

TWO

**Time and the lifecourse:
perspectives from qualitative
longitudinal research**

Bren Neale

Introduction¹

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be re-united, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross... (van Genneep, 1960 [1909], p 189)

This quotation from an early ‘armchair’ anthropologist reflects much of what is compelling about the study of the lifecourse – conceptualised here as the flow of lives through time. Writing in the first decade of the 20th century, van Genneep was one of the first scholars to use the organising principle of the lifecourse to make sense of social practices and processes. He sought to understand how the biological processes of ageing – from birth to death – intersect with the biographical unfolding of lives – from cradle to grave. The study of individual biographies, or life journeys, is a central component of lifecourse research (Chamberlayne et al, 2000). The focus may be on the dynamics of specific ‘phases’ of the lifecourse (for example, youth, older life); transitions between these phases, or from one status or circumstance to another (for example, into and out of schooling, parenthood, employment, poverty, ill health or crime); or the mechanisms which trigger turning points or transitions. Longer term trajectories are no less important: for example, the age trajectory through childhood and adulthood into later life; the family trajectory through partnering and parenting into grandparenting; or the work trajectory through education and un/employment into retirement. The intertwining of these varied trajectories and how they influence each other is a key

1 site for investigation. It is through the long sweep of a life over decades
2 that macro-historical processes come more clearly into focus, and the
3 cumulative influence of earlier life patterns on later life chances and
4 experiences can be more fully investigated and understood.

5 While individual biography is integral to lifecourse research, so too is
6 a concern with how lives unfold collectively (interactively, relationally),
7 and how individual and collective lives shape and, in turn, are shaped
8 by wider historical, structural, spatial and geo-political processes. How
9 lifecourse research is approached depends on how these domains of
10 experience are understood, and the relative priority accorded to them.

11 Conceptualising the lifecourse in terms of the flow of lives brings
12 to the fore another of its key features – it is essentially a temporal
13 process. That it involves studying lives over time (Elder and Giele,
14 2009) seems, at first glance, to be self evident and straightforward, a
15 matter of creating a moving picture that charts changes and reveals what
16 happens next. Yet trajectories, transitions and turning points do not
17 necessarily unfold in chronological order, in a linear direction or at a
18 uniform pace. Discerning how time is implicated in the unfolding of
19 lives is a challenge when much existing lifecourse research is empirically
20 driven and under theorised (Reiter et al, 2011).

21 The complexities of biography, collective biography, history and
22 time alluded to above have implications for researching the lifecourse.
23 Longitudinal surveys began to develop initially in the US and the
24 UK during the latter decades of the 20th century. Such studies are
25 quantitatively driven, yielding social trend data from large scale,
26 national samples. These are followed up at regular intervals, turning a
27 ‘snapshot’ of social life into a ‘movie’ (Berthoud and Gershuny, 2000).
28 Qualitative longitudinal (QL) research, with its roots in oral history,
29 anthropology, ethnography and community studies, has a longer
30 history. Defined as qualitative enquiry that is conducted through
31 or in relation to time, QL research uses in-depth, situated enquiry,
32 and a combination of thematic, case history and temporal analysis to
33 discern how lives unfold. Designs are flexible and creative. Time can
34 be built in prospectively, retrospectively, or through a combination of
35 the two. Tracking may occur intensively, following samples through
36 particular transitions or policy interventions, or extensively, to chart
37 changes across the decades (Neale, forthcoming). In this chapter, ways
38 of conceptualising the lifecourse from a QL research perspective are
39 outlined. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the flows of
40 time in human experience, and suggests ways to ‘slice’ time in order
41 to enrich lifecourse research.
42

1 The flow of lives...

2
3 The lifecourse is a central organising principle of longitudinal enquiry,
4 both qualitative and quantitative. The focus is on the unfolding lives
5 of individuals and groups, of different ages, generations, statuses and
6 dependencies; their positions in the life span and their life chances and
7 experiences, relative to others; and the dynamics of these processes
8 through biographical and historical time. The lifecourse can be
9 investigated in a variety of ways, creating a diverse and amorphous
10 field of study, but two approaches are outlined here.

