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Qualitative longitudinal methodologies for crisis times: Against crisis exceptionalism and 'helicopter' research

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Abstract

In this introduction to the collection of papers 'Qualitative Longitudinal Methodologies for Crisis Times', we argue that two main characteristics or 'qualities' of qualitative longitudinal methodologies (QLMs) can be identified for researching crisis. The first is that QLMs can function to repudiate crisis exceptionalism. The papers denounce the discrete and time-limited, instead impressing the ongoingness of crisis from the past, the present, and into the future. The second overarching point made in the introduction is that QLMs protect against 'helicopter' research, a heightened risk when studying crisis times. Together the papers offer a close and complex introspection on the use and outcome of QLMs in spaces and times of crisis from the perspective of researchers undertaking the research, and in multiple instances, research participants enrolled in them.

KEYWORDS
crisis, crisis temporalities, feminist, longitudinal research, qualitative methodology

1 | INTRODUCTION

The visceral and material omnipresence of 'crisis' in the world is perhaps one of the defining features of the contemporary condition. In this context, there has been mounting academic wrangling over the (political) risks of this crisis 'everywhereness' manifesting in a crisis of exploded analytical meaning and purchase (Madden, 2023; Roitman, 2013). These wranglings arise, in part, because of the scale and scope of crisis, its diffusion in and across spheres of life, which has become 'increasingly normal and perpetual instead of functioning as localized disruptions to the ordinary' (Calvente & Smicker, 2019, p. 143). This 'crisis ordinary' (Berlant, 2011) departs from normative notions of crisis as an unexpected chasm or illogical departure from an expectation or norm (Roitman, 2013). The spatial proclivities and temporalities of crises that the eight papers in this Special Section map on to are testament to the tensions as well as confluences between exceptional 'aberrational' and amassing 'ordinary' crises. As a collection, they encompass the COVID-19 pandemic, the global financial crisis, and austerity, plus (often intersecting) personal-cum-structural crises such as domestic violence and gender inequality; precarious livelihoods, street lives and migrations; and mental and physical ill-health.

Geographers are alert to the need 'to develop a more profound understanding of crisis as a particular context for action and a possibility for intervention' (Brinks & Ibert, 2020, p. 276). In this Special Section, we centre our attention on what 'crisis times' means from an explicitly methodological purview and within the specific remit of qualitative longitudinal methodologies (QLMs). We ask, what can geographers and other social scientists achieve in the study of crisis

through QLMs? Brought together, the authors work variously with individuals, groups and communities to explore this question in geographically diverse contexts, including the United States (Cuomo, 2024), the United Kingdom (Carruthers Thomas, 2024; Hall, 2024; MacLeavy, 2024), Spain (Di Feliciantonio, 2024), Singapore (Yea, 2024), Cambodia (Brickell et al., 2024), Ghana, DRC and Zimbabwe (van Blerk et al., 2024). They harness a range of methods as part of QLMs, with a particular onus on diaries and in-depth interviews, multiply collected or conducted, over an extended time horizon to intentionally enable temporal understandings and readings of crisis.

QLMs are viewed as 'a small but vital component of the longitudinal canon', looking 'to follow the same individuals or small collectives (households or varied forms of organization) prospectively, in "real" time, as lives unfold' (Neale, 2019, p. 1). As feminist geographers Madge et al. (1997, p. 96; see also McDowell, 2001; Tarrant et al., 2023) have noted, longitudinal studies are valuable precisely 'because the research is not fixed in time but reflects the dynamism of people's experiences, so enabling temporal differences' to be comprehended. In other words, longitudinal methods allow research to transcend the singular event or time, to tell a fuller and more cumulative story of people's lives that might otherwise be possible. It is qualitative research which enables this in-depth and rich understanding through time, and which keeps a close eye on questions of power, the politics of knowledge production, and the context in which QLMs are undertaken.

