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timescapes

An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study



Researching Lives Through Time: Time, Generation and Life Stories

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1. Biographical Notes

Barbara Adam (PhD, DScEcon) is Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. Her expertise is in time and futures theory and practice across social and socio-environmental domains. She has developed the time perspective over the last two decades during which she has worked the time dimension into the following areas of conceptual and empirical social science research: culture, education, environment, environmental economics, food, globalisation, gender, health, international relations, management, media, risk, technological innovation, transport and work. As an integral part of this research commitment she edited the international, trans-disciplinary Sage journal *Time & Society*, which she founded in 1992 and handed over to new editors in 1999. Since 2003 she has expanded the time focus to 'the future' under an ESRC Professorial Fellowship project '*In Pursuit of the Future*'. This work, which is ongoing, is theoretically challenging and has significant implications for social theory and methodology as well as policy and entrepreneurial practice. Research findings are made available on www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures/. Her publications include five research monographs on social time (two of which have been awarded book prizes), five edited collections, 100+ articles and 25 issues of journals published as editor or guest editor.

Jenny Hockey trained as an anthropologist and is currently Professor of Sociology at Sheffield University. She has published widely in the following areas: ageing, gender and the life course; death, dying and bereavement; memory, material culture and home. She is particularly interested in questions to do with identity, embodiment and the body - and co-authored *Embodying Health Identities* (Palgrave, 2007) with Allison James. Another recent volume, *Mundane Heterosexualities. From theory to practices* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), co-authored with Angela Meah and Victoria Robinson, critically engages with feminist theory around heterosexuality by drawing on the team's recent empirical research into the making of heterosexual relationships. Her current and forthcoming work includes an ESRC-funded project on the practice of natural burial in the UK; a co-edited collection on space and the material culture of death, dying and bereavement; and a co-authored volume on masculinities in transition.

Paul Thompson is internationally recognised as pioneer of the use of oral history and life story interviews in social research. He is Founder Editor of the journal *Oral History* (from 1970). Subsequently he became Founder of the National Life Story Collection at the British Library National Sound Archive (1987), now the world's leading oral history archive. In 1994 he established Qualidata, the ESRC's action unit for archiving qualitative research fieldwork. His book *The Voice of the Past* (1978; revised editions 1988 and 2000; translated into ten languages) is the classic text on the oral history method. Paul is now Professor Emeritus in Sociology at the University of Essex (where he first became a Lecturer in 1964) and also a Research Fellow at the Young Foundation. There have been three strands in his research and writing. Earlier he was strongly involved in architectural history and also conservation work through the Victorian Society. Then from the late 1960s he used retrospective oral history interviews for social history. This led to *The Edwardians* (1975; revised editions 1977 and 1992), and then to *The Voice of the Past*. He has also edited oral history collections on *The Myths We Live By* (with Raphael Samuel, 1990) and on *Narrative and Genre* (with Mary Chamberlain, 1998). He is currently working with community oral history projects in Mallaig (a Scottish fishing community), Wivenhoe, and with Moroccan migrants in London. Lastly, he has been concerned with contemporary social change. His book *Listening for a Change* (with Hugo Slim, 1993) has been widely used by development workers. In his study of Scottish fishing communities, *Living the Fishing* (1983), he

explored the links between family and community culture and economic adaptability, using a combination of archival research, oral history and anthropological fieldwork. He pursued similar issues in life story studies of car workers and of City financiers, and in his joint works with Daniel Bertaux, *Between Generations* (1993) and *Pathways to Social Class* (1997). Most recently, his principal research interest has been complex families. He is joint author of *Growing Up in Stepfamilies* (1997), and of *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic* (2006) on transnational Jamaican families.

Rosalind Edwards is Professor in Social Policy and Director of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group at London South Bank University. She is directing one of the projects under the *Timescapes* programme: 'Children and young people's lateral relationships: siblings and friends', details of which can be found at: www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/yourspace. Ros is also leading on the publications strategy for the *Timescapes* team as a whole.

2. Introduction

Rosalind Edwards

The *Timescapes* project was launched on 31st January 2008, and the event included an afternoon seminar on ‘Researching Lives Through Time’. Keynote speakers at that seminar were Barbara Adam, Jenny Hockey, and Paul Thompson. This first working paper in the *Timescapes* series presents their talks, respectively focusing on time, generation and life stories. Each of these concepts and approaches is central to the *Timescapes* endeavour.

Timescapes is a five-year study that aims to throw light on the dynamics of personal relationships over the course of people’s lives, and the identities that flow from these relationships. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council to pioneer the use and development of large scale qualitative longitudinal methods of enquiry. *Timescapes* aims to explore the micro processes through which people’s relationships and identities are forged, sustained, discarded or re-worked over time. It comprises seven empirical projects that track individuals or inter-generational groups over time, in varied geographical and cultural settings across mainland Britain. Collectively the projects span the life course, documenting the personal lives and relationships of children and young people, adults in midlife, and those in later life. They illuminate fundamentally important relationships with parents, siblings, wider family, children, partners, friends and lovers; and dynamic life experiences such as growing up, forming relationships, bearing and rearing children, living in families and becoming old. *Timescapes* draws on the experiences and perspectives of those involved in these fundamentally important dimensions of life, to see how they influence the ways people define themselves, and how they affect their life chances and well being. Understanding the ways that individuals live their lives over time, linked to both their own generation as well as those before them and those to come, and setting these experiences within their varied circumstances and environments locally and globally, will enrich our knowledge of social processes and social change. Time, generation and life stories are thus key to the work of *Timescapes*, both as guiding concepts and as methodological approaches.

The first contribution in this collection is by Barbara Adam, who has been at the forefront of developments in theorizing time and enabling social researchers to see the world through a different lens. Her paper outlines what might be involved when a timescapes perspective is taken seriously in social theory and methodology. It sets out some of the time-based challenges and identifies temporality and futurity as two of the major difficulties researchers of the longitudinal *Timescapes* study are likely to encounter in their efforts to integrate social time into their approach.

We then move on from time to consider the related idea of generation. Jenny Hockey has been an important figure in highlighting the life course as a mode of working for empirical researchers. Her paper asks how the relationship between continuity and change might be understood during the analysis of qualitative data. Drawing on arguments which suggest that, for westerners, change is something that happens to continuity, it highlights the importance of exploring interviewees’ narrative strategies. This approach not only sheds light on the status of empirical data – but also reveals the ways in which identities may be claimed through the assertion of temporal or cross generational continuities and differences.

Finally, Paul Thompson – a noted pioneer in oral history – considers the issue of life stories. His paper starts from the fundamental interweaving of individual lives and social change that the celebrated

sociologist C. Wright Mills saw as 'the shank of social study'. It looks at how this interweaving can be explored through social research using life stories. While drawing attention to difficulties such as the complexity of memory and different forms of narrative analysis, the paper shows the strength of the life story method in uncovering hidden voices, hidden spheres and hidden connections in the shaping of social change.

3. The Timescapes Challenge: Engagement with the Invisible Temporal

Barbara Adam

3.1 Introduction

The Timescapes study is about – and I quote directly: ‘The processes by which identities are forged, sustained, discarded and reworked...’; ‘in relation to significant others...’; ‘understanding the significance of time in people’s lives.’ For this study time is not just conceived as a linear linking of past to future but a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that involves *biographical time*, which covers that lifespan from birth to death, *generational time*, which provides links and attachments across generations of kinship relations and *historical time*, which locates individual and family lives in the wider frames of external events, environments and political landscapes. This means that the study seeks to understand micro processes of social change in their biographical, familial and historical contexts.