11 In the first, the lifecourse is defined in macrodynamic terms as a
12 socially defined and institutionally regulated sequence of transitions
13 which are re-enforced by normative expectations (Heinz, 2009b). Life
14 is seen to unfold as a predictable passage through a number of fixed,
15 developmental stages relating to the institutions of family, schooling,
16 employment and so on:

17
18 There is a central life cycle theme ... that underlies much
19 of this research. ... [using] panel data to show directly how
20 people move from stage to stage. ... The standard lifecourse
21 progressions are the regular and expected events of anyone's
22 life. ... We expect to marry and have children at a certain
23 age, to retire from our jobs at another ... It is possible to
24 show whether members of the sample move along the
25 expected trajectory from year to year ... Particular expected
26 events, and unexpected ones (eg. divorce, unemployment),
27 their incidence at particular ages, their prevalence across the
28 population ... constitute the individual life chances of a
29 given state of society. (Berthoud and Gershuny, 2000, p 230)

30
31 Berthoud suggests eight life stages, ranging from dependent child to
32 old/infirm. This is one among many models of lifecourse development,
33 or of particular 'stages' within it (for example, the model of childhood
34 development posited by Piaget). Researchers vary in the degree to
35 which they present these as prescriptive models, and Berthoud avoids
36 being overly deterministic. Nevertheless, such models are assumed to
37 represent widespread patterns of behaviour and, in the process, they
38 acquire the status of normative benchmarks against which to measure
39 the actuality of people's lives. In such accounts, the lifecourse is assumed
40 to have a universal linearity and a seeming objectivity that places it
41 outside and 'above' those whose lives are under study.

42

1 An alternative, microdynamic approach starts from the premise that
 2 the lifecourse is socially constructed through lived experiences and
 3 subjectivities, and the agency and social interactions of individuals
 4 and groups. While recognising the structural constraints within which
 5 all lives unfold, this approach foregrounds the subjective framing and
 6 crafting of life journeys across time and place. Social constructionists,
 7 from van Gennep onwards, have reflected this fluidity in their research.
 8 For Harris (1987, pp 27–8) the lifecourse is ‘the negotiation of a
 9 passage through an unpredictably changing environment’; while, for
 10 Holstein and Gubrium:

11
 12 [T]he lifecourse does not simply unfold before and around
 13 us; rather we actively organise the flow, pattern and direction
 14 of experience ... as we navigate the social terrain of our
 15 everyday lives. ... The meaning of our existence is artfully
 16 constructed, constantly emerging, yet circumstantially
 17 shaped. ... The construction of the lifecourse is always
 18 ineluctably local. ... Individuals never yield authorship
 19 of realities to deterministic structural imperatives. (2000,
 20 pp 182–4, p 210, p 32 **{would it be better to break this
 21 up into several quotes, one for each page reference?}**)
 22

23 This more malleable, constructionist approach has been reinforced
 24 through historical evidence that challenges standardised models of
 25 development: childhood and old age, for example, are relatively recent
 26 historical categories, emerging in response to wider demographic
 27 and structural changes in Western societies. In contemporary life,
 28 too, generational categories (from infancy to deep old age) are fluid
 29 and shifting as people cross generational boundaries, and as lifecourse
 30 categories expand or contract. As Hockey and James observe, ‘We
 31 have to account for changes in the shape of the lifecourse itself: it is
 32 not only individuals who change but the categories that they inhabit’
 33 (2003, p 57). That there is nothing fixed about the way the life span
 34 is conceptualised or categorised is also reinforced in cross cultural
 35 perspective. While the life span is recognised in all societies, age and
 36 generational categories are culturally defined and constructed (Holstein
 37 and Gubrium, 2000). Similarly, social ageing is perceived in varied
 38 ways, for example, as an ‘upward’ journey to venerable status, or a
 39 ‘downward’ journey to senility (Hockey and James, 2003).

