

Time and the Life Course: The flow of lives through time

Perspectives from Qualitative Longitudinal Research

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Overview

- Why a dynamic approach to social research?
- Micro-dynamic research: QL Research : qualitative enquiry conducted through or in relation to time
- Rethinking the Life course
- Re-thinking time: time as method, time as a theoretical framework and substantive topic that drives enquiry
- Slicing Time: time in older life



Thinking Dynamically

- ‘At a time when social forces are making instability a way of life, researchers are developing new modes of enquiry that take account of the dynamic nature of people’s lives. Approaches to ‘thinking dynamically’ have triggered the beginning of an intellectual revolution ... (Leisering and Walker, preface to *The Dynamics of Modern Society*, Policy Press , 1998).
- Pointing to rapid social change in contemporary societies – that they are in a perpetual state of flux and change, biographically and historically – provides the key rationale for temporal research



An intellectual revolution?

Large scale longitudinal studies are relatively new, they date from the post war era.

Qualitative approaches to thinking dynamically have a much longer history – they have their roots in social anthropology, oral history and community studies, going back over a hundred years.

e.g. Maud Pember Reeves (Fabian Women's group):
Round about a pound a week: 42 low income families in Lambeth Walk, 1909-13. Perceptive humanity



Re-discovering past wisdom

- For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be re-united, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross... Van Gennep *The Rites of Passage* 1960 [1909]: 189

A dynamic thinker, a social constructionist

One of first to use the life course as the central organising framework for social research: discerning how the biological unfolding of lives (birth to death) intersects with the biographical unfolding of lives (cradle to grave).

Not such a new revolution!



From snap shots to 'movies'

- Move away from snap shot pictures of the social world to construct a moving picture that captures social processes (Richard Berthoud 2000, Seven years in the Lives of British Families: 15).
- Longitudinal Data offers a movie rather than snapshot (Berthoud)
- **But what kind of movie?**

Macro-dynamics: Epic movie

- Quantitatively driven.
- Mapping broad social trends across large populations.
- Through quantitative survey and cohort studies, measuring chronological change at regular intervals: **what** changes, for whom, the **direction and extent** of change, **where and when and how often** change occurs.
- Big, 'thin' statistical data that offers a grand vista, a birds eye view, a broad, 'surface' picture of social change
- **Creates an epic movie**
- The dominant framework

Micro-dynamics: Intimate movie

- Rich, in-depth, situated studies, tracking lives to discern the **'how and why'** of change, continuity, endurance, causality
Why life journeys are undertaken and the nature of the journey along the way (the Odyssey).
- Human subjectivity and agency – as a dynamic concept - captures *lived experiences*, the *interior logic* of lives as they unfold: how change is created, lived, experienced through the generation of reflexive narratives of the self.
- Ethnographic, interview and narrative based methods – rooted in social anthropology, community studies, oral history... **the 'up close and personal' or intimate movie**
- Poor cousin, growing in social and environmental sciences.
- Also a third movie: QPS **intimate epics**



The Life course- ...

- The flow of lives ... through time
- How is time implicated in the study of the life course?

How we perceive the life course depends on how we perceive time itself.

The flow of lives: conceptual building blocks

- **Turning points** – ‘lived moments’ that may trigger or cause change: taking stock, nudges, eddies, rehearsals, tipping points, epiphanies, fateful moments, critical moments (Denzin Giddens and Thomson and Holland): Something that triggers a change in perception or what matters to people as a precursor to action – Strauss; changes in an inner biographical disposition (Mirrors and Masks 1959): subjective, crafted, understood retrospectively
- **Transitions:** change in state or over phase of life course e.g into parenthood, marriage, education, work, illness, bereavement, poverty, into dependency, into care
- **Trajectories:** longer term pathways/ lines of development through the long sweep of a life: upwards, or downwards, converging or diverging, intersecting trajectories.