My task in this paper is to unpack what might be involved when time as a key dimension of people’s lives is understood as *complex* and *multi-dimensional*. What then might be involved in the effort to achieve this nested, relational, processual understanding of identity? What is new and innovative about a longitudinal study that takes time seriously? What are the difficulties and challenges involved? What might need to change in both theory and methodology if the complexity of time was to be encompassed in social investigation?

In this brief discussion I will not empty for you the entire contents of this Pandora box but instead open up just three issues for consideration: i) temporal complexity, ii) engagement with temporality, that is, invisible processuality and iii) the social sciences’ troubled relation with futurity.

3.2. Temporal Complexity

First we need to consider what is conjured up in our minds when we think respectively of individual time, family time, work time, generational time, institutional time, social time, and historical time. Is ‘*my time*’ which I associate with my garden compatible with the study of processes and structures associated with my work time? Is my grandchildren’s play time compatible with the meal time with their parents or meal times spent in front of the TV? Is the historical time of dates and facts compatible with the study of the creation of identity and its embeddedness in historical contexts, kinship relations and family traditions? Or are there many different kinds of times involved?

To assert that time is multifaceted and complex is to acknowledge that time is not uni-dimensional but multi-dimensional. In previous work I have theorised and developed a *timescapes perspective* (Adam 1998; 2004). Social science conducted from a timescapes perspective acknowledges that at the structural level of understanding time involves a number of irreducible elements. Let me first of all simply list these and then take three of the elements as examples of the differences involved:

Timescapes

- *Time frame* – bounded, beginning and end of day, year, life time, generation, historical/geological epoch;

- *Temporality* – process world, internal to system, ageing, growing, irreversibility, directionality;
- *Timing* – synchronisation, co-ordination, right/wrong time;
- *Tempo* – speed, pace, rate of change, velocity, intensity: how much activity in given timeframe;
- *Duration* – extent, temporal distance, horizon: no duration = instantaneity, time point/moment;
- *Sequence* – order, succession, priority: no sequence = simultaneity, at same time;
- *Temporal modalities*: past, present and future – memory, perception/experience and anticipation.

When several of these elements are brought together we begin to see *patterns* of rhythmicity, periodicity and cyclicity. However, whether we see cycles of repetition or change and linear succession is fundamentally relative. It depends on our temporal framework of observation. Thus, for example, when we focus on the minutiae of everyday life we see linear succession: one event following another. We see children playing in the school yard until the bell calls them back into the class room. And we can follow a lesson from beginning to end. Yet, when we widen the timeframe of analysis to the school year, then the daily and annual repeating cycles of playtimes, lessons, homework and home time become visible. That is, with the wider temporal perspective the linear gives way to the cyclical, only to be followed by another linear perspective when we focus, for example, on the historical change of educational traditions and pedagogic practices.

The point here is a dual one: first, temporal frames are not given but chosen and, secondly, the temporal framework we impose determines what we can and do see. Similarly, it matters which temporal elements we focus on and what combination of elements we bring together in our analysis. At this point let me exclude from consideration issues that will be raised later and consider here just the *time frame*, *timing* and *tempo*.

The temporal element of time frame: I already mentioned that the choice of time frame will affect the findings of investigations. But the issue of the time frame is even more complicated than that. It is also a question about standpoint and perspective. It matters whether you place your subjects and their relations in an objective frame of calendars and clock time which positions them temporally in an externally located, socially constructed frame. These frames are stable and fixed. Thus, for example, 9/11 will always stay 9/11 irrespective of your standpoint and perspective. In contrast, when subjects are placed in their personal frames of life time and family time, and/or times of illness and stress, the situation becomes a very different one. These latter frames are relative and mobile. They move with every new moment, situation and context. Their implied past and future expands and contracts as people move along their life course. Thus, for an infant school pupil the beginning of school life is still near, while the end of school life is an almost inconceivable distance in the future. For an A-level student, in contrast, the situation is reversed. Moreover, it matters what the perceived end is: a student's A-level result or death as a likely outcome of his/her terminal illness, for example. As researchers we need to be acutely aware of these differences and recognize their effects on investigations and findings.

The temporal element of timing: Very different issues confront us with this second timescape element where we focus on social synchronisation, co-ordination, and what are good and bad times for action. Here it matters greatly what kind of time is used as a timing and synchronising medium and whether or not the participants' times are *compatible* to achieve good timing. Equally important is the social, political, economic, religious and socio-technical *context* of timing. The latter in turn are intimately connected to the *speed of change*.

Let me list here just a sample of different times that are routinely synchronised in daily life: clock and calendar time which are invariable and unaffected by context; body time which is hugely affected by age and degrees of wellbeing; the seasons and the different climatic conditions with their wide-ranging effects. Different again is the time internal to the task at hand, that is, to feeding the baby, dressing, homework, or a history lesson. Generational times are tied to the different temporal needs of grandparents, parents and children (and here teenagers will have different times and timing needs from their very young siblings). Equally important for timing are the different opening and closing times of institutions, agencies, shops and places of work. And, as a last example, we might think of the time that is internal to the technology involved: the communication times of face-to-face, letter, telephone, or internet; the mobility times of walking, cycling, driving a car or riding on a bus or train, and/or the times of cooking technologies such as the open fire, electric cooker, or the micro-wave. All have different effects on our capacity to time and synchronise our actions. Yet, despite their significant differences they all need to be brought into one coherent frame of action. Clearly, the more types of time involved, the more difficult becomes the task of synchronisation and timing.

The temporal element of tempo: Now let me briefly look at the third temporal element of the timescape perspective: tempo, speed and pace. This element relates to the speed, pace and intensity at which activities are conducted, work has to be completed, and institutions change, to name just a few examples. Here we need to establish whether or not the speed is the same across the various domains investigated in this study. We need to ask further who establishes the pace for whom and on what basis (Adam 1995 chapters 3 and 4). We need to explore what happens when there is a clash of tempi: when children need to adapt to the tempi of their parents; when the elderly need to conform to the pace of the working majority and to institutionally paced schedules; and when workers need to match their pace to the efficiency requirements of their job where ever more work needs to be packed into the same unit of time.

In order to understand the power relations involved, we need to inquire who has to do most of the adapting – why - and with what consequences (Adam 1990 chapter 5)? Then there is the additional need to investigate what happens to the quality of life and wellbeing of family members in those conflicts of tempi: what happens and what adjustments need to be made when the economic resource time of public life clashes with the embodied process time of feeding a baby or an elderly family member with dementia? We might further explore to what extent the speed of the internet or the speed fetish (Adam 2004 chapters 5 and 6) of the economy have penetrated family life and to what effect.

What is most important to appreciate is that none of these temporal elements operate in isolation. They all mutually implicate each other. Therefore, when in our studies we concentrate on one particular element we must not lose the others from our peripheral vision; they have to remain implicated and included in our focus and the resulting analysis (Adam 1990 chapters 3 and 7). The complexity is further increased when we focus on the second key issue I highlight, that is the temporality of social life which operates below the empirical level of sense data.