40 Methods for studying the lifecourse reflect and reinforce the
 41 distinctions outlined above. Heinz (2009a, p 422) suggests there are
 42 two contrasting methodologies: ‘top down’, from social structure to

1 individual agency, and ‘bottom up’, from social action to larger social
2 structures. The ‘top down’ approach is a defining feature of large scale
3 longitudinal survey and panel studies. Such studies have significant
4 value in charting broad social trends across extensive segments of the
5 population and with considerable historical reach (given sustained
6 funding). Through structured questions that are repeated at regular
7 intervals, they measure what changes, for whom, the extent and
8 direction of change, where changes occur and over what time periods.
9 Much of the focus is on the spells of time that individuals spend in
10 particular states. To return to Berthoud’s ‘movie’ metaphor, such
11 studies create an epic movie, a broad ‘surface’ picture of change over
12 the generations, generated from big ‘thin’ data (Neale and Flowerdew,
13 2003).

14 This broad canvas is highly valuable, but also entails limitations: ‘much
15 ... lifecourse analysis does not analyse lives but presents the statistical
16 histories of cohorts’ (Neugarten, quoted in Heinz, 2009b, p 476).
17 The flat, ‘surface’ picture allows for an understanding of correlations
18 between lifecourse factors, for example, between family and
19 educational or poverty trajectories, but correlations cannot be used to
20 infer causality. For those working with large scale, ‘thin’ data, evidence
21 on the factors that shape lifecourse trajectories and the mechanisms
22 through which change occurs is acknowledged to be fragile, pointing
23 out the inherent complexities of unravelling interactions between
24 individual and structural factors (Such and Walker, 2002, p 190).

25 Discerning these patterns requires a finer, qualitative lens, operating
26 in particular contexts of change. This ‘bottom up’ approach, a defining
27 feature of QL research, focuses on the intricacies of change and
28 continuity in localised settings, the factors that trigger change, the
29 processes by which change occurs, and the creativity of individuals
30 in shaping or accommodating to these processes. Like all qualitative
31 research, QL research is concerned with human subjectivity: the
32 meanings that events, circumstances and social processes have for those
33 who experience them, captured primarily through reflexive narratives
34 of the self. It is also centrally concerned with human agency – the
35 capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of
36 one’s own life and the lives of others. Agency is a dynamic concept,
37 embodying action, process, change, continuity and endurance, and
38 bringing subjective understandings of causality to the fore. This,
39 then, is the up close and personal movie, following the twists and
40 turns in the individual story lines, exploring the interior logic of lives
41 to discern how change is created, lived and experienced (Neale and
42 Flowerdew, 2003).

1 The capacity to discern the mechanisms that shape lifecourse
2 trajectories, and the causes and consequences of change in particular
3 contexts, gives this mode of research significant explanatory power.
4 While the large studies may reveal the wholesale movement of
5 populations from points A to B, the ‘thick’ dynamic data generated
6 through QL research reveals the triggers for such journeys, why they
7 are undertaken, and their varied nature along the way. Giele (2009,
8 p 236) makes a similar point: while ‘demographic surveys show the
9 magnitude and distribution of migration in entire populations ... only
10 individual or family histories can reveal why one individual moves and
11 another stays put’.

