recent recession and accompanying austerity measures  
27 (Timmins, 2001; Glennerster, 2007; Alcock 2011; Defty, 2011; Driver,  
28 **2011 {2008?}**).

29 Our study is part of a general move to promote secondary data  
30 analysis in the UK, led by the major social science funding body,  
31 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Secondary  
32 analysis involves the reuse of the rich infrastructure of pre-existing  
33 social survey, interview, documents, administrative and other data  
34 that have been generated by primary researchers or various agencies,  
35 and which then are made available to secondary researchers through  
36 archiving services. Our particular project reused both qualitative and  
37 quantitative longitudinal datasets following individuals participating  
38 in these panels through time, to enable us to identify changes and  
39 continuities in volunteering attitudes and behaviours as these people  
40 moved through the portion of their lifecourse under study. However,  
41 the reuse of qualitative and quantitative data, and mixing methods are  
42 not straightforward processes, and are subject to considerable debate

1 about how these may be achieved, and their relative strengths and  
2 drawbacks, as we discuss in this chapter. Notably there is the knotty  
3 issue of the basis on which these methods may be ‘mixed’ together.  
4 The endeavour becomes even more complicated when the research  
5 topic is concerned with time and the various data sets are longitudinal.  
6 In turn, this raises issues about the nature of the conceptions of time  
7 that are invoked within the datasets. In considering these complex,  
8 interlinked issues, we aim to highlight and contribute to understandings  
9 of time in lifecourse research.

10 The chapter is divided into three sections. The first considers our  
11 reuse of selected narrative and survey datasets, their relationship with  
12 time, and how we have accounted for this when engaging with them.  
13 The second examines how we have analysed the longitudinal data  
14 produced by writers and gathered from survey respondents and how  
15 we have mixed these analyses. The final section explores what we have  
16 learnt about mixing methods in a project where the data and analyses  
17 are shaped by time.

## 19 Designing our study

21 A mixed methods study has particular strengths for research setting out  
22 to trace individual volunteering attitudes and behaviours from the early  
23 1980s to the present day. Quantitative analysis provides an overview of  
24 individual attitudes and behaviours, but can struggle to explain why  
25 individuals hold certain views or behave in a certain way. Qualitative  
26 analysis provides depth and nuance which can explain why individuals  
27 act in a certain way, or hold particular viewpoints, but it cannot and  
28 does not claim representativeness of its findings. Our research design  
29 aimed to potentially ‘offset’ the respective weaknesses of these two  
30 analytical methodologies by taking advantage of their joint strengths  
31 to provide a ‘complete[ness]’, and ‘comprehensive’ picture (Bryman,  
32 2008, p 91) of volunteering behaviours and attitudes to voluntarism.

33 The methods, processes and terminologies involved in bringing  
34 mixed methods together are still being debated (for example, Bryman,  
35 2008; Creswell et al, 2008; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008 **{anything  
36 more recent?}**). Of particular relevance to us in this discussion are  
37 questions concerning the basis on which qualitative and quantitative  
38 are compatible and able to be mixed. Is one a facilitator of the other or  
39 are both approaches given equal emphasis? Are they corroborative or  
40 contradictory, complementary or integral? Does one enhance, extend  
41 or develop the other, or are they on a par? And in what order should  
42 the methods be carried out, one after the other or at the same time?

1 When designing this project we avoided the notion of integration,  
2 which implies an illuminative moment when consistent findings across  
3 datasets form a perfect fit and merge into one. Rather, we preferred to  
4 conceptualise the process as bringing the analyses of our quantitative  
5 and qualitative datasets *into dialogue* with each other while working  
6 on these analyses *concurrently*. We saw the datasets as complementary,  
7 contributing knowledge towards different aspects of the substantive  
8 research. We aimed for three types of mixed method dialogue:

- 9
- 10 1. across the lifetime of the project, described by Teddlie and  
11 Tashakkori (2008, p 104) as a ‘continuous feedback loop’, to enable  
12 an iterative research process;
- 13 2. some direct comparisons between qualitative and quantitative  
14 analyses where there was a fit between the data;
- 15 3. combining substantive findings so that the sum of our joint  
16 knowledge claims would be greater than our individual findings.

17

18 Crucial to the success of this process of dialogue and feedback was  
19 the selection of a complementary combination of qualitative and  
20 quantitative longitudinal datasets.

