TWO

Time and the lifecourse: perspectives from qualitative longitudinal research

Bren Neale

Introduction

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be re-united, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross… (van Gennep, 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 Gennep 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
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It is through the long sweep of a life over decades that macro-historical processes come more clearly into focus, and the cumulative influence of earlier life patterns on later life chances and experiences can be more fully investigated and understood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Berthoud suggests eight life stages, ranging from dependent child to old/infirm. This is one among many models of lifecourse development, or of particular ‘stages’ within it (for example, the model of childhood development posited by Piaget). Researchers vary in the degree to which they present these as prescriptive models, and Berthoud avoids being overly deterministic. Nevertheless, such models are assumed to represent widespread patterns of behaviour and, in the process, they acquire the status of normative benchmarks against which to measure the actuality of people’s lives. In such accounts, the lifecourse is assumed to have a universal linearity and a seeming objectivity that places it outside and ‘above’ those whose lives are under study.
An alternative, microdynamic approach starts from the premise that the lifecourse is socially constructed through lived experiences and subjectivities, and the agency and social interactions of individuals and groups. While recognising the structural constraints within which all lives unfold, this approach foregrounds the subjective framing and crafting of life journeys across time and place. Social constructionists, from van Gennep onwards, have reflected this fluidity in their research. For Harris (1987, pp 27–8) the lifecourse is ‘the negotiation of a passage through an unpredictably changing environment’; while, for Holstein and Gubrium:

[T]he lifecourse 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 our everyday lives. … The meaning of our existence is artfully constructed, constantly emerging, yet circumstantially shaped. … The construction of the lifecourse is always ineluctably local. … Individuals never yield authorship of realities to deterministic structural imperatives. (2000, pp 182–4, p 210, p 32 {would it be better to break this up into several quotes, one for each page reference?})

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

Methods for studying the lifecourse reflect and reinforce the distinctions outlined above. Heinz (2009a, p 422) suggests there are two contrasting methodologies: ‘top down’, from social structure to
individual agency, and ‘bottom up’, from social action to larger social structures. The ‘top down’ approach is a defining feature of large scale longitudinal survey and panel studies. Such studies have significant value in charting broad social trends across extensive segments of the population and with considerable historical reach (given sustained funding). Through structured questions that are repeated at regular intervals, they measure what changes, for whom, the extent and direction of change, where changes occur and over what time periods. Much of the focus is on the spells of time that individuals spend in particular states. To return to Berthoud’s ‘movie’ metaphor, such studies create an epic movie, a broad ‘surface’ picture of change over the generations, generated from big ‘thin’ data (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003).

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

Discerning these patterns requires a finer, qualitative lens, operating in particular contexts of change. This ‘bottom up’ approach, a defining feature of QL research, focuses on the intricacies of change and continuity in localised settings, the factors that trigger change, the processes by which change occurs, and the creativity of individuals in shaping or accommodating to these processes. Like all qualitative research, QL research is concerned with human subjectivity: the meanings that events, circumstances and social processes have for those who experience them, captured primarily through reflexive narratives of the self. It is also centrally concerned with human agency – the capacity to act, to interact, to make choices, to influence the shape of one’s own life and the lives of others. Agency is a dynamic concept, embodying action, process, change, continuity and endurance, and bringing subjective understandings of causality to the fore. This, then, is the up close and personal movie, following the twists and turns in the individual story lines, exploring the interior logic of lives to discern how change is created, lived and experienced (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003).
The capacity to discern the mechanisms that shape lifecourse trajectories, and the causes and consequences of change in particular contexts, gives this mode of research significant explanatory power. While the large studies may reveal the wholesale movement of populations from points A to B, the ‘thick’ dynamic data generated through QL research reveals the triggers for such journeys, why they are undertaken, and their varied nature along the way. Giele (2009, p 236) makes a similar point: while ‘demographic surveys show the magnitude and distribution of migration in entire populations … only individual or family histories can reveal why one individual moves and another stays put’.

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

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

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

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

Part of the reason for this perception, perhaps, is that these two research paradigms have developed as parallel fields of enquiry, with little cross referencing between the two (albeit their complementarity has never been in doubt).
The need to bridge this gap between microdynamic and macrodynamic approaches has long been recognised:

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

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

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

If bridging the conceptual gap between structural and experiential understandings of the lifecourse is a challenge, so too is bridging the methodological gap between large and small scale studies. Here too, some progress is being made. QL research has traditionally been equated with in-depth, small scale studies, the product of individual or small team scholarship. But recent developments have seen a ‘scaling up’ of QL research in ways that can enhance the evidence base and combine depth with breadth of data and analysis. Qualitative panel studies (QPSs) are one example. 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
and propelled by our view of time passing – irresistibly, irreversibly, irretrievably, inevitably. The linear, progressive lifecourse is an artefact of this chronology. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000, pp 35–6)

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

While this view of time is a recent social construction within Western industrial societies, it is pervasive and of global significance, making it difficult to think beyond or outside it. Time is so extensively embedded in the mechanics of the clock and calendar, that the clock becomes time. Yet this model has its source in outmoded forms of scientific explanation and logic. Newtonian physics has been superseded by theories of relativity, quantum physics and ecological biology. Drawing on these insights, Adam (1990) offers a powerful way to rethink and transcend clock time, turning our common sense notions of time on their head to consider not events in time, but time in events. In this qualitative, experiential formulation, time is not fixed but fluid, rhythmically and perpetually emerging in multi-dimensional ways in varied local contexts. Objective, constant, one-dimensional clock time gives way to a plurality of times, held in a simultaneous relationship with each other, flowing and intersecting in complex and unpredictable ways. This, for Adam, is temporality, a realm where flows of time are embedded within our day to day lives. These flows and rhythms are
relative, subjectively defined and context dependent. They inhere in and emerge from our social events and practices. Rather than occurring *in* time, these processes *constitute* time.

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

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

In contrasting fixed and fluid time, Adam (1990) is careful to avoid creating another Cartesian duality. She stresses that these are not either/or formulations: both need to be taken into account as empirical
realities that influence every day existence. Even so, in the broader, more fluid formulation offered by Adam, narrowly conceived clock time loses its dominance. It becomes one among many complex flows of time that make up our temporal world. The key task then becomes a holistic one: to transcend the dualities that stultify conventional investigations of time, to discern and investigate the flows and rhythms of time – social and natural, linear and cyclical, ancient and modern, quantitative and qualitative, fixed and fluid; and, crucially, to explore the webs of their intrinsic connections, how they are implicated in each other.

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

**Micro–meso–macro**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Time–space

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

The five temporal dimensions outlined above form a provisional
basis for elaborating the intricacies of time and their complex
intersections. Past, present and future, for example, can be understood
at different levels of magnitude – biographically or historically, in
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different spatial contexts, and through differential experiences of the intensity or synchronicity of time. Endless possibilities exist for further refinement and for discerning myriad connections across and beyond these dimensions. Adam (1990) reminds us that, in focusing on one dimension of time, we should not lose sight of the others; as parts of a larger whole, they are all implicated in how lives unfold.

Concluding comments

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

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

Notes

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

References