12 The in-depth, situated nature of QL enquiry is integral to its strength,
13 but can be seen as a limitation in a scientific tradition that values ‘hard’
14 statistical evidence. It is the large scale panel and cohort studies that
15 have become established as the ‘gold standard’ research method, the
16 ‘backbone’ of lifecourse enquiry (Elder and Giele, 2009). In 2003
17 Heinz noted that quantitative studies had made impressive progress in
18 exploring the shape of life trajectories through the use of event history
19 and sequence–pattern analysis. However:
20

21 Qualitative life history or biography research seems to
22 have made comparatively less visible progress. Though
23 it has been recognised as an important complement to
24 life event and trajectory studies ... it has yet to become a
25 steady companion and resides at the margins of mainstream
26 lifecourse research. (Heinz, 2003, p 75)
27

28 This tendency to view QL studies as somewhat peripheral, of use only
29 to augment the large scale panel studies, is notably persistent:
30

31 The field of lifecourse studies has matured. There appears
32 to be more consensus on methods of data collection and
33 on analytical strategies ... Longitudinal survey research
34 and panel studies are the principal way to chart changes
35 in the lifecourse over time, with other methods, such as
36 ... ethnographic observation ... as important supplements
37 (Elder and Giele, 2009, pp vii–viii)
38

39 Part of the reason for this perception, perhaps, is that these two research
40 paradigms have developed as parallel fields of enquiry, with little cross
41 referencing between the two (albeit their complementarity has never
42 been in doubt).

1 The need to bridge this gap between microdynamic and
2 macrodynamic approaches has long been recognised:

3
4 We cannot hope to understand society unless we have a
5 prior understanding of the relationship between biography
6 and history ... [the task is to] continually work out and
7 revise your views on ... the problems of social structure in
8 which biography and history intersect (Mills, 1959, p 225)
9

10 While Mills had little to say about how this relationship could be
11 investigated, researchers had already begun to explore the connections
12 via the 'meso' domain of experience. Here collectives of individuals,
13 in communities, families, organisations and generational cohorts,
14 provide a bridge between individual and structural processes (cf. the
15 concept of 'linked lives' (Elder and Giele, 2009) and Settersten and
16 Gannon's (2009) model of 'agency within structure'). HQL researchers
17 have a long history of working in this tradition, following collectives
18 of individuals over time who share particular life circumstances
19 and/or whose fortunes are shaped by a common passage through a
20 changing historical landscape. In a rich variety of ways, these studies
21 bring collective biography and historical processes into a common
22 framework. Examples include Jahoda et al's classic study of the effects
23 of long-term unemployment in Marienthal (1972 [1932]) and Pollard
24 and Filer's study of the educational trajectories of primary school
25 children (1999).

26 Prospectively tracking or retrospectively sampling across generations
27 are important strategies for linking individual lives with wider historical
28 processes. Shah and Priestley's (2011) study of three generations of
29 disabled people revealed very different experiences of growing up
30 through a shifting landscape of disability policies over many decades
31 of change. Similarly, Giele (2009) uses retrospective methods to chart
32 the changing environments shaping the career trajectories of three
33 generations of high achieving women.

34 If bridging the conceptual gap between structural and experiential
35 understandings of the lifecourse is a challenge, so too is bridging the
36 methodological gap between large and small scale studies. Here too,
37 some progress is being made. QL research has traditionally been equated
38 with in-depth, small scale studies, the product of individual or small
39 team scholarship. But recent developments have seen a 'scaling up' of
40 QL research in ways that can enhance the evidence base and combine
41 depth with breadth of data and analysis. Qualitative panel studies
42 (QPSs) are one example.² These studies engage with larger and more

widespread samples, over longer timespans (for example, Burton et al's (2009) large scale longitudinal ethnography). In-depth QL studies need not necessarily be 'small scale' in terms of sample size, geographical coverage or historical reach. This scaling up process produces a new kind of movie, intimate epics that are grounded in 'big' rich data and evidence, yet, crucially, retain their depth and explanatory power.