3.3. Engagement with Temporality – Processuality and the Invisible

Conventional empirical study seeks to produce factual results. This involves focus on space and matter: that is, on material, spatially located facts, not the ‘immaterial’ world of processes. It tends to deal with phenomena that can be counted and quantified, or at least be described in factual terms. When change

is involved empirical study tends to take snapshots on a before-and-after basis. The processes involved tend not to form the explicit focus of attention.

Matter in space is visible; processes are not. We can recognize the latter's workings only with hindsight, by a friend's hair having gone grey, the new car having gone rusty, the toddler having grown up, the radiation from a leaking nuclear power plant emerging as cancer symptoms, the grandmother's developing dementia by her confusing the grandchildren and repeating the same question over and over again.

Social scientists know how to study the outcomes and the symptoms of processes set in train by action but not how to investigate the processes involved. And yet, it is these we need to access if we want to study the dynamics of relationships with significant others as *timescapes*, if we want to explore how identities are formed, maintained, discarded or reworked over time, if we want to understand individuals as embedded in social relations across time, if we want to grasp the significance of time for their emotional, spiritual, personal, public, political and institutional wellbeing, and if we want to appreciate how the individual, the social, the historical and generational aspects of their lives are interconnected and mutually implicating (Adam 1995 chapter 7).

Past approaches to social time have worked with a range of dualisms. They have opposed public to private time, cyclical to linear time, clock to process time, external and objective to internal and subjective time and many more. In contrast, the longitudinal *Timescapes* study seeks to understand relationships, interdependencies, and embeddedness and aims to connect process to structures as well as macro and micro perspectives of social change. This of course is a much more difficult task than establishing dualisms and then discarding the part that is not easily amenable to empirical study. Taking time seriously changes social science at the level of ontology, epistemology and methodology. It transforms our subject matter, how we know it, and how we study it. This means that the *Timescapes* programme of work involves its various research teams in adapting and changing established theories and methods and requires that they explore new paths of scientific investigation for the complex multi-faced temporal domain that is inseparable from its spatial and material expression. This is nowhere more apparent than in the social relations of the future, the third and last point I want to raise.

3.4. The Social Sciences' Troubled Relation with Futurity

Everything we do in our lives is not just embedded in a socio-historical past but also projects into a socio-environmental future. The *past* is accessible to us through its memory traces and records. It even has its own dedicated academic discipline and it is regularly encompassed by social science analysis. The *present* is accessible through perception, observation, face-to-face interaction and, in mediated form, through many technologies. The *present and past* are the primary domains of scientific, evidence-based investigation. The *future* in contrast has no dedicated academic discipline. Hence we find future and foresight studies only in the research worlds associated with business, planning and policy.

And yet, the subject matter of the social sciences is fundamentally extended across the modalities of time: that is, past, present and future (Adam and Groves 2007). Everything people do is embedded and extended in time. Our hopes, plans and fears project us into the future. We move in this future domain with great agility: we make choices. We weigh off risks and chances. We calculate the likelihood of success. Futures are created continuously, across the world, every second of the day. They are

produced by the full range of social institutions, including politics, law and the economy, science, medicine and technology, education and religion. And futures are produced at all levels of social relations: the individual, the family, social groups, companies and nations. These created futures extend across the full range of temporal reach from the very short to the extremely long-term and they extend spatially from the local to the regional, national, international and global. The future is therefore an inescapable aspect of social and cultural existence.

However, as the realm of the ‘not yet’ the future is not accessible to the senses. It is not knowable; to know it would require pre-cognition and clairvoyance. In its futurity much of the world of our making is not material in the conventional sense. Instead it is marked by latency and immanence. It is a world of deeds under way that have not yet materialised as symptoms, not yet congealed into matter. It is the future of processes – social, familial, generational, economic, political, and socio-technical. These are set in motion by socio-political, legal, scientific, economic and everyday performative, enacting practices. Moreover, the actions and processes associated with this ‘future in the making’ are ongoing. That is to say, past future-creating actions make up our present and future as well as the past, present, and future of successors. Our future creating actions make up not just our future and the future of contemporaries but also the past, present and future of successors. Future-creating actions, therefore, produce layers and layers upon layers of past and present futures as well as future presents and pasts.

The founders of the social sciences had no problem with the future as both an object of study and a domain they set out to create and engineer. For social thinkers such as Condorcet, Saint Simon, Comte and Marx, for example, social theory was indissolubly tied to practice, interpretation to normative conduct, science to politics, and prophesy to a desired social outcome. As such these early social scientists shared a commitment to make their world a better place. They wanted to identify *and* shape their history in the making. They were concerned not just to foresee and unveil the future but also to help usher it in and steer it in a particular direction. Their social science, therefore, was a mixture of social analysis (of the social world as it *is*), of social diagnosis (of what is good and bad or right and wrong about it), of social prognosis (of development, considering ‘if this... then that’), of vision of the good society (how the world could and should be) and of strategies for change (how we might achieve desired visions and goals). For them the contradiction between scientific study and normative engagement in the subject matter, and between science and politics/policy, had not yet emerged as a problematic issue.

Looking back over the history of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular we find it punctuated by efforts to embrace the social future and come to grips with the disjuncture between everyday practice and social science methodology. Thus far, however, evidence-based science and the interpretative tradition have won through and successfully bracketed this central domain of social life from their theories, methods and analyses, delegating it to a separate field of study, loosely covered under the umbrella term of futurology. With that move engagement with the future became associated with prediction, forecasting and prophesy.

This, however, is clearly not what this longitudinal *Timescapes* study is about, not what its researchers will encounter in their diverse investigations, not what they will need to grapple with. Instead it is far more likely that the *Timescapes* researchers will encounter a future that is projected, pictured, planned, promised, pursued, performed, prospected, produced and polluted. They will be confronted by futures encoded in processes and relationships. As such they will seek to access and unravel the invisible future embedded in actions, traditions and chains of obligation and care. That will be both the study’s challenge and its reward. Finally, investigators will need to come to terms with the issue of implication

– that they cannot extricate/abstract themselves from the consequences of their knowledge practices. And this is an issue not just of methodology but of politics and ethics. Knowing the future is inseparably tied to making futures and this in turn is an issue of ethics and responsibility. Clearly, the challenge is enormous and I wish the *Timescapes* project and its investigators success in their endeavours to embrace temporal complexity and in their efforts to make the invisible visible.

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4. Life Course and Intergenerational Research

Jenny Hockey

4.1 Introduction

In her work on the popularisation of photography, Susan Sontag noted two apparently contradictory ways that it contributes to who we think we are. First, the new technological scope of photographs to make us aware of difference or change – of mortality, vulnerability, mutability. As she says: ‘Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt’ (1978:15). Yet she also suggests that photographs can connect us to other people – particularly family members: ‘as that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialise, to restate symbolically, the imperilled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life.’ (1978:9)

Carol Smart similarly links photographs with the possibility of connection in her book on personal life. She describes feeling prompted to sort out the family photographs she inherited and reflects on her desire to establish relatedness with people who, she says, ‘I had never met and of whom I had only the dimmest knowledge’ (2007:1).

4.2 Continuity and Change

The *Timescapes* study is set up to ‘explore the ways in which people’s personal relationships and identities unfold over time’. Change seems to be foregrounded here. And not just the changes experienced by the individual, the *Timescapes*’ project overview statement says it: ‘has also been designed to help explain the widespread transformations that are occurring in contemporary family life’.