In reflecting on what collectively binds the Special Section papers, two main characteristics or 'qualities' of QLMs can be identified for researching crisis: first, that QLMs can function to repudiate crisis exceptionalism; and second that QLMs protect against 'helicopter' research, a heightened risk when studying crisis times.[1]

2 | A BULWARK AGAINST CRISIS EXCEPTIONALISM

One contention we make in this editorial introduction is that QLMs are a bulwark against crisis exceptionalism; that crisis or a particular crisis is unusual or extraordinary somehow and is delimited in time. The Special Section papers reveal the value of utilising QLMs on what have come to be known as 'crisis temporalities': those that are (both) 'fast' sensational and spectacular; *and* those which are 'slow' and woven into the deteriorations and ongoingness of ordinary life (Ahmann, 2018; Anderson et al., 2020; Brickell et al., 2023; Brydolf-Horwitz, 2018; Cahill & Pain, 2019; Christian & Dowler, 2019; Nixon, 2011; Pain, 2019; Tyner, 2021). In responding to the need to 'look beyond the immediate, the visceral, and the obvious in our explorations of social injustice' (Davies, 2022, p. 409), the papers show how QLMs allows for the mutual imbrication of these to be known, for example, the 'slow' violence that pre-dates, outlives and/or combines with the 'fast' (see especially papers by, Cuomo, 2024; Carruthers Thomas, 2024). While geographical scholarship has come a long way in past decades, the status quo is that 'crisis' remains largely still understood in the register of the 'fast', the spectacular or the extraordinary.

As a collection, by virtue of working with QLMs, the papers denounce the discrete and time-limited, instead impressing the ongoingness of crisis from the past, the present and into the future. The initial inspiration for this Special Section was the COVID-19 pandemic when we began undertaking longitudinal research in Cambodia for the ReFashion study on garment workers' experiences of livelihood precarity during and beyond the crisis (see Brickell et al., 2024, this Special Section). Our research findings from across the crisis problematised the presentation of COVID-19 as the 'exceptional' and 'fast' cause of livelihood precarity, faced in fact, long before 2020 (when we were also studying this issue in Cambodia). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely represented as an acute period of uncharacteristic rupture, rather than continuity, with COVID exceptionalism rife and obscuring the structural dimensions of long-running crises impacting people and places.

Carruthers Thomas' (2024) paper, for example, focuses on the experiences of female academics living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom. She uses a 'diary, diary-interview' method with 25 participants from 2021 and into 2022 to understand more about the disruption to rhythms and routines and how these fell disproportionally on women, to their detriment. In the case of Curruthers Thomas' participants, the damaging impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women's bodies, their relationships and careers became visible and could only really be gauged over the long haul through QLMs. The paper sits well with a growing suite of scholarship beyond geography which focuses on the 'arrhythmia' (the disruption) of the COVID-19 period. Lyon and Coleman (2023, p. 26) articulate, for example, how the 'COVID-19 pandemic has foregrounded the significance of time to everyday life, as the routines, pace, and speed of social relations were widely reconfigured'.

Curruthers Thomas' paper and these other synergistic works point to the value of QLMs—and particularly diary keeping—for understanding the rhythmic dimensions of crisis. Banal and unseen impacts of crisis are revealed not necessarily at the 'peak' of a crisis, but over time, and are themselves ungirded by longer patterns of 'slow' crisis. Yea's (2024)

paper in the Special Section also harnesses a diary method to pursue such analysis. She engaged with male precarious workers in Singapore for up to 3 months and shows the benefit of QLMs for being both temporally appropriate, and in some senses 'in sync', with the lives of participants 'made to wait' through the slow violence and prolonged boredom of the Special Pass visa system. She writes, the 'articulation of migrant worker narratives through daily or regular entries enabled the everyday to be seen as constituted through the destitution and violent waiting that follows from workplace desertion and claim-making amongst migrant workers in Singapore' (this Special Section). While quantitative longitudinal data are commonly used to track the life trajectories of a large and diverse migrant population, 'this is still insufficient to delve into the individualised experiences of migrants, including their experience of change through time in personal and community networks' (Ryan & D'Angelo, 2018, p. 149). Yea's article highlights how QLMs are tools to achieve this 'in tune' with the slow crisis impacting migrant workers, who felt they had the time, whilst waiting, to engage in the diary study and to take interpretive 'control and shape the structure and content of their diaries' (this Special Section).

In making the case that QLMs can act as a defence against crisis exceptionalism, Di Feliciantonio's (2024) paper in the Special Section shows how a limited focus on a time-bound extraordinary crisis can distract attention from structural, everyday and ongoing crises impacting people's lives. He traces how different forms and times of crisis intersect in the life course of one participant he has returned to for a decade. The HIV/AIDS crisis, the Spanish housing crisis, the global financial crisis, the COVID-19 crisis, the hidden crisis of domestic violence, and the mental health crisis, all coalesce. Di Feliciantonio's use of qualitative longitudinal research was remarked upon by the in-focus participant as a form of 'catharsis' and the repeated nature of interviews over time as testament to his continued survival, one not guaranteed amidst the myriad crises he had continued to navigate between meeting Di Feliciantonio each time.