Parallel developments and shifts are also evident in the macro field of research. Medium scale community based panel surveys are developing (for example, Born in Bradford) that are no longer driven by the search for elusive, nationally representative samples (Rothman et al, 2013). Mixed longitudinal methodologies are being refined (Giele and Elder, 1998; Heinz, 2003; Cohler and Hostetler, 2004), while QPSs are increasingly designed to run alongside large surveys or form a nested sample within. The conceptual and methodological advances outlined above are relatively new developments but, taken together, they suggest the rise of a new methodological infrastructure within which lifecourse research can advance and flourish.

...Through time

While lifecourse research is centrally concerned with the flow of lives, the temporal dimensions of the enterprise, how lives flow *through time*, have been neglected. Engaging with temporal theory, however, is clearly important, for how the lifecourse is perceived depends, in large measure, on how time itself is perceived:

To study the experience of duration, the estimation of an interval ... or the timing, sequence and co-ordination of behaviour, is to define time as duration, interval, passage, horizon, sequencing and timing. The conceptualisation is in turn imposed on the studies. .. Time does not 'emerge' from these studies but is predefined in the very aspects that are being studied. (Adam, 1990, p 94)

Western notions of the ageing process are based on fundamental assumptions about chronology. We organise our temporal perceptions by connecting the past to the present, and this to the future, in linear terms. ... We divide and mark our days with units of time, seemingly orienting our every action to clock and calendar. Life change and a linear chronology implicate one another. Our understanding of ageing and life change is circumscribed

_____ 1 and propelled by our view of time passing – irresistibly,
_____ 2 irreversibly, irretrievably, inevitably. The linear, progressive
_____ 3 lifecourse is an artefact of this chronology. (Holstein and
_____ 4 Gubrium, 2000, pp 35–6)
_____ 5

_____ 6 A powerful critique of this dominant perception of time is offered
_____ 7 by Adam (1990). Her main arguments are summarised here. Most of
_____ 8 our social scientific and common sense assumptions about time are
_____ 9 reflected in clock and calendar time, which are linked to the regular
_____ 10 pattern of the seasons and the cycles of nature. This ‘fixed’ model of
_____ 11 time has its source in abstract, positivist, Newtonian physics and the
_____ 12 clear cut, reductionist dualisms of Cartesian logic. Time is perceived
_____ 13 as an invariant, chronological, linear feature of life, a quantity that
_____ 14 is objective and measurable, with a relentless, regular and recurrent
_____ 15 motion that is expressed numerically. Paradoxically, ‘fixed’ time has two
_____ 16 intertwined dimensions: it is inexorably advancing and irreversible, yet
_____ 17 recurs in repetitive cycles (in much the same way that the lifecourse
_____ 18 itself is perceived). Past and future are separate and identical realms, held
_____ 19 apart by the progression of the clock. Time in this formulation provides
_____ 20 an external structure within which our lives are measured, planned,
_____ 21 organised and regulated. In the process time becomes a resource, a
_____ 22 commodity and a site of power and control. Under ‘clock’ time, then,
_____ 23 lives progress and events occur ‘in time’, for time is external to them. It
_____ 24 is a shared background, a taken for granted presence, the constant and
_____ 25 unvarying medium through which lives are lived and events unfold.

_____ 26 While this view of time is a recent social construction within Western
_____ 27 industrial societies, it is pervasive and of global significance, making it
_____ 28 difficult to think beyond or outside it. Time is so extensively embedded
_____ 29 in the mechanics of the clock and calendar, that the clock becomes
_____ 30 time. Yet this model has its source in outmoded forms of scientific
_____ 31 explanation and logic. Newtonian physics has been superseded by
_____ 32 theories of relativity, quantum physics and ecological biology. Drawing
_____ 33 on these insights, Adam (1990) offers a powerful way to rethink and
_____ 34 transcend clock time, turning our common sense notions of time
_____ 35 on their head to consider not events *in time*, but *time in* events. In
_____ 36 this qualitative, experiential formulation, time is not fixed but fluid,
_____ 37 rhythmically and perpetually emerging in multi-dimensional ways in
_____ 38 varied local contexts. Objective, constant, one-dimensional clock time
_____ 39 gives way to a plurality of times, held in a simultaneous relationship
_____ 40 with each other, flowing and intersecting in complex and unpredictable
_____ 41 ways. This, for Adam, is *temporality*, a realm where flows of time are
_____ 42 embedded within our day to day lives. These flows and rhythms are

1 relative, subjectively defined and context dependent. They inhere in
2 and emerge from our social events and practices. Rather than occurring
3 *in* time, these processes *constitute* time.