If we look back to our sociological and anthropological ancestors, we find sociologists particularly concerned with social change - with the problems of modernity introduced by capitalist industrialisation and urbanisation. Early anthropologists, however, expected to find long-standing continuities within the traditional societies that they travelled to. Rites of passage, for example, was a schema devised to explain how ritual enabled social stability in the face of individual flux and change (Van Gennep, [1909] 1960). Today, however, both anthropologists and sociologists concern themselves with transnational and global processes where ‘transience, mobility, immanence or fluidity’ are to be discovered. So what can we say about stability, continuity, connectedness?

My discussion of these questions draws on some of my own connections: long-term work on the life course with Allison James (Hockey and James, 1993; 2003); the cross-generational ESRC project on the making of heterosexual relationships with Vicki Robinson and Angela Meah (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2007); and an ESRC project on bereaved people’s treatment of human ashes retained after cremation with Leonie Kellaheer and David Prendergast (see for example, Kellaheer, Prendergast and Hockey, 2005). In all three projects, key questions have concerned the extent to which individuals and their social contexts change and/or stay the same over time.

What I am exploring here are some of the issues surrounding the qualitative data that we might gather in order answer such questions. Interviews give us some sense of how individuals’ lives have changed;

we can identify connections between their biographical information and historical sources. If, as we did in our project on heterosexuality, we ask similar questions of family members from different generations, again we get some sense of how heterosexual life has changed.

Since these are qualitative data, they have to be treated as situated. They are not transparent. They tell us how people remember or perhaps imagine their past lives. They are interpretations or perceptions. But this in itself raises issues as to whether people from different cohorts are – or are not – willing to discuss particular aspects of their personal lives with a researcher. Do we now have more sexual partners or are we now more prepared to discuss them than our grandmothers and grandfathers were?

4.3 Motivated Narratives

I want to suggest an additional dimension to all this. When data appear to evidence continuities and connectedness – or biographical and historical change – and particularly when they do both, in turn – we need to ask ‘why was the story told that way?’ Here I am drawing on the work of medical sociologist Mike Bury (2001) on illness narratives. He argues that these are not simply data which reveal the ‘underdog’ patient’s experience of illness – they are motivated narratives which directly contribute to the ways in which a patient manages the implications of their illness for their identity. In working with qualitative data relating to ageing, personal life, family and relationships, asking why the story was told that way can also lead to issues of identity – and help make sense of how continuity and change relate to one another - regardless of whether or not the data describe the highly problematic rupture of a life script.

Richard Jenkins’ (2004) work on identity highlights two dimensions of the process of knowing who we are: recognising who we are like and who we are not like; or having others recognise this on our behalf. He describes this as a reflexive process, actively undertaken within social interaction, whether face-to-face or imagined. What work like his often evokes, however, is a here-and-now where individuals rub up against one another in an embodied sense – and differences and similarities become evident. Where time is at issue – whether biographical or historical – I want to suggest that similar processes of identification may be at work. This may be in relation to images or memories of our former selves who we may or may not identify as ‘me’; but equally in terms of people who are older or younger than ourselves and with whom we may or may not identify. So for the individual, ageing across the life course can involve finding similarities and differences between different representations of the self - whether encountered through memorabilia and photographs or through revisiting long-lost relationships, via Friends Reunited, for example, or old ‘haunts’ – and that word in itself suggests some dislocation between me and my shadow self.

These practices can confront us with the processual nature of identification, one identity perhaps seeming to eclipse another entirely. Such experiences resonate with the term ‘active ageing’ favoured within a social gerontology which has shifted its gaze from cosy continuities to positive change (see for example, Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995). Within the conditions of post modernity, the life course arguably enables multiple lifestyles and identities to be exchanged across time and space. Doris Ingrisch (1995), for example, describes older women reinventing their gendered identities via access to education, independence and good health.

Along with technologies and practices which enable an experience of individual change, generational and age-cohort membership can also provide the basis for recognising someone as similar or different.

For example, when the grown-up children of the anthropologist Malcolm Young, now parents themselves, made him aware that they see him as radically different from them, he was prompted to begin writing his autobiography – and so lay claim to similarities and connections. In personal correspondence, he says ‘I find the young things have little or no conception that you once had similar feelings to those they’re now experiencing. It seems almost axiomatic to them that you can surely never have experienced anything they might be dabbling in, such as sex – and surely you never had children so how can you know anything about having small kids or how to bring them up’ (personal communication, 2008).

Both these experiences might seem self evident. If identification is an embodied process then the predictable biological changes of ageing will surely make and/or mark difference? And if we see ourselves as social beings, then won’t we age in particular ways, depending upon a wider historical context - which will then differentiate us from people ageing at another time?

4.4 Time Flows Downward

This returns us to the question as to where continuity and connection might feature within all this. What I want to draw upon here are arguments which suggest that our everyday conceptions of the relationship between continuity and change are culturally specific – even if they are difficult to extricate ourselves from. What the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argues is that in contemporary western societies ‘time is seen to flow downward’ (1992:20). It is a temporal context within which adults/parents are seen to act from convention, while their children exercise greater individual choice. So it is a cultural perspective which assumes that convention and tradition come from the past, and choice and invention lie in the future. Strathern sums up this western perspective on time and change as follows, ‘Increased variation and differentiation invariably lie ahead, a fragmented future as compared with the communal past ... time increases complexity’ (1992:21).

I found her notion that ‘Change can be visualised as a sequence of events that ‘happens’ to something that otherwise retains its identity ... continuity makes change evident’ (Strathern, 1992:1) thought-provoking – the idea that as westerners we tend to see continuity as some kind of base or core which change then happens to. Certainly this was evident when we carried out focus group work with different age cohorts as part of the heterosexuality project (Hockey, Meah and Robinson, 2007). The project examined the making of heterosexual relationships from the interwar period onwards in East Yorkshire, combining focus group work with interviews with members of three generations within 22 extended families.

When asked about their early lives, focus group participants who grew up between the wars made statement such as:

‘[Things] were different when we were young’. ‘we didn’t have sex; we made love’.
(Describing the 1960s) *‘[Oh, that was] all free love and liberation. Everything went downhill then’.*

Of sexual knowledge, this group said:

‘They know it when they’re ever so young, don’t they?’

Their statements seem to reflect a notion of time unfolding downwards, away from a communal past ‘when we were young’ and towards a fragmented future of easy come-easy-go partnerships. What older

participants offered was generalised condemnation of at least one if not two age cohorts 'below' them who they described as - *'too permissive'*; as having *'no respect for themselves'*; *'their morals are very low'*; *'women want it all, they've been told they can have it all'*.

What seems to be happening here, then, is that in asserting how different things had become, the members of this focus group were in fact claiming similarity. In other words, they were identifying as members of a particular and morally superior age cohort – and this kind of identification extended into individual interviews as well.

Yet alongside a strong view that changes were rife and for the worse, older informants also repeatedly drew continuities between 'then and now', 'us and them': *'we weren't all virgins that walked down the aisle'*; *'there was a lot of girls, say between the war breaking out, 1939, they knew what everything was about because [...] they'd been around a bit'*. These statements were often grounded in connections – between what I did then and what I see other people doing now; or between different family members. When a younger woman, in her late thirties, challenged the view that change had acted upon continuity for the worse it reflected the experience of her unmarried sister's pregnancy. She said:

I think it's hard for women any road today because you can't, you can't do anything right, there's always something, oh, judging you, pressurizing you and it's just like a big boiling pot really that everybody jumps into it, and you've just got to scramble to get back out, really.

