



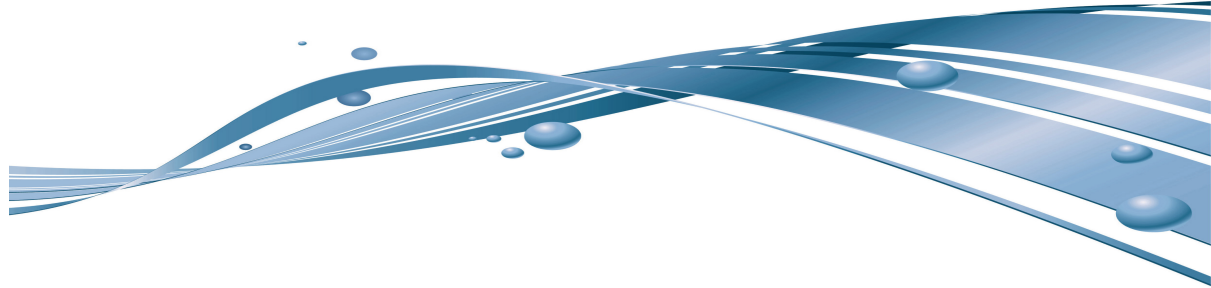
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An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study





Personal Lives and Times: The Temporal Turn in Social Enquiry

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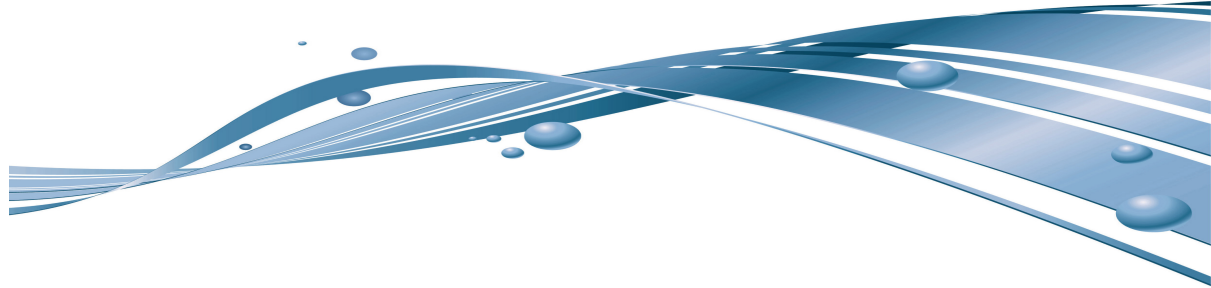
www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk

The Timescapes Study: Changing Relationships and Identities through the Life Course

- First major Qualitative Longitudinal (QLL) study to be funded in the UK, initially for five years. Scaling up of QLL research
- Enriches the Portfolio of Longitudinal research and resources in the UK.
- Creation of the Timescapes Archive, a national level dataset for sharing and re-use: research and archiving as integrated processes.
- Conducted by a consortium of researchers from 5 Universities

What is Timescapes About?

- **Substantive topics:**
 - the dynamics of personal relationships and identities, family life, intimacy, friendship, inter-generational care and support.
- **Empirical work:**
 - 7 projects that span the life course: two on young lives, three on mid life experiences and two on older lives.
- **Life Course** as a temporal construct, linking biological processes of ageing with the social processes of growing up, forming and transforming relationships, bearing and rearing children, growing older and dying



Producing Practical Knowledge

- **Policy themes**
- Intergenerational care and support
- Long term resourcing of families
- Issues of work-life balance, social support, social exclusion
- Implications for life chances, health and well being

Qualitative Longitudinal Methods

- Rich qualitative enquiry, conducted through and in relation to time
- Charts changes, continuity, endurance, transitions, turning points.
- Prospectively tracking people as their lives unfold, e.g. through particular policy landscapes that are themselves changing
- Retrospectively documenting their lives through the generation of life histories.

Key features: research/archiving

- Timescapes archive: rich resource linked to live study
- A continuous process of archiving: documenting the unfolding stories of people's lives as the study progresses
- Specialist resource, thematically driven
- Dynamic: evolving, growing as study grows
- Based on principles of data sharing and re-use
- Core archive users affiliated to the study itself
- Archiving as a creative research output, a dissemination strategy, rather than a technical task at the end.
- Turning 'people' into 'data' in ways that preserves their vitality, their agency: multimedia data, situated ethics.