4 In this fluid, temporal realm, past and future are no longer separate
5 states that progress chronologically, in a linear direction; they are
6 processes that flow into one another. Relativity theory demonstrates
7 that time is curved, circular rather than linear, unfolding in a recursive
8 (self referential) loop, such that *before* and *after* lose their meaning.
9 Since time folds back on itself, the past is no more fixed than the
10 future. A similar transformation occurs in our social understanding
11 of causality. In clock time, causal sequences are implied in the linear,
12 orderly progression from past to future; cause and effect are intimately
13 tied to this sense of chronology. However, in the fluid realm of
14 temporality, causality is integral to the world of experience. It emerges
15 as a subjective, ongoing and emergent process, bound up with ever
16 recurring, and widening cycles of influence, each embodying subtle
17 changes that cumulate slowly and almost imperceptibly as they ripple
18 outwards. While causality can only be discerned by looking backwards,
19 reconstructing past lives from the vantage point of the present, it no
20 longer becomes tenable to trace outcomes back to a single, objectively
21 defined cause.

22 Adam (1990) shows that unpredictable, intersecting flows of time are
23 not confined to the social world but permeate the natural and cosmic
24 worlds. This is where our temporal awareness arises, for temporality is
25 a law of nature, of which our social world is a part. She demonstrates
26 that fluid time predates clock time and is no less pervasive in social
27 experience. It is an enduring feature of all societies, both modern and
28 traditional. To take one example, while past and future extensions are
29 fundamental to all cultures these find expression in highly varied ways.
30 The Balinese calendar does not measure the passage of chronological
31 time but marks and classifies noteworthy social and natural events
32 (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Rather than indicating what date it is,
33 this calendar indicates what kind of time it is. In many other cultures,
34 too, people do not order events so much as name them, with little
35 sense of clock based history, chronological aging, or the cumulative
36 effects of past, present and future. As Holstein and Gubrium observe,
37 'the linear lifecourse is merely one variant. ... across cultures we find
38 depictions of ageing and life change aligning with local notions of
39 time' (2000, p 36).

40 In contrasting fixed and fluid time, Adam (1990) is careful to avoid
41 creating another Cartesian duality. She stresses that these are not either/
42 or formulations: both need to be taken into account as empirical

1 realities that influence every day existence. Even so, in the broader,
2 more fluid formulation offered by Adam, narrowly conceived clock
3 time loses its dominance. It becomes one among many complex flows
4 of time that make up our temporal world. The key task then becomes
5 a holistic one: to transcend the dualities that stultify conventional
6 investigations of time, to discern and investigate the flows and rhythms
7 of time – social and natural, linear and cyclical, ancient and modern,
8 quantitative and qualitative, fixed and fluid; and, crucially, to explore
9 the webs of their intrinsic connections, how they are implicated in
10 each other.

11 Two decades on, some progress has been made to import these
12 insights into social scientific thinking although, inevitably, clock time
13 continues to dominate social research, both qualitative and quantitative.
14 In the large scale panel studies, time is a self evident, empirical
15 dimension of research. A moving, chronological picture of progressions
16 from ‘stage’ to ‘stage’ emerges through the simple expedient of building
17 calendar time in as the medium for conducting a study. Indeed, this
18 strategy is used in all longitudinal enquiry. But QL research is also
19 centrally concerned with flows of time. Temporality is factored into the
20 design and development of a QL enquiry from the outset, not only (or
21 necessarily) as a methodological strategy, the medium through which
22 data are gathered, but as a rich theoretical construct, and a topic of
23 enquiry that drives data generation and analysis. Time can be ‘sliced’
24 along a variety of dimensions to build theory and aid investigation.
25 Five possible dimensions are outlined here.