### 21

### 22 *Qualitative and quantitative datasets used*

### 23

24 The secondary datasets that we chose to reuse – a *longitudinal* writing  
25 panel and *cross-sectional* and *longitudinal* panel survey data – were  
26 generated so that they could be used for a variety of different research  
27 purposes. As we describe below, given the broad potential uses of these  
28 datasets, this has affected how we were able to apply these datasets to  
29 the substantive aims of our mixed methods study. The longitudinal  
30 qualitative data that we chose to use is the Mass Observation Project  
31 (MOP),<sup>2</sup> which we regarded as our ‘lead’ data source. Since 1981, a  
32 national panel of self-selected volunteers has written for the MOP  
33 in response to themed questions or ‘directives’ that are sent to them  
34 three times a year. Over three decades, MOP writers have been asked  
35 to discuss a range of issues relating to UK society and their personal  
36 and political attitudes, involving past memories, current experiences  
37 and future expectations. Although most MOP writers answer the  
38 questions asked of them, their narrative scripts often stray from the  
39 theme and go ‘off piste’ (in our judgement). The results can be both  
40 frustrating and deeply rewarding to the researcher. MOP writing  
41 represents a rich source of insight into the changes and continuities in  
42 people’s lives during the time in which they have written for MOP.

1 It also represents a unique source of longitudinal data; yet, to date, in  
 2 following individual writers across time, this is the first research project  
 3 to use the MOP as a longitudinal data source, rather than a thematic  
 4 cross-sectional source.

5 On the quantitative longitudinal side, we chose two datasets to  
 6 provide facilitating, contextual insights into volunteering (see Table  
 7 3.1). The first, the British Social Attitudes survey (BSAS) is a cross-  
 8 sectional survey conducted annually since 1983. More than 3,000  
 9 people aged 18+, who are representative of the British population are  
 10 chosen at random to take part. The BSAS measures continuity and  
 11 change in people’s attitudes about ‘what it is like to live in Britain and  
 12 how they think Britain is run’.<sup>3</sup>

13 The second, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) was a  
 14 multi-purpose panel survey that collected longitudinal information  
 15 from the same 5,500 households, comprising 10,300 individuals aged  
 16 16+, between 1991 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> It was replaced by another survey  
 17 Understanding Society (US) in 2011. Over 80% of the BHPS panel  
 18 continued to participate in US. Although there is some variation in  
 19 the questions asked between them, when analysed together the two  
 20 surveys constitute one longitudinal panel survey. The overall aim of  
 21 the BHPS/US is to understand social and economic change in Britain.

22 Thus, as Table 3.1 shows and we describe below, these three datasets  
 23 complement each other, temporally and thematically.

24  
25  
26 **Table 3.1** Qualitative and quantitative data fit

	Longitudinal data sources		Cross-sectional data sources	
	MOP Directives	BHPS (1991 to 2008) and US (2011) questions	BSAS volunteering questions	BSAS views on welfare and political responsibility
	Wave 1: 20 older, serial responding writers	2,267 people who volunteered at least once between 1996 and 2011, aged between 15 and 85 in 1996	<i>The number of people responding and their age range varied by year. Mean age category 45 to 54, mean (sd) responders in a year: 3,392.8 (711.7)</i>	
	Wave 2: 18 younger writers, lower response rate			
2012	Volunteering; the Big Society			
2011		Volunteering behaviours		Views
2010	Work; Belonging; Survey			Views

## Working with large scale panel survey data

	Longitudinal data sources		Cross-sectional data sources	
1				
2	2009			Views
3	2008	Economic crisis	Volunteering behaviours	Views
4				
5	2007			Views
6	2006	Core British Values	Volunteering behaviours	Views
7				
8	2005			Views
9	2004	Being part of research	Volunteering behaviours	Views
10				
11	2003			Views
12	2002		Volunteering behaviours	Views
13				
14	2001			Views
15	2000		Volunteering behaviours	Views
16	1999			Views
17	1998		Volunteering behaviours	Views
18				
19	1997	Paid work		Views
20	1996	Unpaid work/ Volunteering	Volunteering behaviours	Views
21			Volunteering attitudes	
22	1995	Where you live: community		Views
23				
24	1994			Views
25	1993			
26	1992		Volunteering attitudes	Views
27	1991		BHPS begins	Views
28	1990	Voluntary Orgs/ Social		Views
29				
30	1989	Divisions		Views
31	1988			
32	1987			Views
33	1986			Views
34	1985			Views
35				
36	1984	Relatives, friends, neighbours		Views
37	1983	Work		Views
38	1982		BSAS begins	Views
39	1981	Unemployment		
40				
41				
42				