Researching the life course: top down approach

- Two broad approaches:
 - **Top down:** life course is defined in structural or macrodynamic terms as a socially defined and institutionally regulated sequence of transitions which are re-enforced by normative expectations (Heinz 2009). Life is seen to unfold as a predictable passage through a number of fixed, developmental phases relating to the institutions of family, schooling, work and so on.
 - The life course is seen to have a universal linearity/objectivity that places it outside /‘above’ those whose lives are under study.
 - **the epic movie.**

Researching the life course: 'bottom up' approach

- **Micro-dynamic** approach based on premise that the life course is socially constructed through lived experiences and the subjective framing of crafting of life journeys across time and place
- Harris: (1987) the life course is 'the negotiation of a passage through an unpredictably changing environment'
- Life course categories are not fixed: 'we have to account for changes in the shape of the life course itself. It is not only individuals who change but the categories they inhabit' Hockey and James (2003 57)
- **The intimate movie**

'Bottom up' approach

- The life course does not simply unfold before and around us; rather we actively organise the flow, pattern and direction of experience ... The meaning of our existence is artfully constructed, constantly emerging, yet circumstantially shaped. ... The construction of the life course is always ineluctably local... Individuals never yield authorship of realities to deterministic, structural imperatives (Holstein and Gubrium 2000 182-4, 210, 32).

Relative Value/Status

- Large scale studies said to have made **impressive progress**: the **gold standard**, the **backbone** of life course enquiry
- QL research has made '**less visible**' progress... it **resides at the margins** of mainstream life course research (*Heinz 2003: 75*) **Longitudinal surveys/panel studies** are the **principle way** to chart changes... with other methods ... such as ethnographic observation ... as **important supplements....** (*Elder and Giele 2009 vii-viii*).
- *On the other hand.....*

Relative value/status

- life course analysis does not analyse lives but presents statistical histories of cohorts' (*Neugarten cited in Heinz 2009b: 476*)
- '[while] demographic surveys show the magnitude and distribution of migration in entire populations ... only individual or family histories reveal why one person moves and another stays put' (Giele 2009: 236).
- **Complementary methods**, *not either/or* bridging the gap: QPS Intimate epics, Community based surveys e.g. Born in Bradford
- New infrastructures in which life course research can grow and flourish



The Flow of lives... through time

- How is time perceived in life course research?
Self evident and straightforward: We create a moving picture that charts changes by tracking people over time
- Are there other ways in which time is implicated in the flow of lives? How might we re-think time?
- How we perceive the life course depends on how we perceive time itself