Given that crisis is not exceptional, but rather ordinary and mundane, Di Feliciantonio goes one step further to question what this means for care and ethics in the academy. The emotional bonds, responsibility and personal investment which can be fomented through QLMs travels beyond the administrative confines (and sometimes constraints) of the neoliberal academy to problematise narrow institutional remits of what 'counts' as impact. The conclusion of Di Feliciantonio's paper reminded us of the much talked about journal article (in feminist geography circles at least) 'how many papers is a baby "worth"?' (Klocker & Drozdzewski, 2012). While the Australian researchers sought to explore how university decision-makers accounted (or not) for the career impacts of having children on journal article productivity (ibid.), Di Feliciantonio's summations are reminiscent in raising debate on how impact is audited. We were struck wondering 'how many people doth impact make'? This is a particularly pertinent question when it comes to QLMs which tend to work with small cohorts, privileging relationship building, and necessitating this given the time and energy required to do longitudinal work (especially in a crisis context). 'Does the impact agenda's emphasis on impact for "society at large" run counter to certain (feminist) methods like this?'

3 | AN ANTIDOTE TO 'HELICOPTER' RESEARCH

Cesare Di Feliciantonio's paper is a powerful segway into thinking about QLMs as antidotes to 'helicopter' or 'parachute' research which is typified by a lack of meaningful, reciprocal and long-lasting engagement and collaboration. Their very nomenclature evokes ideas about a crisis situation marked by the fast arrival of 'help'. The scathing terms have been variously used to refer to short one-off research trips (Adame, 2021) and/or the extractivism of Global North researchers working with local partners in the Global South, resulting from and embroiled in broader power imbalances and neo-colonial practices (Haelewaters et al., 2021; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022). However 'helicopter' research is not just problematic in terms of Global North/Global South asymmetries and unequal power relations, but can also work within each. While not free from such risks, the papers in the Special Section certainly point to QLMs being a protective factor mitigating against 'helicopter' research as well as crisis exceptionalism which can be perpetuated by short-termism and a lack of historical and political knowledge.[2] The qualitative longitudinal 'sensibility' can be 'engaged to think about knowledge exchange practices and the temporal and relational character of academic production' (Thomson & McLeod, 2015, p. 245). QLMs are rooted typically in feminist research practice, namely 'the intentional use of methods and methodologies that are inclusive of marginalized knowledges and ways of knowing' (Liegghio & Caragata, 2021, p. 151).

The paper by van Blerk et al. (2024), for example, is based on a peer-researcher model which has been developed over 3 years of working with young people growing up on the streets of three African cities. The approach taken was valuable in showing 'how young people's realities are future impacted by slow and rapid crises and challenging daily life experiences as they age towards adulthood' (van Blerk et al., 2024, this Special Section). The paper underlines the crucial importance of longitudinal research for policy and practice to ensure that there is a better understanding of the complex

realities of growing up over the lifecourse, rather than just a snapshot insight into their experiences at one point in time. Such insights over the lifecourse would not be possible with 'helicopter' research. Nor is this the case for Hall's (2024) research showcased in the Special Section which focuses on the importance of QLMs for understanding the experiences of younger people's reproductive decision-making in the contest of living with austerity. She argues that QLMs have a dual function, to reveal experiences of the life course, and to show the life course of crisis itself.

In pushing against 'helicopter' research through QLMs it is clearly important to think about what the approach 'does' in the widest possible sense through the research process and when it comes to the temporal dimensions of crisis. In our own paper (Brickell et al., 2024), we scope out what 'feminist longitudinal research' is, and argue that it not only brings to the fore 'temporarily contingent gendered impacts of a phenomenon, but can be distinguished by its intentionality and/or potential to challenge the patriarchal status quo, both in the lives of researchers and participants' (this Special Section). In essence, the paper shows how feminist consciousness-raising can be designed in and/or be an unexpected outcome of QLMs. The life of a research study, especially one rooted in QLMs is, like crisis, not finite. For example, the paper thinks about how researchers themselves can newly recognise inequalities in their own workplace by focusing on those that they study in others. As van Santen (2014, p. 24) echoes, in 'many disciplines we may set out on a longitudinal study at the beginning of a fixed period of time and make clear from the outset what changes we are looking for', yet 'this is hardly possible … [and] we should deduce that we—professionally and otherwise—are part of these changes'. As our paper shows, and taking inspiration from Hall's (2024) observations, understanding the lifecourse of QLMs translates into a concern for their varied impacts on participants, researchers, participant–researcher, and researcher–researcher relationships (into the future) too.