27 *Micro–meso–macro*

29 This dimension captures the different magnitudes of biography,
30 collective biography and history, and their complex intersections. As
31 shown above, historical moments or the broader sweep of macro-
32 history can be discerned even within the confines of a time limited
33 study, through a creative combination of prospective and retrospective
34 methods, and through cross generational designs. As a further example,
35 Bornat and Bytheway (2010), in their study of the Oldest Generation,
36 combined life history and diary methods to capture the long sweep
37 of a life lived over decades, alongside the day to day contingencies
38 of older age. Bringing these different magnitudes of time together
39 enriched their analysis.

1 *Past–present–future*
2

3 While life trajectories can be understood through fixed chronology, it is
4 also necessary to understand the fluidity of past and future – how they
5 are constructed and reconstructed through the ever shifting present.
6 Past–present–future may be understood at a macro level (re–interpreting
7 history) as well as a micro level (overwriting biographies). From a
8 micro perspective, the past – hindsight, memory, heritage, legacies,
9 reputations – can be seen as a subjective resource that plays an important
10 role in life planning and the ongoing construction of social identities.
11 The future, meanwhile, is a neglected field of research, yet it has the
12 potential to reveal the seeds of change (Adam and Groves, 2007).
13 Recursive understandings of time emerge through a combination of
14 prospective and retrospective methods. Using life history methods
15 and tools such as time maps, accounts of past and future time can be
16 generated, revisited and re–envisioned at each research encounter. This
17 is a powerful way to understand the future orientations and changing
18 aspirations of individuals, and the opportunities and constraints that
19 shape their life trajectories and chances.
20

21 *Intensive–extensive: the tempo of time*
22

23 This dimension concerns the experiential intensity of our lives:
24 the tenor, pace, velocity and rhythms of time and the acuteness or
25 chronicity of change. This enables a focus on the pace and speed at
26 which events or change occur and time is perceived to pass – whether
27 it is slowing down or speeding up. Understanding these different
28 tempos and how they intersect is an important dimension of lifecourse
29 research. Studies of time use, or work–life balance, for example, may
30 distinguish between industrial time (the rigid, impersonal tempo of the
31 clock), and family time (which is fluid, flexible, enduring and value
32 laden), exploring how families attempt to reconcile these different
33 tempos (Harden et al, 2012). This dimension invites us to consider
34 continuities as well as change. The work of enduring hardship or
35 sustaining relationships – how, in all kinds of activity, people bide their
36 time, is equally important to our understanding of the flow of lives.
37

38 *Continuities–discontinuities: the synchronicity of time*
39

40 The extent to which time is perceived to be continuous or discontinuous
41 was first raised by Aristotle (Bastian, 2014). Synchronicity may
42 be understood in two senses. Biographically, it concerns how far

1 individuals feel ‘in step’ or ‘out of step’ with the dominant flows of
2 time in a society or community (Bastian, 2014). Discontinuities can
3 arise when there is a rupture in life experiences, whether planned
4 or welcomed, or not, for example, through migration or the entry
5 into parenthood, unemployment or divorce. For those undergoing
6 challenging transitions (illness, bereavement, poverty), time may
7 seem to shrink, creating a sense of being ‘out of time’, disoriented
8 or dislocated from the mainstream, such that the seamless flow of life
9 from past to future is disrupted. People commonly talk of ‘taking each
10 day as it comes’ or ‘living in the moment’ shortened time horizons,
11 a sense of time as fleeting or ephemeral, can make future planning
12 impossible and multiply risks. This is the sense of liminality documented
13 by van Gennep. Where it persists, this has implications for people’s
14 trajectories and life chances. This was powerfully documented by
15 Johoda et al (1972 [1932]) in their study of long-term unemployment
16 in Marienthal; in this context, quantitative measures of time were
17 meaningless. Synchronicity may also be understood in terms of the
18 timing of life events, and how these mesh across micro and macro time.
19 For example, the age, career and family stage reached by individuals
20 during the Great Depression in the US had a significant impact on
21 their ability to cope with adversity (Elder and Giele, 2009). Timing,
22 how biographical time intersects with wider historical time, is crucial
23 to our understanding of the flow of lives.