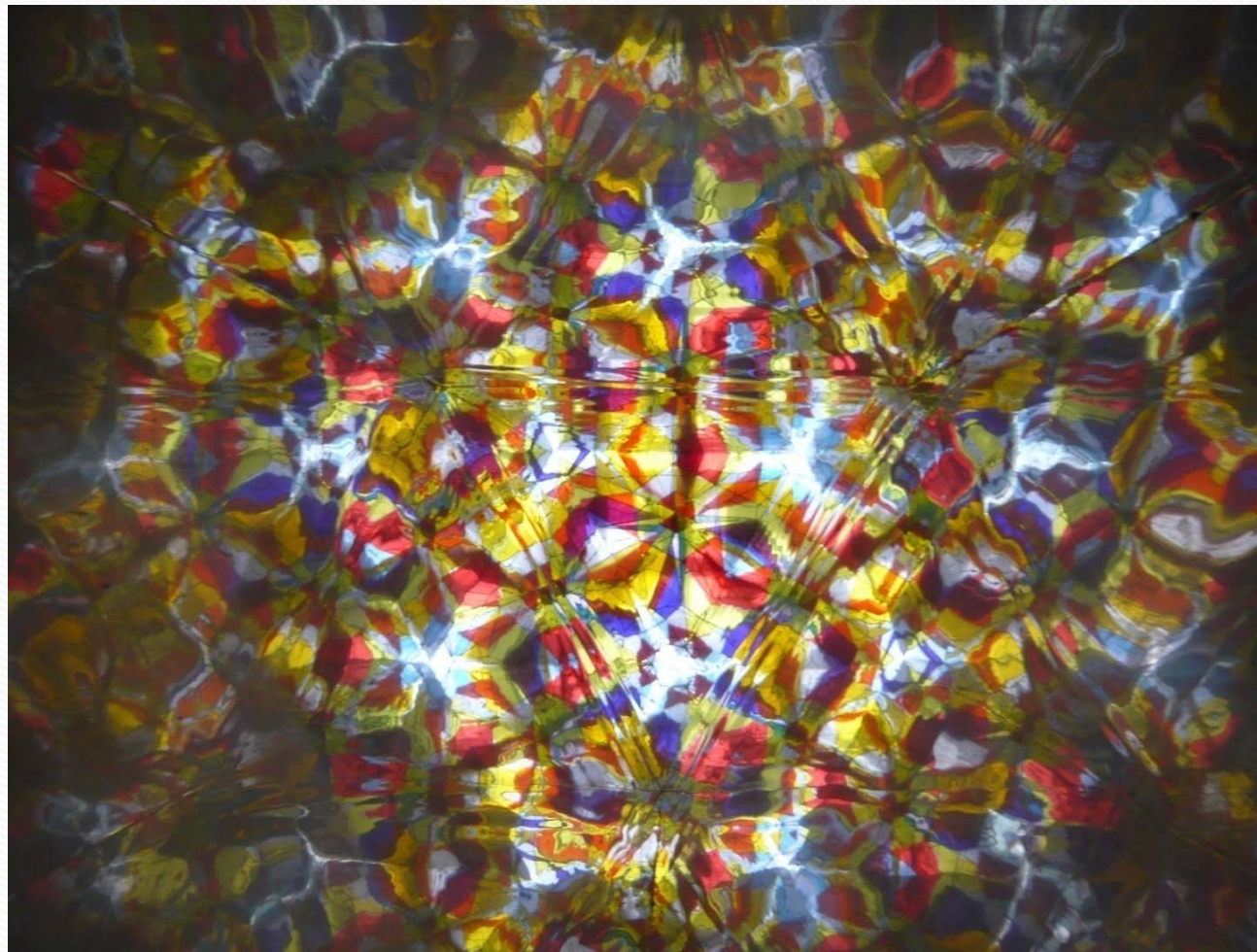
Re-thinking Time: Adam 1990

- ‘To study the experience of duration, the estimation of an interval ... or the timing, sequence and co-ordination of behaviour is to define time as duration, interval, sequencing’ and so on... ‘The conceptualisation is in turn imposed upon the studies. ... Time does not ‘emerge’ from these studies but is predefined in the very aspects that are being studied.’ (*Adam 1990: Time and social theory 94*)
- ‘Our understanding of ageing and life change is circumscribed and propelled by our view of time passing – irresistibly, irreversibly, irretrievably, inevitably. The linear progressive lifecourse is an artefact of this chronology. ... across cultures, we find depictions of ageing and life change aligning with local notions of time’ (*Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 35-6*)

fixed time

- Drawing on Adam, two broad ways to conceptualise time:
- **Fixed, chronological time: Clock/ Calendar.**
- Time is a constant, unvarying, cumulative, objective, mechanical construct. It has a relentless, recurrent, linear or cyclical motion that is expressed numerically.
- Time as chronology, sequence, duration, interval. A shared, taken-for-granted background, an external framework within which we measure, plan, organise, regulate our lives, a resource and site of power and control
- Events occur **in time** because time is external to them: **the clock becomes time.** This **top down** perception of time maps on to our top down view of the life course.
- Pervasive view since early C18th (Newtonian physics)

Fluid time - a kaleidoscopic view



fluid time

- **Fluid, experiential time: Temporality or Timescapes**
- A plurality of times emerge that are relative, subjectively defined, context dependent, recursive, intersecting in complex and unpredictable ways
- Flows of time are embedded in our day to day lives – emerging from our social events, practices and experiences.
- Our social world **does not occur in time, rather it constitutes time**. Adam turns our common sense notion of time on its head to consider, not *events in time*, but *time in events*. This **bottom up** perception of time maps onto our bottom up view of the life course.
- Re-discovered through C20th relativity theory, quantum mechanics, ecological biology: it pervades the world of nature, of which the social world is a part.

Relative value/status

- Not either/or formulations: both are empirical realities that influence every day existence.
- Clock and calendar time are only part of the temporal picture: we need to consider all dimensions of time and their intricate connections.
- 25 years on there is some progress in importing Adam's ideas into social research . Fixed time still dominates. Life course researchers – both qual and quant- take the self evident empirical route, using calendar time as the vehicle for their studies
- The hall mark of QL research, is a central concern with fluid time, flows of time: time as a theoretical construct drives research design, the generation of data and insights.



'Slicing' Time: Intersecting dimensions/domains/planes

- **Passage: Past–Present–Future Time**
- **Tempo: Intensive- Extensive Time**
- **Synchronicity: Continuous –Discontinuous Time**
- **Geography: Space-Time**
- **Magnitude: Micro-Meso-Macro Time**