Our participants – aged between the mid teens and the late eighties – therefore inhabited both a generational identity, grounded in their relationships with other family members, as well as an age-based identity. Their data was often contradictory – and at face value might not reveal what had changed and what had persisted. Approached as a form of identification, however, it showed that claiming continuities was often associated with the assertion of familial identities, whilst claims to being different from other cohorts allowed membership based on similarity with a particular age-based cohort.

4.5 Practices of Connectedness

Moving on from these data on the early life course transitions of becoming hetero/sexual, I want to consider material about what is seen as the final passage: from life to death. In my first example I argued that assertions of difference or continuity could be seen as particular kinds of identity claim – and in that identities are always multiple, this helps explain some of the contradictions within these data. In my second example I focus more on *practice* as a resource for claiming connectedness.

70% of the bodies of the UK dead are now incinerated rather than buried with the cremation rate remaining steady since the 1960s (Davies. 2005). However, this period has seen a marked change in the destinations of ashes. In the 1970s about one in ten sets of ashes were removed from the crematoria for private disposal; by 2005 this proportion had risen to around 60% (Kellaher, Prendergast and Hockey, 2005). Our project asked what was happening to these ashes and what they meant to people. What we found was another contradiction in terms of the relationship between continuity and change. Not only did this project address questions arising from a quantifiable change in practice - as revealed by crematorias' figures on the numbers of ashes retained by families – but interviewees themselves often saw what they were doing as new and different. Many had volunteered for interview because they felt they had a unique tale to tell. Their narratives often critiqued established disposal practices – whole body burial or ash interment in a cemetery – or the scattering of ashes by crematoria staff in a garden of

remembrance within the crematoria's ground. Bill Oswald, a ninety year old interviewee had retained his wife's ashes and kept them, companionably, by his bedside, said:

Well, I think cemeteries are depressing places. I have the deeds for the grave where my mother and father are buried, but I think all this remembrance and crosses and these things are not necessary. I mean, I was religious when I was young - 'til I was around fourteen and then I thought 'I've started to think for myself'. I won't say that I'm an atheist but I did not - well I didn't have a service for the cremation, because I do not believe in using the church just for marriages, deaths and christenings.

This notion that cemeteries were anonymous and poorly maintained was not uncommon. They represented past practice, something which interviewees rejected on grounds such as that the earth was cold and, particularly, that the dead needed company, care, safety and warmth. In some cases it was implied that a different age cohort had set up 'depressing cemeteries' and so excluded the dead; in others interviewees expressed regret about their own or their family's earlier disposal choices – and represented their more recent retention of ashes as a chance to do things differently.

In the heterosexuality project participants flagged differences between age cohorts as a way of claiming connection with their same age peers; but here connection and continuity across generations and/or time was being established through a different form of practice. The retention of ashes allowed interviewees to sustain their relationship with the dead - whether through visiting a particular spot for conversation with the dead, gardening and gift-giving, or through choosing a site with special meaning for the deceased. Among these interviewees, then, sustaining relationships with the dead and so making claims for their own identities - as parent or spouse, were continuities they achieved through a deliberate change in practice (Hockey, Kellaher and Prendergast, 2007).

Paradoxically, however, the choices they described as new often reflected highly traditional symbolic forms and practices: the placing of ashes in stone sanctums or columbaria to which gifts can be taken; through interment in family churchyard or cemetery plots. While the fluidity of ashes allows for multiple sites of disposal, some interviewees expressed horror at the idea of dividing ashes: one woman said *'I wouldn't chop my dad in half would I? He's a whole isn't he ... it would be like chopping his legs off.'* Despite the lack of UK legislation about what we do with sets of ashes, a crematorium manager echoed this point when he said: *'It's illegal! I mean, it's like cutting an arm or leg off'*.

So in the case of one interviewee, who we called Doris Penny, she was actually against the finality of cremation and the lack of a focus for visiting a site of disposal – as she saw it. However her father had been against burial. As older family members began to die, she reconciled her desire for a permanent focus for sustaining connections with the dead with her family's commitment to cremation. She bought a special cemetery plot, had her relatives cremated – as they wished, but then buried their ashes all together in a place that she could continue to visit. Describing the most recent burial, of her husband's ashes, she said:

'They were poured into the ground. It seemed more of a natural process - like part of the burial service. We said prayers over it. I can't remember the actual committal.'

4.6 Conclusion

How can we understand this contradiction? Why are interviewees flagging choices which look very like traditional death ritual as something new and different? As I argued, participants in the

heterosexuality project appear to mobilise contradictory accounts of sexual mores as part of broader and multi-layered processes of identification. When it comes to decisions about disposal, I suggest that apparent contradictions subsume a distinction being made between the institutional contexts of traditional practices – that is the church and the municipal cemetery – both of which represent a modernist era where bereaved people were encouraged to seek closure and ‘move on’ after a death – and the domestic and kinship-based relatedness which such practices can be adapted to resource. This process of adaptation, which may occur primarily at the level of meaning, is more persuasively represented as new within a cultural context where time is seen to flow downwards, from convention towards innovation.

On one level, then, I am arguing that accounts of difference may tell us more about shifting interpretations or meanings than any empirical change in practice. But this can be taken this further when working with autobiographical material. Bury’s (2001) concept of a motivated narrative reminds us to ask ‘why was the story told in this way?’ And in answer I suggest that the making of connections often underpins claims that change and difference are occurring. Whether these reflect a continuity of familial relatedness, a desire for symbolic forms rooted in the past, or a sense of belonging to an age-based cohort, asserting change and difference may well contribute to achieving a narrative goal which is in fact about connection and continuity.

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5. Life Stories, History and Social Change

Paul Thompson

Since my theme is life stories, let me begin by situating my perspectives in terms of my own life story as a researcher. I am a mixture between a social historian and a sociologist. I did my first degree fifty years ago as a historian. But then in 1964 I went to Essex to join the new Sociology Department, and I've been infused by sociology ever since. Early on in my research career I wrote two biographies based on written material, both on nineteenth century figures, so I have had some direct experience of that type of historical biography (Thompson, 1967 and 1971). But from the late sixties, due especially to the influence of Peter Townsend – then fresh from his research for *The Family Life of Old People* (1957) – I started recording interviews with older people, got very fascinated by that and have remained fascinated by it ever since. In fact although I am now retired I am still doing interviews! I am still amazed by the things that people tell me about their lives. I have written and published some twenty books using that kind of material.

Over that long time span I shifted. I started using this kind of interview as 'oral history', focussing exclusively on the past, and my first book *The Edwardians* (1975), which is about Britain in the early twentieth century, is of that type. Indeed, to my later dismay when re-using the material for new themes, we pretty abruptly curtailed interviewees from talking about their experiences after 1920. By the 1970s however, when I started a study of Scottish fishing communities, *Living the Fishing* (1983), I brought my analysis right up to the present and combined the oral histories with a community study approach. Then my more recent research has become present-focussed, with its method essentially the 'life story' rather than 'oral history'. For instance, *Growing up in Stepfamilies* (Gorell Barnes et al., 1997) was based on interviewing men and women in their thirties, while for my most recent book, *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic* (Bauer and Thompson, 2006), about migrant Jamaican families, we interviewed people from three generations in over forty families. So there has been an important shift in the way that I use the method, but there is also a continuity of interest and in many ways of technique.