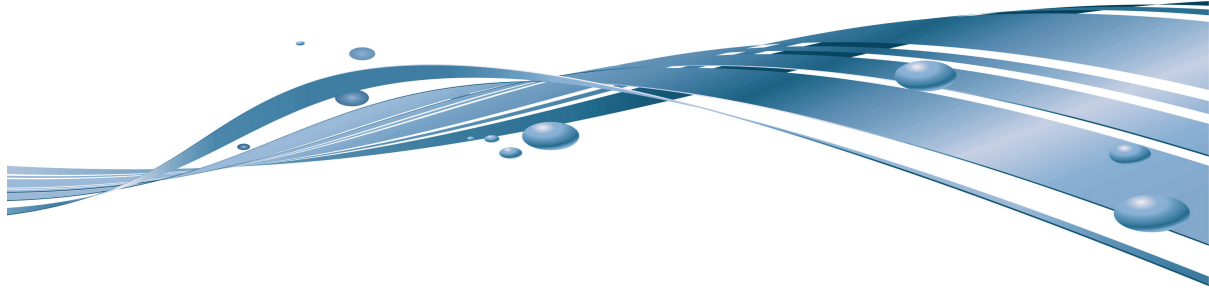


Authenticity of Personal Lives and Human Agency

- **Personal Lives:** the micro world of individual identities, practices, values, meanings, choices, world views
- **Agency:** the capacity to act, to interact, to influence the shape of one's life, the lives of others, and to impact on broader social structures.
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- **Qualitative Explorations:** Ethnographic, Biographical, Narrative methods of enquiry to understand **how** and **why** questions about the textures of personal lives and the agency of individuals and groups

Understanding a life

- We can only recognise and understand a life when we understand not only what it has in common with other lives, but when we can grasp its individuality, the way in which a recognisable individual has made sense of, interpreted, adapted to or suffered his or her life circumstances. In short when we understand our subjects as persons like ourselves.
(Chamberlayne and Rustin *From Biography to Social Policy* Sostris Working Paper, UEL 1999)



The Temporal Turn in Sociology

- Conceptual, substantive and methodological engagement with time: making tangible the intangible
- Time as a focus of enquiry in its own right
- Time as
 - linear and cumulative and invariably moving forward: quantitative model of time as chronology, sequence, duration, interval
 - fluid, recursive, multi-dimensional, infinitely varied: qualitative model of time as a social construct

Temporal Understandings of the Life Course

- **Life cycle:** structured, pre-defined life stages: seen as benchmarks against which to measure development and behaviour (e.g. Piaget, Kohlberg (6 stages) Berthoud: 8 stages (2000:216, 230))
- **Life course:** the negotiation of a passage through an unpredictably changing environment (Harris 1987: 27-8)
- The life course does not simply unfold before and around us, rather we actively organise the flow, pattern and direction of experience...as we navigate the social terrain of everyday lives (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 184)

Conceptualising Time

- Chronotopes (Timespace) Bakhtin (1981 [1938]): The intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships. intersection of **where** and **when** as the key mechanism for grasping the significance and meaning of events
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- Timescales (the pace of time) Lemke (2001): Ecological model of Time. We simultaneously inhabit many different timescales, from the microscopic functions of the cells in our bodies (where time moves at infinite speed) to the cosmic history of the universe e.g. the ice age (where time moves infinitely slowly or stand still)
- 'One can live for years, sometimes without living at all, and then all life comes crowding into one single hour' (Oscar Wilde).
- Turning Points, Critical Moments, Defining Moments, Epiphanies (Denzin, Giddens)

Timescapes

- biographical, generational and historical time.
- How these timescapes intersect through the life course.
- We can't hope to understand society unless we have a prior understanding of the relationship between history and biography (C. Wright Mills)

Biographical Time

- An individual life that flows through the life span, from birth to death, shaped by and interacting with a multitude of personal, relational and historical events and circumstances
- Life Journeys (Chamberlayne and Rustin 1999) : If an individual moves from point A to B how did they get there, what was the journey like on the way? Were there diversions or hold ups along the way, was this journey a matter of choice, was the destination planned?
- We can explore the intersection of time and place, the direction and pace of change, the momentum of change:
- What moves individuals on? Turning Points, Critical Moments, Defining Moments, Epiphanies (Denzin, Giddens. Holland and Thompson) which may mark a significant change in an individual life. Epiphany: A sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence.
- Or how do individuals endure or sustain particular relationships or circumstances, how do they 'bide their time'

Generational Time

- Individuals as part of an age or generational convoy, moving collectively through time, relating to the generation 'above' (parents, grandparents, their contemporaries) and/or those 'below' (children, grandchildren, their contemporaries). Micro-relational dimension of time, bound up with shifting structures of family and kinship.
- Age and, more broadly, generational categories (e.g. child, young person, older life, deep old age') are fluid and shifting as people cross generational boundaries, and as life course categories expand or contract.
- We have to account for changes in the shape of the life course itself: it is not only individuals who change but the categories that they inhabit (Hockey and James 2003; 57)