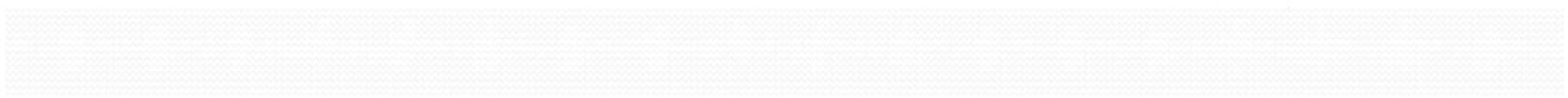
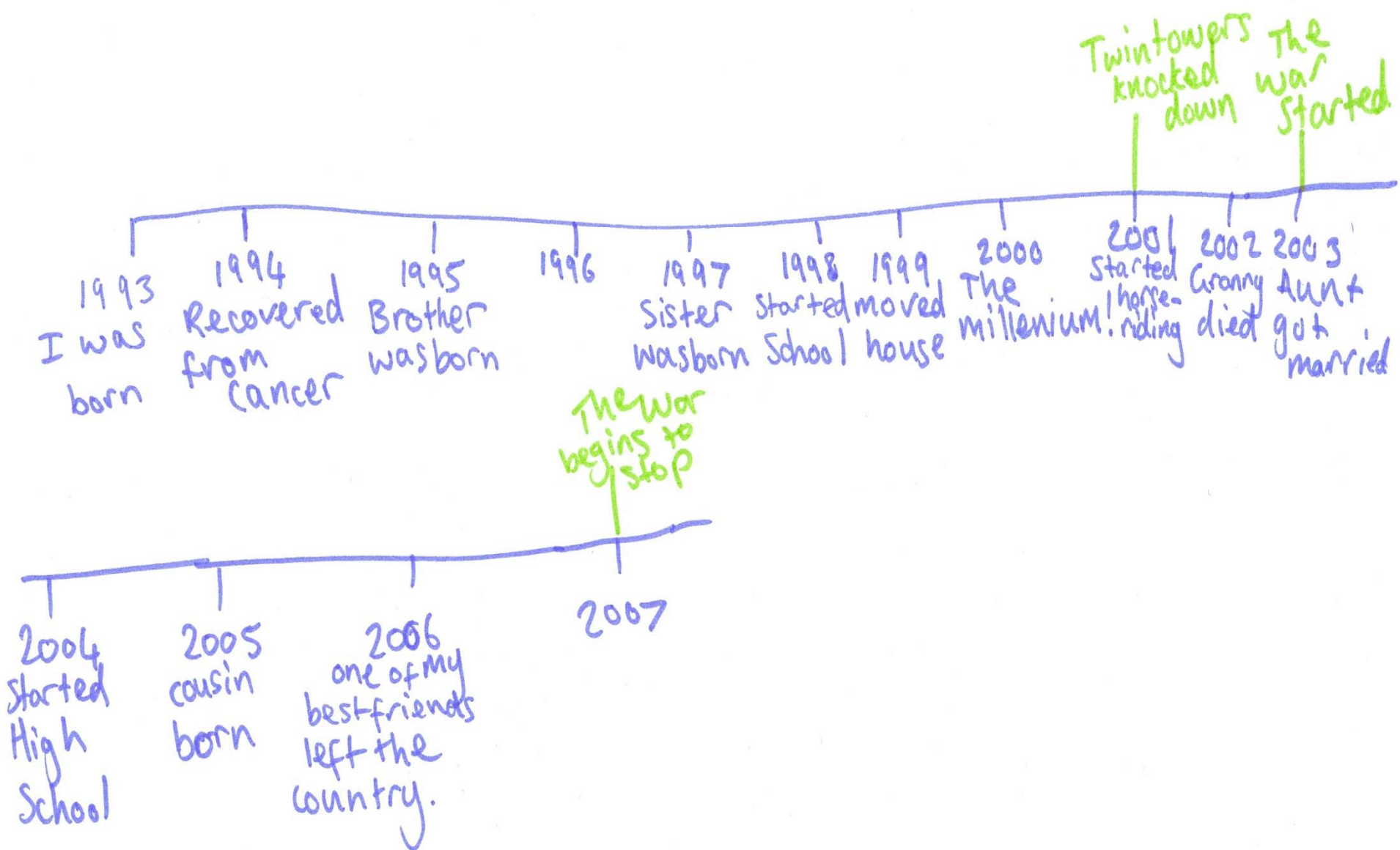
Passage: Past-Present-Future