## *How the datasets fit together*

The three secondary datasets chosen for this study were not designed specifically for researching volunteering, but as Table 3.1 shows, all three contain questions on volunteering. When selecting these datasets we attempted to find the best temporal and thematic fit to answer our research questions. However, despite this attention to fit, temporal and thematic gaps run through and across the datasets used. The MOP contains 15 directives with themes relevant to the substantive aims of our project: volunteering, helping out informally, membership of organisations, work, unpaid work, and voluntarism and the role of the state. These specific foci meant that the directives we planned to work with were not evenly spread across the timeframe. As Table 3.1 shows, there is some temporal bunching of our selected directives. We were concerned that these gaps in time would result in us missing reports of key events and changes in individual writers' lifecourses, their volunteering behaviour, their attitudes towards voluntarism and the state, and their experience of events such as recession, public unrest and changes to social policy. We believed, however, that these limitations were overridden by the contribution of the sampled directives to the substantive aims of the project.

The 1996 directive, entitled 'Unpaid work', which asks writers for accounts of their volunteering behaviour and their views on the role of voluntarism in society, is key in bringing MOP data, and BSAS and BHPS sources into dialogue. In particular, the questions asked by this directive fit well with those about volunteering attitudes in the BSAS and volunteering behaviour in the BHPS, in 1996. As Table 3.1 shows, both the BHPS and the BSAS have thematic and temporal gaps in their questions on volunteering. The BHPS did not begin asking questions about volunteering until 1996, and then did so only on alternate years. Furthermore, the questions asked are not able to provide insight into the individual attitudes towards voluntarism and the welfare state that are of interest to our project. To some extent these gaps are filled by the BSAS data set providing snapshots of annual changes in attitudes and behaviour. There are two drawbacks, however. First, the BSAS survey only asked questions about volunteering behaviour in 1998, 2000, and 2008, and its questions on volunteering attitudes only began in 1993 (see Table 3.1). Second, the same respondents are not used every year, meaning it is not possible to measure longitudinal, individual change or continuity in attitudes or behaviours. Thus there are difficulties in relating the BSAS directly to either the BHPS or the MOP data.

1 At the design stage we had concerns about the individual limitations  
2 of these two quantitative datasets. However, we believed that these  
3 would be mitigated by the strength of our mixed method study which  
4 would allow us to combine the breadth of an extensive quantitative  
5 perspective with the depth of intensive qualitative approach, offering  
6 original substantive and methodological insights. We discuss the value  
7 of this endeavour later in this chapter when we examine our analyses  
8 and our knowledge claims.

## 10 **Using our datasets: how the design worked in practice**

### 12 *Sampling*

14 Our sampling strategy sought to take advantage of the respective and  
15 distinct strengths of each of our selected data sets for our project's  
16 substantive concerns. This process was not always smooth. The  
17 challenges related not just to ensuring strategic and useful sampling  
18 within each dataset, but ensuring that these choices enabled dialogue  
19 across the qualitative and quantitative data.

20 Our primary criterion for the MOP study was writer response  
21 rates for our chosen directives. We identified individuals who had  
22 contributed to all 15 directives, then those who had responded to 14  
23 out of 15, then 13 and so on. This yielded a cohort of 20 serially-  
24 responding-writers, 14 women and 6 men. The majority are now  
25 in retirement, and began writing for MOP in their mid-30s or  
26 later. While these people are not representative of the broader UK  
27 population in terms of age, gender and status (Lindsey and Bulloch,  
28 2014), this was offset by our ability to compare them with BHPS and  
29 BSAS respondents who are representative, to identify similarities or  
30 differences between the samples; and to compare MOP respondents  
31 with those who match them in age and volunteering behaviour in  
32 the BHPS and BSAS.

33 This first cohort of MOP writers provided older voices that could  
34 offer insights into the volunteering lives of individuals as they moved  
35 from a midpoint (or further) in their working and family lifecourse  
36 into retirement. But we were concerned that our MOP sample  
37 selection would not allow us to explore, fully, discourses around civic  
38 engagement at different stages in the lifecourse. So we decided to  
39 sample a second group of 20 writers with good response rates from a  
40 younger mixed-gender cohort who would provide voices at an earlier  
41 state of their working and family lifecourse. The pool of writers  
42 available comprised a mix of people who had written between 1981

1 and 1996, or 1996 and 2012. We also wanted to select people with a  
2 mix of occupations, as a very loose indicator of class and educational  
3 background. However, this yielded less youthful individuals than we  
4 had hoped. Most writers in our second cohort were 30 or older at the  
5 time that they started writing, leaving us with a shortage of voices of  
6 individuals in their twenties. The eventual second cohort amounted  
7 to 18 individuals, 5 men and 13 women.<sup>5</sup>

8 Sampling of the BSAS survey was a more straightforward process; we  
9 were able to use the entire representative sample. However, sampling  
10 of the BHPS/US was more complex. Two different sample options  
11 were possible. The first consisted of the entire sample. Unfortunately,  
12 not all of the respondents have taken part in the panel every year so  
13 we were unable to follow these individuals through time. Instead we  
14 had to take a cross-sectional approach, treating each year as a snapshot  
15 of volunteering behaviour.