Historical Time

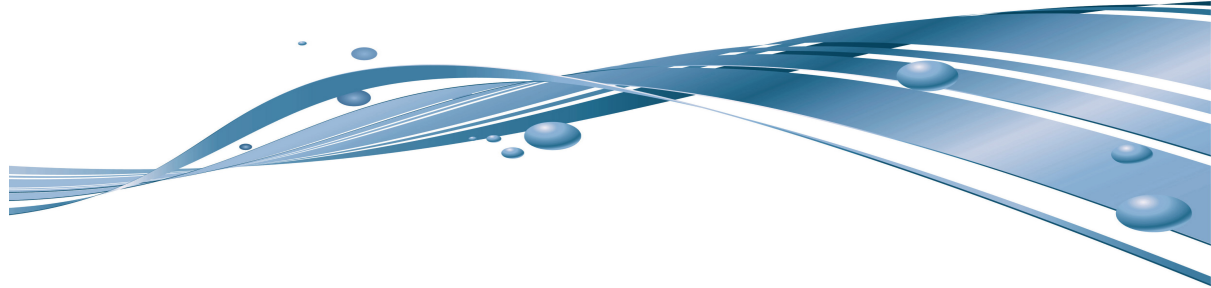
- How individuals locate themselves in different epochs and in relation to different external events, circumstances and environments, both locally and globally.
- External events include socio-economic conditions, and varied policy landscapes, which intersect with critical moments for individuals
- Links also between historical time, industrial time and seasonal time – how we mark the passage of our lives through clocks and the seasons (Adam, Haraven).

Past and Present

- People have a personal past, situated present.
- The past as a subjective resource: heritage, memories, past relationships are used in the ongoing construction of social identities and as a resource for our future aspirations.
- People continually overwrite their biographies, as they re-interpret the past through the lens of the present day.

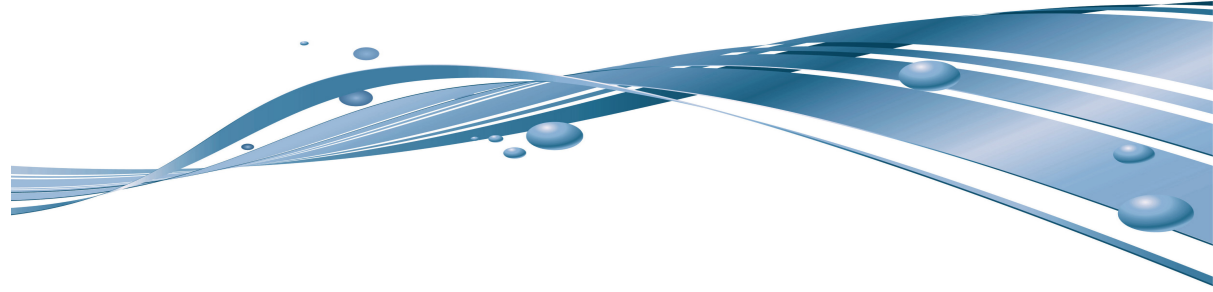
Present and Future

- People have unknown futures that may be scripted in the present. Different orientations to the future impact on how we overwrite our biographies: e.g. beginning/ending, change/continuity, opportunity/constraint, foresight/foreboding, hopes/fears, planning/drifting, choice/no choice.
- Tracking individuals through time: comparing projected futures with the actuality of lives, discerning how age and generation are implicated in the construction of the future.
- Orientations to the future are under-researched (Adam). Yet they may be highly significant in our understanding of the course of biographical and historical change.



Generating Dynamic Knowledge

- Linking biography, generation and history, or micro/meso/macro levels of understanding:
- Provides insights into the nature of social change, the strategies used by individuals to create change in their personal lives, and the way that structural conditions and changes impinge on individuals.
- The relationship between individual/collective agency and structure is essentially dynamic: it is only through time that we can begin to discern how agency and structure, the personal and social, the micro and macro are interconnected and how they come to be transformed.



The Dynamics of Personal lives and Public Policy

- Provides a counter balance to objective, over generalised and static understandings of policy
- Potential for re-historicising our understanding of policy narratives and processes, of understanding life journeys taking shape in the context of particular **aspirations** and values, **resources** both material and social, and external **opportunities and constraints**.
- Taking a temporal, biographical and/or narrative approach to social policy helps close the gap between the individual and the social order; and allows for a more humanistic and dynamic understanding of the relationship between personal lives and public policy



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