My topic of 'Life stories, history and social change' is a very big subject so that I will need to whirl you through it. My starting point is a double assumption which I think a lot of people will I trust share. The first assumption is that time is a fundamental dimension of all societies and social worlds and social institutions, so that we should never reify the present as the basis for social laws. Indeed, to forget about time in studying societies is like taking a pre-Einsteinian view of society and social research. And the second assumption is that men and women's lives are both shaped by the social past, which gives them constraints and opportunities, but also their own life choices help to shape the social structures of the future, so that there is a double process going on all the time. Now that is a dialectical notion which has a long tradition not always at the centre of sociology, sometimes at the margins, but certainly there in Marx. For instance, Marx wrote: 'men make their own history. But they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past' (1852). He puts the same notion with eloquence. And if you think of Giddens on reflexivity, again I think there is a similar dialectical way of thinking there (1991). He is playing with similar ideas, putting them into a modern framework.

In the last fifty years the outstanding champion of the centrality of the historical perspective in social research has been, I would think, C. Wright Mills in his classic book *The Sociological Imagination*

(1959). It is striking how although now quite an old book it is still very much cited. Wright Mills asserts that 'history is the shank of social study' (p. 143). By shank he means the backbone, and it is a phrase with resonance. He declares, 'social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections with social structures' (ibid), so that he is very much with us in principle, and then he gives nice illustrations on how these intersections work. For example, 'when a society is industrialised a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman... When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife is alone; a child grows up without a father' (p. 3). These are telling images. He concludes, 'neither the life of an individual nor the history a society can be understood without understanding both' (ibid).

Now that is an inspiring call. But I think when you re-read Wright Mills you feel that he spends most of his time criticising other approaches, which he shoots down very effectively, but he does not actually offer us a clear path forward either in terms of theory or in method. In terms of theory he does hint about what he hoped was going to happen. He wanted to link individual experience with social structures, and hoped that it might be developed on the basis of psycho-analysis, which he believed ought to become 'a firm and an integral part of academic research'. But he did not go any further along that line, and as any of you who have tried to use psycho-analytical concepts will know, it is very quite difficult to make any direct links between psycho-analytic evidence, which is typically therapeutic and interpretative, and the kind of information that you get from social research interviews.

More remarkably, Wright Mills did not seem to have even sensed that for a sociology which could fulfill his demands a better method would be needed. I find that quite surprising, because he did include a well known appendix to his book on 'intellectual craftsmanship' with lots of tips about how to do things (pp.195-226). And he must surely have been aware of life stories, which were well established almost a generation before his time in both American anthropology and sociology, with classic research achievements, above all in Chicago.

5.1 How Life Stories can Link Biography and Social Research

I want to draw on the experience of both life story work in general and also my own research experience to see how we might more fully grasp the potential for linking biography and social research. To do that we need not only to consider the method's strengths but also to look beyond these. What then are the special strengths of life stories?

The first is the way in which they admit you to hidden spheres of social life. A nice example would be the culture of work. One of my research projects involved car workers in Coventry and Turin. I was absolutely amazed to discover how many activities go on in a car factory which never get into business or trade union records. For example, people told us how they were writing poetry, playing chess, celebrating birthday parties, bringing rabbits in from the nearby railway line and cooking them. They also had very elaborate play activities at Christmas when they would take apart cars and reconstruct them as electro-steel sculptures of whirling lights suspended from the factory ceiling. They also succeeded in re-organising their work patterns. Even though to the management they were assembly line workers, each one carrying out only a tiny fraction of the manufacturing process, like just turning one nut, by systematically rotating these jobs it became possible for each worker to have the experience of working on each part of the process, so that eventually by rotating long enough you would have done everything that was needed to make a car, and then you could say 'I know how to make a car'. And eventually that led me to seeing that through both the fun side and the reorganising of the work

side in the way they were reasserting their skills and I wrote an article about that, 'Playing at being skilled men' (Thompson, 1988). That is an instance of a hidden world which you can only get to explore and understand through such in-depth interviews.

There are other equally hidden worlds, like crime and deviance. Some of the early sociological classics of the Chicago school are in this field, such as Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller* (1930), or Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), or post-war Chicago classics like Helen Hughes' *The Fantastic Lodge* (1961), the story of a girl drug addict. However there is also another very important sphere, which is very closely related to this Timescapes project, and that is the sphere of family relationships. You cannot get really reliable material at all on childhood or marriage or sexual behaviour or old age without some kind of in depth interviews, whether they are of the oral history or life story variety. This is one reason why in my own work I have especially focussed on diverse forms of childhood and childrearing and their consequences. Old age itself is similarly inaccessible without hearing the experience of people who are themselves getting old. If all the evidence you have is from what social workers have to say you get a very one-sided picture. It was in this spirit that one of my books, which I wrote on the experience of ageing, I called *I Don't Feel Old* (1990) – a challenge which I am now trying to live up to!

What is missing without life story evidence is very clearly brought out by looking at some of the developments in retrospective family research over recent decades. Thus Lawrence Stone's great historical volume, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977), was largely based on upper and middle class letters and diaries, but as a contrast to the progressive development of such families Stone provided a thinly-based and extremely dispiriting picture of working class family life. Michael Anderson's statistical analysis of working class family life in *Family Structure in 19th century Lancashire* (1971), with the basic motivation of family life seen as self-interested calculation, was almost as disparaging. But as soon as we reach a time period in which living memory has been accessible, as in the work on the same and other Lancashire towns by Elizabeth Roberts, in *A Woman's Place* (1984) and *Women and Families* (1995), we can see clearly that these pathological perspectives are not borne out in the real experience of working class family life. If we want to get away from researchers' imaginative projections, it is only through remembered experience that we have a chance of reaching firm ground.

It is not only the ability to reveal hidden spheres which gives life stories a special strength as evidence. Equally important are hidden voices, most typically from relatively marginal social groups: women, the poor, the unemployed, migrants and so on. Such life stories have been published especially by anthropologists, the best-known including Oscar Lewis' *Pedro Martinez* (1964), a social and political biography of a small town through the Mexican revolution, and Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the Cane* (1960), the life of a Puerto Rican agricultural worker. But the most famous of all these is *I, Rigoberta Menchu* which was recorded and edited by the French anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray in 1984. It has sold over thirty million copies and provided an enormous rallying cry for the exploited and attacked peasants of Guatemala and indeed Central America in general. It is perhaps the most powerful demonstration of how a life story can actually contribute to change. I do not know whether the researchers in the *Timescapes* project are going to find a story as powerful as this, but I would be delighted if they did.