16 The second sample option was specific: people who had volunteered  
17 between 1996 and 2011. This allowed exploration of how people  
18 transition in and out of volunteering over time, and potentially some  
19 associated lifecourse events. To reduce the impact of missing responses  
20 within the dataset, we sampled individuals who had responded to  
21 the volunteering question every year between 1996 and 2011 (serial  
22 responders), and who stated that they had volunteered at least once  
23 between 1996 and 2011 (serial volunteers). This serial responding  
24 sample also had strong similarities with the MOP volunteer writers,  
25 meaning that these two sources were compatible, enabling some  
26 direct comparisons to be made between quantitative and quantitative  
27 material within this particular timeframe. By combining and comparing  
28 these secondary data, we hoped to overcome some of their individual  
29 weaknesses, and add to our substantive and methodological knowledge  
30 base.

### 31 32 *Reflections on data fit*

34 The process of sampling and fitting our reused datasets together has  
35 not been smooth or seamless. The temporal and substantive ‘messiness’  
36 (Law, 2007) of data originally collected for a different set of research  
37 aims has presented the primary challenge to data fit. Yet, although  
38 individually messy, when used in dialogue with other data, each  
39 dataset has much to contribute to the study, offering longitudinal and  
40 substantive complementarity and comparison.

41  
42



## 1 **Analysing data produced by writers and survey** 2 **respondents across time**

3  
4 In this section we move on to explore our experiences of working  
5 with the strengths and limitations of these secondary qualitative and  
6 quantitative datasets. We note how the original methods of collecting  
7 and producing the datasets shaped our data temporally, and shaped the  
8 way in which we have gone about our longitudinal analyses. This has  
9 imposed limitations on our analyses, enabling less direct comparison  
10 of the quantitative and qualitative data than we anticipated. However,  
11 the process of bringing qualitative and quantitative data together has  
12 demonstrated the methodological strengths of attempting a dialogue.  
13 Mixing methods and reusing longitudinal data has also challenged  
14 us, as researchers, to reflect on how we have engaged with time in  
15 our research project, and how we can communicate our different  
16 methodological conceptualisations of time within a mixed method  
17 research environment.

### 18 19 *Research instruments for collecting data*

20  
21 The research instruments for our secondary data were designed by other  
22 primary researchers, and thus were not a perfect fit with our research  
23 questions. In the case of the BHPS/US and the BSAS surveys, these  
24 were structured questionnaires that were conducted verbally face-  
25 to-face, or over the telephone. In the case of the MOP, the research  
26 instruments were directives generated by the archivists or commissioned  
27 by researchers for specific research projects. These quantitative and  
28 qualitative research instruments were used consecutively across the 'real'  
29 timeframe of 1981 to 2012, a linear longitudinal movement visualised  
30 in Table 3.1, which we have conceptualised as 'vertical time'.

31 Both types of research instrument have produced responses that  
32 occur in the individuals' 'now', a form of present time that immediately  
33 becomes a point in the past. The questions fielded required respondents  
34 to loop backwards and forwards through time from their 'now' to their  
35 past and future. As researchers, we have also had to move mentally  
36 across these timeframes in order to make sense of the responses. We  
37 have conceptualised this respondent and researcher movement as  
38 'horizontal time'.

## *The quantitative story*

The designers of the BSAS questionnaire aimed to generate responses from survey participants that could be measured quantitatively and cross-sectionally. The designers of the BHPS/US questionnaire aimed to produce responses that could be measured quantitatively, longitudinally and cross-sectionally. The temporal questions that were put to survey participants were relatively uncomplicated, and when responding they moved through simple 'horizontal time', usually the recent past (the last year), the 'now', the planned future, and sometimes a vague imagined future. In this context, recall of the recent past can be flawed (Lugtig and Jäckle, 2014). When asked to describe their experiences over the previous year participants can misjudge the length of time involved without the aid of a diary or mental landmarks to guide them through the recent past. The point in the day, week and year in which the survey was conducted can influence the responses of the participant (Tumen and Zeydanli, 2013). The rapport and relationship built between participant and interviewer, variations in how interviews were conducted, and alternatives to interviews, such as telephone or by proxy when interviews were not possible, can also affect the accuracy of responses (Lynn et al, 2004). These process provisos are not immediately accessible to the secondary analysts using this type of data. In contrast, they are very evident in the MOP data, which have provided insight into their possible effects within the quantitative data.