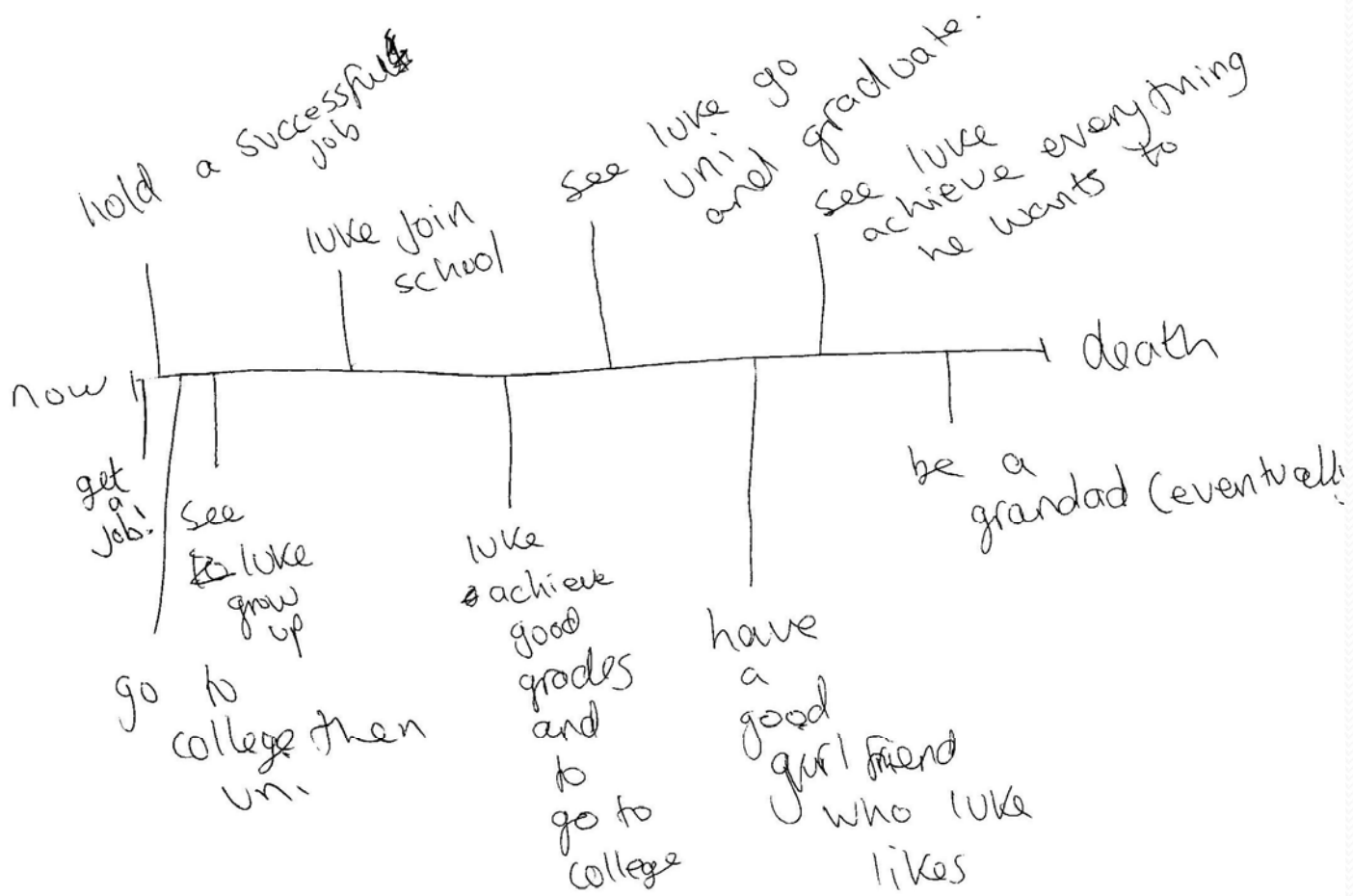
- **Past and future** imaginary realms that flow into each other, in a self referential loop. We constantly over write, reinterpret, reimagine, through the lens of the ever shifting present.
- **Past:** a subjective resource, the power of memory, heritage. Hindsight produces self understanding and plays an integral role in shaping moral life (Freeman 2010). Turning points find their value here
- **Future:** Aspirations allows us to discern the seeds of change. Adam suggests exploring different orientations to the future –fate, fortune, fiction or fact. Our vision of the future changes through the life course.
- We can map and update past and future at each research encounter to discern the opportunities and constraints that shape life journeys



... life ... must be lived forwards. ... But ... it must be understood backwards.