24

25 *Time–space*

26

27 This dimension concerns the intrinsic connection between time
28 and space – or when and where – as a key mechanism to locate and
29 contextualise experiences and events. One of the ways that time is
30 constituted and made tangible is through its intersection with spatial
31 markers, particularly liminal places where we meet to reflect on our lives
32 and finitude (Bakhtin, 1981 [1938]; May and Thrift, 2001). ‘When’
33 and ‘where’ can be added to our understandings of ‘how’ and ‘why’
34 to further enrich the meaning of social processes. While time–space
35 is pervasive in life experiences and processes, across the micro–macro
36 spectrum it offers particular scope for the development of temporal
37 geographies, for comparative temporal research, and for the study of
38 borders, boundaries and spatial transitions.

39 The five temporal dimensions outlined above form a provisional
40 basis for elaborating the intricacies of time and their complex
41 intersections. Past, present and future, for example, can be understood
42 at different levels of magnitude – biographically or historically, in

1 different spatial contexts, and through differential experiences of the
2 intensity or synchronicity of time. Endless possibilities exist for further
3 refinement and for discerning myriad connections across and beyond
4 these dimensions. Adam (1990) reminds us that, in focusing on one
5 dimension of time, we should not lose sight of the others; as parts of
6 a larger whole, they are all implicated in how lives unfold.

8 **Concluding comments**

10 The chapter has sought to rethink our conceptualisations of the
11 lifecourse and to bring lived experiences and complex flows of time
12 more centrally into the picture. Time is central to the task of creating
13 a moving picture of the lifecourse; it is the lynchpin through which
14 to understand the relationship between agency and structure, and
15 between the social and biological dimensions of life journeys. Since
16 these relationships are essentially dynamic, in perpetual interplay as
17 lives unfold, it is *only* through time that we can begin to grasp how
18 agency and structure, micro and macro, the personal and social, and
19 indeed, the natural worlds are interconnected, and how they come
20 to be transformed (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003).

21 A focus on time in lifecourse research is crucial. But how time
22 is understood, its nature and parameters, is no less so. Our vision
23 will be impoverished if it is fixed solely on the clock and calendar.
24 Re-theorising the lifecourse by importing ideas from time theorists
25 is necessary if we are to discern time in a broader, more fluid way,
26 and thereby, to understand how it is experientially implicated in the
27 flow of lives. QL research is particularly suited to this enterprise, for
28 it brings lived experiences and flows of time into a common frame of
29 reference. Adam (1990) observes that seeing things through the lens
30 of time quite simply changes everything. This chapter suggests that
31 seeing things *qualitatively* through the lens of time produces a richness of
32 understanding that can greatly enhance our vision of the social world.

34 **Notes**

35 ¹ The ideas presented in this chapter were developed during the ESRC funded
36 'Timescapes' programme (2007–12, www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk). This programme
37 of research was designed to advance and scale up Qualitative Longitudinal research
38 through a national network of projects concerned with the dynamics of family life.
39 I am grateful to my Timescapes colleagues for many fruitful discussions on this
40 methodology, and to Barbara Adam, whose contributions to the programme enriched
41 our understandings of time.

² The *Timescapes* study (see Note 1) is another example of ‘scaling up’ – bringing thematically related studies together for a synthesis of evidence and secondary analysis of datasets.

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