When analysing the BHPS/US longitudinal data for this study, participants' responses provided a wealth of retrievable, representative, demographic data across a series of consecutive individual 'nows'. However, the absence of volunteering questions prior to 1996 meant that we were only able to look at the timeframe 1996–2011, a 15-year period that represents half the portion of lifecourse being analysed in the qualitative data. To illustrate, if a BHPS serial responder, whom we will call Sarah, volunteered every year between 1985 and 1995, but stopped volunteering in 1995, we would have no knowledge of Sarah's volunteering. Hence we would have no reason to think of Sarah as a recently-stopped serial volunteer. Instead Sarah would be perceived as a non-volunteer after 1996, and would not be considered within our 1996–2011 sample. Although we cannot directly compare Sarah with our sample of MOP writers, our MOP sample can tell us that people like Sarah exist.

The individuals who comprised the longitudinal sample we used from the BHPS/US were all serial responding, serial volunteers between 1996 and 2011. They represent a cohort of individuals, of various

1 ages, who have grown older as they moved through ‘real’ longitudinal  
2 time. Their experience of ageing may be unique to this chronological  
3 timeframe. Although we are able to describe their reported attitudes,  
4 behaviours, and demographic characteristics over time, we cannot be  
5 certain why any changes or continuities in their attitudes or behaviour  
6 have taken place. These may have been associated with the process of  
7 moving through the lifecourse, but equally or additionally they may  
8 have related to other influences, such as the economic, political and  
9 social policy environment of the time. In this quantitative sample,  
10 time, age, lifecourse, and external events are entangled and connected,  
11 reducing the accuracy with which we can extrapolate the experiences  
12 of this cohort to similar BHPS/US cohorts in other chronological  
13 timeframes. Again, the MOP data has been able to provide us with  
14 analyses and insights that the BHPS/US data cannot offer. For example,  
15 MOP writers have described changes in their capacity to volunteer,  
16 and related this to the complexity of their ageing experience, discussing  
17 transitions in health, mobility and energy.

18 Individually the BHPS/US and the BSAS analyses offer limited  
19 evidence relating to voluntarism and volunteering attitudes and  
20 behaviours across, and at particular points in, time. When used in  
21 dialogue with the MOP data, the quantitative analyses offer some  
22 corroboration of and comparison with the MOP material. However, in  
23 the most part, what they offer is a different type of descriptive insight.  
24 Driven by the representative nature of the survey participants, these  
25 analyses illuminate the different dynamic demographics of those taking  
26 part in volunteering over time.

27

### 28 *The qualitative story*

29

30 Our longitudinal qualitative analytical approach was to treat each writer  
31 as a single entity evolving through vertical time. We conceptualised each  
32 response to a directive as a freeze frame of a lifecourse, and the combined  
33 responses of a writer as an evolving narrative of that lifecourse. In this  
34 way we sought to contextualise reported attitudes towards voluntarism  
35 and volunteering behaviours. Within this conceptual framework we  
36 anticipated that ‘the now’ would play a large part in our analyses,  
37 allowing both complementarity, and direct comparison with the  
38 BHPS/US and BSAS responses from 1993 onwards.

39 However, the questions put to MOP writers by the directives were  
40 far more temporally intricate than those put to the survey participants.  
41 Writers were encouraged to move through a range of time states, tenses  
42 and identities, from the retrospective private or collective past, to the

1 imagined personal or collective future. This required us, as researchers,  
2 to track the ideas and thoughts written in these different horizontal  
3 time states through the 'real' vertical time of each consecutive response  
4 to a directive. This complex, superfluid MOP time could not be  
5 immediately compared with the BHPS/US data, and the qualitative  
6 data required synthesising and interpretation before bringing it into  
7 dialogue with the quantitative material to provide comparison and  
8 complementarity.