Søren Kierkegaard





I have finished my medicine course at Edinburgh University, and am now training to be a forensic pathologist. I have a little green car, which I use to get around. I live in a small flat with a good friend. In the evenings, I read, do work related to my training, and take Catalan classes. Occasionally, when my friend is out, I play my clarinet. Eventually, I will finish my course and move to Barcelona. I email old school friends every now and then, and they update me with their lives. I am still writing stories, in spiral bound notebooks, which litter the floor and the desk. The flat is quite clean, as we keep it in good condition. I take the train down to Leeds during the holidays, and visit my family.

EMILIA (YLT, age 15)

At the age of 25 I am now a key stage 1
in year one class. I really enjoy it + I enjoyed university
when I was 18 I went to Australia for a year
+ it really matured me, I am now married with one
child + want more than one child, my husband + I
live in a regular house + earn enough money to
go abroad + buy our child ~~and~~ toys to keep her/him
happy and content. I enjoy life + love the family aspect.
I love spending time with my family + am lucky
enough to have still kept in touch with lots of
my friends, after I came back from Australia me +
Mollie got a flat together, I met my husband when
I was 20 + we married at 22. I want 3 or 4 children
I'm still in touch with most of my family + see my
mum alot. That's it really.

SOPHIE (YLT, age 15)

Tempo: Intensive-Extensive Time

- Pace, speed, velocity, rhythms of time; acuteness or chronicity of change.
- **The Pace of change** Change is neither inherently good or bad, but the speed of change, whether multiple changes occur in quick succession, and how these processes are managed are important areas of study (Flowerdew & Neale).
- **The Rhythms of time – intersection of different tempos** *industrial time* (the rigid impersonal tempo of the clock) and **family time** (fluid, enduring, value laden). Time itself, like the life course, changes shape, expands and shrinks, accelerates or slows down. (Novotny's extended present).
- **Turning points, transitions, trajectories:** from fleeting moments to the long sweep of a life. Bornat and Bytheway combined life histories with diaries to capture daily lives.

Synchronicity: Continuous-Discontinuous Time

- The timing of life events, how far individuals are in step or out of step with wider generational or historical processes e.g. in hard times, war times, personal or natural disasters.
- **E.g. Elder's study of the Great Depression** and the factors, relating to age, timing of events, life circumstance that enabled people to survive
- **Ruptures in Personal Time** – turning points or transitions e.g. migration, illness, bereavement, job loss, displacement, rupture experience; feeling 'out of time', disconnected from past and future. Time horizons shrink, people live in the present, needs of the present override care for the past (burning bridges) or the future (risk, lack of aspiration).
- **Continuities:** enduring hardship, sustaining relationships, how in all kinds of circumstances people bide their time

Geography: Space-Time

- The intrinsic connection of time and space – or when and where – to locate and grasp the significance and meaning of events and experiences: time is irrevocably bound up with the spatial constitutions of society (May and Thrift 2001: 3).
- Fluid time is grounded, located in particular places (where as clock time is spatially adrift, empty).
- Time is made tangible through situated practices, spatial markers, liminal places, symbolic landscapes e.g. churches
- Time emerges and is constituted differently in different localities and cultural spaces
- (May and Thrift (2001 eds) *Timespace: the Geographies of Temporality* Routledge)

Magnitude: Micro-Meso-Macro

- ‘We cannot hope to understand society unless we have a prior understanding of the relationship between biography and history ... [the task is to] continually work out and revise your views on the problems of history, the problems of biography and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect’ (C Wright Mills *The Sociological Imagination* 1959:225).
- **Loongitudinal prospective:** biography becomes history
- **Retrospective and follow up studies :** oral history , biographical research
- **Historical moments** – recession, war, disasters. Elder
- **Generational Research (Brannen, Shah and Priestley)**
- Working through collective lives as a bridge between micro and macro.



Intersecting Dimensions of Time

Passage-Tempo-Synchronicity-Geography-Magnitude

- Five dimensions or planes of experience intersect and flow into each other – they are all implicated in how lives unfold. So we can understand past, present and future biographically or historically, in different spatial contexts, and through differential experiences of the intensity or synchronicity of time.
- Endless possibilities exist to elaborate these planes and their intersections, thereby enriching life course research.



The importance of Time

- Time is the lynchpin for understanding the essentially dynamic relationship between agency and structure, micro and macro, between lived experience and wider historical and policy processes.
- But how time is understood, its nature and parameters, is no less crucial. Our view of the life course will be impoverished if we focus solely on the clock and the calendar.
- It is through QL research that we can take temporality - fluid, social time into account; creating distinctive forms of knowledge and generating a much richer vision of the social world.

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