Just as our ReFashion research during the COVID-19 pandemic was only possible given our years-long commitment to the issue of worker precarity and research collaborations previously in Cambodia, this was also the case for Cuomo (2024) in relation to domestic violence in the United States. Together, these articles point to QLMs in crisis times being unlikely to arise from, or being operationalised through, 'helicopter' research. For five years since 2018, Cuomo had been part of a community-based research project in collaboration with local victim advocates and also acted as victim advocate for survivors of domestic violence before becoming an academic. Through interviews with professionals who work with survivors, including victims, advocates, law-enforcement, prosecutors and judicial officers, she has long shown a keen commitment to tracking the implementation of the recommendations made over time. The COVID-19 pandemic hit midway through her fieldwork, but the research was able to continue because of trust she had with stakeholders pre-pandemic. In this sense, Cuomo's ability to conduct longitudinal research in crisis was highly contingent on research connections, commitments and engagements before the fast crisis unfolded.

What can be learned from this is that researchers need to be researching the slow crises of everyday life, such as domestic violence, to then understand how response to it manifests with a fast emergency. Cuomo's (2024) paper in the Special Section shows how crisis can have positive as well as negative outcomes. To exemplify, survivors no longer need to physically travel to the courthouse to fill out a paper petition by hand, and to physically appear in person at a hearing—this had in the past enabled abusers to engage in coercive control of survivors in court. Through long-term research on the 'ordinary' crisis of domestic violence, Cuomo could understand how crisis can lead to transitions (such as the court process turning from analogue to digital) that were previously deemed impossible by policy and law-makers.

In the final paper, MacLeavy's (2024) article centres on the value of QLMs in a policy context of longstanding and ongoing crisis. Drawing on her engagements in regeneration communities in Bristol, from her doctoral research to the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper underscores the importance of going beyond quick outcomes of policy in terms of assessment, to think about how a temporal consciousness can allow researchers, and engage policy-makers to think about change, or lack of change, over time. Researchers engaging in QLMs tend themselves to become important repositories of understanding that can counteract lurches or tendencies towards crisis exceptionalism. This encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic. As MacLeavy (2024) reflects, 'the persistent disconnect between employers and people from the NDC area implied that labour market exclusion was not only—or even—a product of the COVID-19 crisis, but emerging from long run, dynamics of inequality and disadvantage that incurred within the present, despite past policy investment in these four neighbourhoods' (this Special Section). Here, again, the fallacy of the COVID-19 crisis being an aberrational crisis is exposed through QLMs—precarious livelihoods long impacting socio-economically deprived areas.

4 | CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship on QLMs emphasises their value for understanding trajectories and journeys over time, and for sensing, tracing and evidencing the impact of life and historical crises over the short and longer term (Neale, 2019;

Patrick et al., 2021; Scott, 2022; Thomson & McLeod, 2015; Treanor et al., 2021). What the Special Section adds is a closer and more complex introspection on the use and outcome of QLMs in spaces and times of crisis from the perspective of researchers undertaking the research, and in multiple instances, research participants enrolled in them. As the papers attest, QLMs when undertaken with significant care and thought, can have both intellectual (as well as sometimes personal) benefits for both. In the context of the crisis times in which we live, our editorial introduction has marked out two main contributions of QLMs as told through the eight papers in the Special Section: first that they guards against crisis exceptionalism, and second that they can aid against 'helicopter' research.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
ReFashion data is available via ReShare https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/study?id=856007.

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ENDNOTES
[1] These are summative observations of course, and do not fully reflect all the myriad contributions which the papers make on their own terms.

[2] Equally, as Sharpe (2017, p. 242) notes, the 'line between persistence and pestering in re-establishing contact with, and repeat participation by, people in qualitative longitudinal research can be a thin one'. This is something that different papers reflect on in the Special Section.

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