9 Writing in 'the now' was not always reliable. When respondents  
10 were experiencing some sort of personal rupture or transition in their  
11 lives – such as divorce, bereavement, unemployment, sharp loss of  
12 income or a health problem – this was often elided during the time  
13 in which this was taking place, even when relevant to the directive  
14 theme being discussed. These elisions may stem from the inability of  
15 narrators to make immediate sense of these events and how they fit  
16 into their 'nows' and constructed identities and life stories. When a  
17 rupture is finally discussed by the narrator the effect is palimpsestic.  
18 Previous 'scripts' are overwritten, and the new event is presented with  
19 hindsight as 'the past' and absorbed into the life story. This phenomenon  
20 affected our analytical approach, in that we placed increasing value on  
21 retrospective recall. However, we noted that retrospective recall also has  
22 its limitations. Some narratives can be contradictory, and occasionally  
23 writers have refocused or reframed the past when examining it through  
24 a different lens, or in the light of recent events (Neale and Flowerdew,  
25 2003{1999?}; Lindsey, 2004).

26 We settled on an approach that combined analysis of 'the now'  
27 with retrospective accounts to construct vertical personal, work,  
28 volunteering and attitudinal lifecourse histories/biographies for each  
29 writer. Contextualising voluntarism, volunteering, and attitudes  
30 towards the welfare state within these lifecourses,<sup>6</sup> we looked for  
31 continuity and change in individual writers, and differences and  
32 similarities between writers. We were able to identify various complex  
33 volunteering trajectories associated with the lifecourses of the MOP  
34 writers sampled. However, few writers actually related their personal  
35 and volunteering experiences to external events such as recession and  
36 increased unemployment. This narrative gap may be associated with  
37 the secondary nature of the data, as the research instruments do not  
38 explicitly prompt such connections. But it also raises some interesting  
39 questions about how individuals make sense of the public and the  
40 private when constructing narratives and stories about their lives.

41 We also sought to explore the longitudinal shape of volunteering  
42 trajectories in our concurrent quantitative analyses. This process

1 was hampered by the limited timeframe of the available sample  
2 (1996–2011). Although the quantitative analyses were able to offer  
3 some cautious insights into relationships between some key life events  
4 and volunteering behaviour during this time, they were not able to  
5 provide a full understanding of the relationship between the lifecourse  
6 and volunteering. Thus, when describing volunteering trajectories,  
7 the quantitative analyses could only provide evidence for two types  
8 of behaviour within the British population: episodic or continuous  
9 volunteers. However, the quantitative analyses were able to make some  
10 associations between volunteering and recession, and provide detail on  
11 *who* volunteers across time, a question that the MOP data was unable  
12 to answer, given the limited size of the sample.  
13

### 14 *Reflections on mixed method analytical fit*

15

16 Reflecting and evaluating on how we have met the original aims  
17 relating to mixing our methods (at the time of writing when we are  
18 three-quarters of the way through the project), we acknowledge that  
19 our mixed method approach to our longitudinal analyses of secondary  
20 data has provided us with some challenges, but we believe that this was  
21 a worthwhile endeavour. We have been able to maintain a continuous  
22 dialogue that has allowed us to corroborate findings emerging from the  
23 analyses of the MOP data, and enabled an iterative research process.  
24 This, however, has been less successful when making direct comparisons  
25 between qualitative and quantitative analyses, and when asking the  
26 same research questions of these analyses. The limitations of these two  
27 types of data, and their analytical fit, has not lent itself to this sort of  
28 blending. Rather, both types of analytical method have made distinctive  
29 contributions towards the project and to our understanding of time,  
30 volunteering and the lifecourse.  
31

### 32 **Learning from our mixed method longitudinal secondary** 33 **data analysis** 34

35 At the start of this chapter, we observed that undertaking mixed  
36 methods research is not a straightforward process. It becomes very  
37 complicated when we add a research topic that is concerned with  
38 time, and draw on longitudinal, secondary datasets to undertake our  
39 analyses. In this final section we reflect on what we have learnt from  
40 this complicated and rather messy process, sharing learning that might  
41 be of benefit to those conducting longitudinal mixed method studies in  
42 the future. We reflect on: our choice of research design; the analytical

1 fit between our quantitative and qualitative data; and how our datasets  
2 have lent themselves to answering our substantive research questions  
3 in relation to longitudinal time and the lifecourse.  
4

### 5 *Research design*

6

7 Reusing data that has been collected by others is often thought of  
8 as a time-saving process, cutting out the investment of resources  
9 associated with collecting primary data. But it is not without its own  
10 challenges. In this study we had to invest time and financial resources  
11 in choosing and preparing the data (particularly the qualitative data<sup>7</sup>),  
12 and weighing up how our data sources fitted together temporally and  
13 thematically. It was particularly difficult to decide which quantitative  
14 datasets we should reuse. The BHPS/US did not offer as much data  
15 relating to our substantive research questions as a cross-sectional dataset  
16 like the Citizenship Survey. However, the value of this dataset was  
17 its longitudinality, which provided a good fit with the longitudinal  
18 possibilities offered by the MOP. Both datasets allowed us to follow  
19 individuals across time, although the timeframe in the survey data was  
20 limited by the questions asked by the research instruments.