On the other hand, and reaching beyond their best-known strengths, although I have said that hidden voices are typically those of the marginal and the poor, I think that life stories can also be very revealing about elite groups, and I also have been actively involved in that kind of work. For instance,

at National Life Stories at the British Library Sound Archive, we have an ongoing project on artists' lives with the Tate gallery, which I see as an enormously important documentation of a central aspect of British cultural life. We have carried out a project on the City financial elite, which was published as *City Lives* (Courtney and Thompson, 1996). The culture which it revealed was fascinating. The older City generation, and indeed also some people then still in power, came in with no economic training at all. Even when they were interviewed for their first jobs, there were no questions about economics. The interview was about what they were reading, or about cricket or something like that. It was an amazingly amateurish world. And the work world itself was revealed as a continuation of public school boy life. In the Stock Exchange people used to go around with boxes of matches setting light to other people's papers and cheering about it. Schoolboy pranks of this kind were going on all over the city and it was only really changed by the introduction of women, who would not put up with it; it all became much more serious when women arrived.

Some of the most famous examples of life story work are of books based on interviews carried out personally by the researcher, as for example in the work of Oscar Lewis. But here again I feel we need to move beyond this starting point. Indeed on the contrary, if we were to take it as an axiom that the evidence in an interview depended on the conjunction between one particular researcher and one particular interviewee, so that a different researcher would obtain substantially different evidence, then the whole enterprise would have little research validity. In most of my research projects I have interviewed myself alongside a research team of other interviewers. This has been rarely problematic despite testing the outcomes. For example, in *Jamaican Hands Across the Atlantic*, where my colleague Elaine Bauer was a Jamaican-born black woman, we found that she was much more able to persuade contacts to be interviewed than I was, while I might need an hour or so's discussion before reaching agreement. But once the human relationship had been established in the interview itself, these differences disappeared. Interviewees would equally often talk to me confidently in patois, or discuss issues such as sexual or criminal behaviour, or illegal immigration.

For the first big oral history study I carried out, *The Edwardians*, we had 444 interviews in twenty different locations, with teams of interviewers in each area. We worked out a very elaborate interview guide, combining coverage with flexibility, and the context of the interviews was closely monitored throughout the fieldwork. Equally crucially, we decided to use a systematic sample based on the 1911 census. This ensured that we had a balanced group of interviewees in terms of gender, six occupational classes, and city/urban/rural contexts. It turned out that this sampling approach, combined with the number and fullness of interviews, gave the research material an enormous potential for secondary analysis. For twenty years we ran a rather elementary archive in the Sociology Department at Essex, where it was visited by large numbers of researchers, and more recently the entire interview set has been archived by Qualidata, digitised, and also made available as audio through the British Library Sound Archive.

In my view re-using older recorded material ought to be seen as a useful option for any research project. I see little difference in principle between using interviews collected by a fieldwork team for analysis by the project as a whole and secondary analysis of the same or other datasets. Re-analysis is by far the most economical way of broadening the basis of interview evidence. There are now increasingly large collections available for this, above all through Qualidata (UK Data Archive) and the British Library. One of the most remarkable collections held by the British Library, but I think little used by sociologists, is the cross-national Millennial oral history project of some 6500 interviews. Summaries are available through which it is quite easily to search mechanically for particular themes, ethnic groups, etc. This broadening of the basis can add to the strength of any project and I strongly

recommend it. Hence I am particularly pleased that in the *Timescapes* project are planning to archive its data and I think that gives it a much greater long-term potential. In terms of its sample, I shall be very interested to see how it develops, how the different bits are linked, and whether it really can be treated as one vast data set or whether in practice it is going to be a maze of little separate ones.

Looking ahead, and thinking in terms of future grand projects, I believe that our effectiveness as researchers would be greatly strengthened by new life story work which is first of all inter-disciplinary, and secondly links qualitative and quantitative evidence. As I noted earlier, I have moved from social history towards sociology, but I have drawn from both. I have also learnt a lot from anthropology. Participant observation is also a very valuable approach to use alongside in depth interviewing. With *Living the Fishing*, I sat in the harbour café and attended churches and went out on the boats, and I stayed in a village in Jamaica for *Jamaican Hands* and attended funerals and reunions and so on, keeping a notebook of my direct experience, and I found it enormously rewarding in relation to the recorded stories we were collecting.

Such fruitful combinations of methods are often the consequence of working with researchers in other disciplines. I have also been strongly influenced by the ideas of family therapy. In *Growing up in Stepfamilies* I worked with two family therapists and a psychiatrist and that brought in different theories; attachment theory through the psychiatrist, and family systems theory through the family therapists. Both are more practicable theories, I would say, than psychoanalysis, to which life story sociologists and oral historians are unfortunately more often drawn, because you can use remembered evidence to test your interpretations.

I think linking quantitative and qualitative evidence in single research samples is also crucial. This is something that is seriously lacking in Britain. It is partly because of the great difficulties in allowing access to national quantitative samples for use as sub-samples which have become almost a matter of doctrine for many of those conducting them. It is also because too many qualitative researchers shun quantitative approaches as if they were a form of poison, preferring to work like craft workers with tiny samples, not bothered by being unable to reach any provable conclusions. I think that both attitudes are highly regrettable.

In the US the integration of qualitative and quantitative it is much more developed. A key leader in this has been Glen Elder and his 'life course' school. He started with *Children in the Great Depression* (1974), his reanalysis of the Berkeley-Oakland cohort study. This group cohort had been studied from infancy in the 1920s and an extraordinary variety of material had been collected about them: all sorts of physical counting and weighing, regular visits by social workers and psychiatrists, interviews and then eventually they did retrospective oral history interviews with all of the cohort. So the cohort archive has all those different elements in it. I doubt if any dataset in this country approaches that richness. And following from this early experience, Glen Elder has gone on to work with combined quantitative and qualitative sources, mostly but not all cohorts, in a whole series of research projects. Another example of this integrated American approach is in the joint research of Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenberg on changing families, divorce, and grandparenting (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991).

Choosing who to interview, whether or not by a representative or a purposive sample, is one key problem of life story research, and I think that for us to have a national cohort combining quantitative and qualitative interviews would give us all a crucial point of stable reference. The second inevitable

problem is how you deal with the twists of memory, the problem of 'truth'. How far can we believe what people tell us?

Oddly enough, this is an issue largely ignored by sociologists, even though all interview material draws considerably on memory, and some, such as on social and work mobility, is primarily dependent on retrospective memory. But because this question will always be a fundamental one for oral historians, I have given a whole section to this issue in *The Voice of the Past* (Chapters 4 and 5) (Thompson, 2000). Put simply, testimonies *combine* two types of content. On the one hand they may yield a great deal of valuable factual information, for example about where a person lived, their family structures, types of work, and so on – information which in various ways can be proved to be broadly reliable; but alongside this they also bear the equally revealing mark of the shaping force of memory, and so of individual and collective consciousness. There are the silences, which Luisa Passerini first noted in memories of those who lived under Fascism, which may be a mark of how they suffered, just as children may repress memories of sexual abuse by a parent (Passerini, 1987). And there is the active reshaping of memory to make sense of the lived past, or even to link it with lost dreams, which Alessandro Portelli has so eloquently demonstrated from his recordings with the old Communists of Terni in central Italy (1991).

This reshaping can be especially revealing in terms of family values, and is especially likely to emerge through interviewing more than one generation of the same family. For example, I recently interviewed an elderly Jamaican woman in Britain, who had worked as a nurse, and has been a very active figure in one of the churches. She gave me a straightforward account of her marriage to a pastor and their children. But it was only later when I interviewed her granddaughter that I realised that she had had her eldest child as a single mother before she met the pastor, although they brought this child up as one of their own, and also that after his death she had had a second brief and unsuccessful remarriage. In the wider Jamaican context, such a family story would be thoroughly normal, indeed the majority of women had children outside marriage; but for herself, some editing of the story was clearly helpful for her identity and respectability as a church leader.