21 The timing of our analyses also provided challenges. The aim was for  
22 the quantitative and qualitative analyses to be concurrent, so that they  
23 could be in continuous dialogue with each other and thus encourage  
24 an iterative approach. When work began, the starting points of the  
25 analyses, the ordering of the analyses and the length of time taken to  
26 draw conclusions, differed. In particular, the qualitative data preparation  
27 and analysis took longer than the quantitative work. Although we  
28 were able to share emerging themes and hypotheses, these differences  
29 in progression and timing increased the difficulty in maintaining  
30 dialogue throughout the analysis. With retrospect, a staggered start,  
31 with the quantitative analysis beginning after the qualitative, might  
32 have benefited the project.  
33

### 34 *Analyses*

35

36 We envisioned three types of dialogue that would bring the quantitative  
37 and qualitative analyses together. These included direct comparisons of  
38 the data and analyses, a continuous iterative dialogue/feedback loop,  
39 and combining the substantive findings in order to answer complex,  
40 mixed, research questions.

41 As anticipated, due to the nature and limitations of the different  
42 datasets being used we were not particularly successful in undertaking

1 direct comparisons between our different datasets and analyses.  
2 In contrast, although we experienced difficulties relating to the  
3 timing and concurrency of our analyses, we were able to maintain  
4 a continuous iterative dialogue. Moreover, this dialogue represented  
5 the methodological heart of the project. It included discussion of the  
6 differences in our research instruments and how these affected our  
7 analyses and conceptualisation of time. We discussed and recorded  
8 emerging themes and hypotheses. We identified where the data and  
9 findings complemented, or built on each other. We questioned whether  
10 or not (in the case of our project at least), it was essential for the  
11 different datasets to be comparable directly. Perhaps most importantly,  
12 we considered how we might bring together the ideas and concepts  
13 that were emerging from the separate analyses in an iterative and  
14 ongoing fashion. At the time of writing this chapter, we are in the  
15 process of a final dialogue, bringing together our substantive findings,  
16 exploring evidence and ideas from different angles, and combining and  
17 interweaving the results of our quantitative and qualitative analyses.

### 19 *Time and the lifecourse*

21 A key consideration when undertaking analyses of our datasets was  
22 that we should be aware of what type of time our datasets were able  
23 to describe and measure. The aim of our mixed method longitudinal  
24 approach was to bring together three different sorts of time:

- 26 • the flow of personal biographical time, connecting the lifecourse,  
27 volunteering activities and attitudes to voluntarism, in MOP writers'  
28 narratives;
- 29 • chronological time, moving from one year to the next, in the  
30 variables about social characteristics and volunteering attitudes and  
31 behaviour, repeatedly collected through the cohort studies;
- 32 • contextual public/collective time, in which we were particularly  
33 interested in the historical ebbs and flows of prosperity and austerity.

35 The way that these multiple forms of time interact and intersect (or not)  
36 was at the heart of the mixed methods effort for our research project.

37 Unfortunately, our survey data, which is anchored in chronological  
38 time, was unable to provide us with clear evidence of the relationship  
39 between lifecourse events and volunteering. Its primary value was in  
40 providing an understanding of who was volunteering, and how their  
41 attitudes towards voluntarism have changed across calendar time.  
42 However, the survey data also offered the potential to be mapped onto

1 historical/collective events and changes in social and economic policy  
2 over time, and to explore the relationship between individual changes  
3 in behaviours and attitudes and changes in national events over time.  
4 We found that individuals like our volunteer Sarah, whom we met  
5 earlier in the chapter, reduced the intensity and frequency of their  
6 formal volunteering in 2008. We might infer that this was associated  
7 with the 2008 economic crisis.

8 In the MOP narratives, where individuals moved through  
9 biographical time, writers described the relationships between personal  
10 lifecourse events and their volunteering attitudes and behaviours.  
11 However, few writers made explicit connections between external  
12 events, the lifecourse and volunteering, requiring us to look for inferred  
13 connections and associations. We are unsure why writers did not make  
14 these connections. This negative evidence has made us reconsider the  
15 potential of a data source like the MOP for examining the influence of  
16 public, external events on individuals. We are of the view that further  
17 work on this data source is required to explore its temporal limitations  
18 when considering the relationship between the public and the private.

19 Although we hoped that our qualitative and quantitative datasets  
20 would provide us with a multidimensional picture of volunteering  
21 behaviour and attitudes across time, each dataset was unable to provide  
22 a comprehensive picture on its own. However, when bringing our  
23 longitudinal analyses and findings together, we have been able to build  
24 up the multilayered picture that we were aiming for, demonstrating  
25 the value of a mixed method approach.

26 The multilayered picture resulting from mixing methods has been  
27 at its strongest in providing a comprehensive and complimentary  
28 understanding of the way in which individuals move in and out of  
29 volunteering throughout the lifecourse. The proportion of people who  
30 are long-term volunteers is relatively small, amounting to less than a  
31 third of BHPS/US respondents. Crucially however, these individuals  
32 contributed over half the total amount of voluntary activity reported by  
33 BHPS/US respondents over time. We had hoped that the BHPS could  
34 provide some correlation between life course events, public events and  
35 volunteering behaviours, for example, showing a relationship between  
36 early retirement and volunteering in the economic crisis year of 2008.  
37 Unfortunately, the data was not able to provide this sort of explicit  
38 correlation. Nevertheless we did find that the contribution of BHPS  
39 long-term volunteers became less intense and less frequent in this  
40 particular year. MOP writers, who were also long-term volunteers,  
41 wrote at length about the trigger points for entering and exiting  
42 volunteering, many of which were linked to lifecourse events. Entrance



1 trigger points for some individuals represented exit trigger points for  
2 others. These include events such as starting a job, children entering  
3 the education system, or a spouse taking retirement. Several mentioned  
4 their spouse taking early retirement during the economic crisis of  
5 2008. The fact that for some writers this was a trigger for ending their  
6 volunteering, while for others it was a trigger for beginning meant that  
7 we could argue there may have been more exiting and entering into  
8 volunteering in this year than suggested by the survey data. Indeed, the  
9 recessionary effects on volunteering can be hard to evidence if relying  
10 only on one type of data source.

## 12 **Conclusion**

14 The aim of this chapter was to explore the methodological and  
15 analytical challenges encountered when reusing and combining  
16 longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data to take a lifecourse  
17 approach to studying volunteering. In particular, we have reflected on  
18 the temporal aspect of this mixed methods endeavour. Our conclusion  
19 is that, at times, working through the methodological issues involved  
20 has been a messy and difficult process. An initial issue that we faced  
21 was that when working across our multiple data sets (Mass Observation  
22 narratives and cohort surveys) the temporal and substantive fit was  
23 not exact and seamless. Despite the limitations this posed for direct  
24 comparison of qualitative and quantitative data, we hope that we have  
25 conveyed that a mixed methods dialogue had the advantage of enabling  
26 us to combine the breadth of an extensive quantitative perspective  
27 with the depth of an intensive qualitative approach. We discussed  
28 the implications of the uneven fit between the different data sets for  
29 bringing them into dialogue, which became complementary rather  
30 than directly compatible. A key issue here was the different sorts of time  
31 being engaged with through the data sets: chronological time through  
32 the cohort survey data which links into public/collective time; and  
33 personal biographical time in our narrative material which could be  
34 held against, but did not establish links to, public/collective time within  
35 itself. We argue that the process of grappling with these challenges  
36 has enhanced our understanding of the value of mixing methods to  
37 examine substantive questions related to time and the lifecourse.

## 39 **Notes**

40 <sup>1</sup> The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under its first  
41 Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI), grant number ES/K003550/1.

1 <sup>2</sup>See [www.massobs.org.uk/mass\\_observation\\_project.html](http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass_observation_project.html)

3 <sup>3</sup>See [www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/british-social-attitudes/)

5 <sup>4</sup>See <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps>. Northern Ireland was not included within the data collection until 2001; this reduces how representative the sample is of the UK.

8 <sup>5</sup>The gender imbalance and loss of two writers from the project relate to problems in accessing metadata on individual writers held by the Mass Observation Archive (MOA). We have worked in partnership with the MOA to gain funding from the ESRC, through the SDAI2, grant number ES/L013819/, to improve the quality of its metadata.

14 <sup>6</sup>This approach required an acknowledgement that we, the researchers, were exploring writers' lifecourses through the hierarchical lens of our own subjectivities, rather than 'walking alongside' the writers (Neale et al, 2012). We sought to offset this by exploring some writing using different analytical methods that might allow the voices of the writers to speak without the militating effects of our researcher identities.

20 <sup>7</sup>See Lindsey and Bulloch (2014) for a detailed discussion of the difficulties relating to preparing MOP material.

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