In short, we have as much to learn from the reshaping of memory as from the facts – and in this case both come from oral recollections. The issue of memory will always be a fundamental question for life story sociologists and oral historians, but I believe that we should approach it positively, with confidence in the *double* strength of remembered evidence, both objective and subjective.

I should also refer to the development in recent years of different forms of the narrative analysis of life story interviews. These vary, ranging from the very linguistic approach of Catherine Riessman, for example in her *Divorce Talk* (1990) to Elizabeth Tonkin with her work on the varying contexts for life stories (1990), and how these may result in different genres for telling the story, or the German hermeneutical narrative approach, is best known in this country through the work of Gabriele Rosenthal (1989) (cf Tom Wengraf, 2001; Prue Chamberlayne et al', 2000). This last approach has a particularly useful emphasis on the need to distinguish, when analysing, the 'lived life' from the 'told story', so that you try to sort out the facts given in the interview from the comments and feelings of the interviewee on his/her experiences.

5.2 The Interpretative Power of Life Stories

Let us turn now to the interpretative power of life stories. Firstly, overall they can give us a crucial understanding of the dynamics of social change. In the past it has been assumed that social change is caused primarily by the economy and by overt political action, and hence by what is publicly known and written about. But there is also the quiet path of ordinary men and women making their lives, choosing to stay or to migrate, choosing what jobs to take, finding a partner or not, having children or not. All those individual choices build up to cumulatively reshape the social and economic structure. This is a really crucial insight which can only come when the life story evidence from hidden spheres can be put alongside public economic and political documentation.

A second basic point, which is also a caution, is that life story evidence is a strong counter against stereo-typing, for it reveals the immense variety of life paths that people take. And it is important to recognise and understand how sometimes it is the exceptions which help to shape the future in the most important way. Take the example (from *Jamaican Hands*) of an Irish girl who came to London in the 1950s and chose to defy the surrounding racism and to marry a Jamaican ex-serviceman. That couple become founders of what is now a very extended mixed-race London family of four generations. That is the case of an exception which was creating the future. So it is not always a question of counting but also of perceiving how something might lead to a different outcome. In relation to that I like some of the notions in the Timescapes literature about fluidity and structure and turning points rather than rather fixed notions about lives and career paths.

Then secondly there is the reconceptualisation of time cycles which to some extent has been mentioned already. That was notably the achievement of Tamara Hareven in her *Family Time and Industrial Time* (1982), a study of the workers in a huge textile factory in New England. She showed that how the point in the economic cycle when people went into the mill shaped how they related to the mill work. Thus for the earliest generation, when the industry was booming, the mill offered lifetime security and a paternalistic family. The second generation came of working age in the depression, and suffered a 'nightmare of tension' at work; while the third and last generation experienced the hopelessness of a sinking ship. Similarly the forms of child socialisation which had worked for the first generation would not necessarily succeed in the changed historical context of the next generation. Hareven also showed how extended families, many with kin in Quebec, remained a crucial support in seeing the mill families through the ups and downs of the industrial cycle. In this she effectively undermined the then current American sociological assumption that the nuclear family was the family form most appropriate to the industrial era.

There is one point to add about Hareven's work on family time. She distinguishes generations by the phases in local, industrial, historical time. In other words she does not separate generational time and historical time. This is a problem which inevitably arises when using the term 'generations', because it is very difficult to decide when a generation starts and when it ends. In practice the easiest way is by looking at moments of historical change: it could be an event, or an economic shift. But there are no automatic boundaries which define beginnings and endings of generational time.

Then, lastly, life stories offer us chances of making connections through lives. Migration is perhaps the classic example because you can look at both ends of the migration, both cultures, the starting and the receiving culture, and you can also look at how transnational families hold together. It is also possible to trace the connecting threads in a single life in this way, such as the life of a painter, or how a pioneer

social researcher found his or her life's theme – like Peter Townsend, only child of a seaside singer, brought up mainly by his grandmother, longing for kin, who found his first major theme in researching extended families. Another example, again connecting family life with work, is Joanna Bornat's study of the women textile workers in West Calderdale, West Yorkshire (1977). Why did they join the textile trade unions so much less than men? The typical explanation up to the 1970s was that women were naturally focussed on the home, never fully committed to work. But the life stories revealed other connections which provided a much more powerful explanation. It turned out that trade union subscriptions were collected from the house door rather than in the mill, and fathers decided if their daughters should join. Thus the cause was not something in the nature of women, but how the patriarchalism of the home was so tightly linked with the young women's work lives in the mill.

As this instance shows, while in most formal documentation family and work are separate, through life story work you can connect the two effectively. I did this myself in my research for *Living the Fishing*. I was looking to see whether there was any connection between different types of childrearing and success or failure in the fishing industry. Fishing is a good industry for exploring the ability to adapt because of the constant changes in boats and gear, markets and fish stocks. And I found there were huge contrasts between communities in different parts of Scotland in the spirit in which they worked and in how they reacted to change.

In the big trawler port of Aberdeen there was a lot of drink and violence on the boats, indeed the men were supplied with cheap alcohol as a way of inducing them to come and work; but this carried over into the home life, and there was a lot of violence in the families. I was very shocked by my first encounters in Aberdeen with stories I was told, including of murder. But the long-term effect was that those Aberdeen trawling fishing families became a *lumpen proletariat*, so that it was very hard for the firms to recruit workers. So in the end that kind of trawling died out.

On the West of Scotland on the Isle of Lewis you had a different kind of difficulty. The fishing was declining and that, we concluded, was because children there were brought up in a heavy Calvinist atmosphere of pre-destination, but pre-destination not of hope as Weber might have expected but of condemnation to sin and failure. This discouraged any kind of initiative. And there was an extraordinary disapproval of competition, so that school children were not even supposed to win races. Essentially, children were brought up to follow their 'elders', and their elders meant both elders in the family and in the church, for the two were very closely linked together. Each settlement was dominated by its 'Wee Free' Calvinist churches. Hence the fishing was only kept going by heavy government subsidies, and was very slow to change according to market needs.

Then that in turn contrasted with the Shetlands and the North-East of Scotland, where socialisation encouraged early independence and individuality and competitiveness. In the Shetlands physical punishment of children was disapproved, and talking and discussion were encouraged, so that children were brought up to think for themselves and take responsibility for themselves and take their own conscience on their own shoulders from a very early age. These became by far the most successful Scottish fishing communities of the post-war era. And I think you can see in this example, how there is a continuous interaction between the economic structure, which is being remade all the time through the socialisation in the family and community, and so creating a different situation for the families and work of the next generation. That is the kind of linking, the type of explanation, which life stories have to offer, through making connections between individual life paths and history and social change.

These are all examples of the interpretative power of life stories in generating new understandings and theories of the relationship between biography and history and social change. They build from small observations towards big interpretations. I think in that last example they do come close to the kind of theory which Wright Mills might have liked. But you note that it was not developed on the basis of psychoanalytical speculations, which are so hard to prove or disprove, but on much clearer documentation provided from within the life story interviews. And I offer you these examples in support of my belief that, properly used, life stories present us with opportunities of unparalleled richness for future research.

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