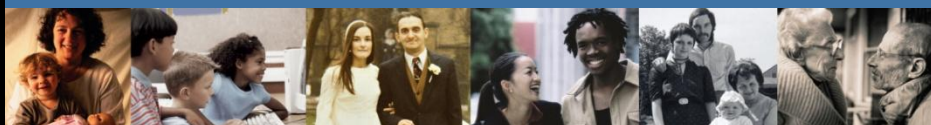




UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



# timescapes

An ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study





# Journeys through Time:

Conceptual categories and methodological  
strategies in

Qualitative Longitudinal research

Bren Neale

# Overview

- The contours of QL Research
- Time as a conceptual category & methodological strategy: more than the medium through which we conduct research, it is an important topic of enquiry in its own right.
- Aim: to draw a closer and productive alignment between social theories of time, and empirically driven life course and longitudinal studies: QL research an important bridge between the two.



QL research is...

... qualitative enquiry conducted  
through or in relation to time



# Qualitative Enquiry...

- Generates rich, detailed, textured data about individuals and linked lives, using an array of interview, ethnographic and narrative methods
- Discerns social practices, subjective experience, identities, beliefs, emotions, values and so on
- Derives meanings from context and complexity
- Produces finely grained understandings
- Addresses how and why questions: significant explanatory power
- Authenticates personal lives and human agency.



## ...Conducted Through or in Relation to Time.

Explores the temporal dimension of experience: change, continuity, endurance, transition, causality

Sheds light on micro processes and the causes and consequences of change or continuity in the social world;  
Illuminates how change is created, lived and experienced



# Time in QL Research

- It is *through time* that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change ...  
Indeed it is only through time that we can gain a better appreciation of how the personal and social, agency and structure, the micro and macro are interconnected and how they come to be transformed, for the relationship is essentially a dynamic one. (Neale, IJSRM 2003)



# Time in QL Research

- We cannot hope to understand society unless we have a prior understanding of the relationship between biography and history ... [the task is to] continually work out and revise your views on the problems of history, the problems of biography and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect: keep your eyes open to the varieties of individuality and to the modes of epochal change (C Wright Mills The Sociological Imagination 1959:225).





# Conceptualising Time.

‘Longitudinal data ...offers a movie  
rather than a snapshot’

(Berthoud 2000: Seven years in the Lives of British  
Families: 15)



# Quantitative Concepts of Time

Large scale panel and cohort studies: time is linear, cumulative and invariably moving forward: time emerges as chronology, sequence, duration and interval

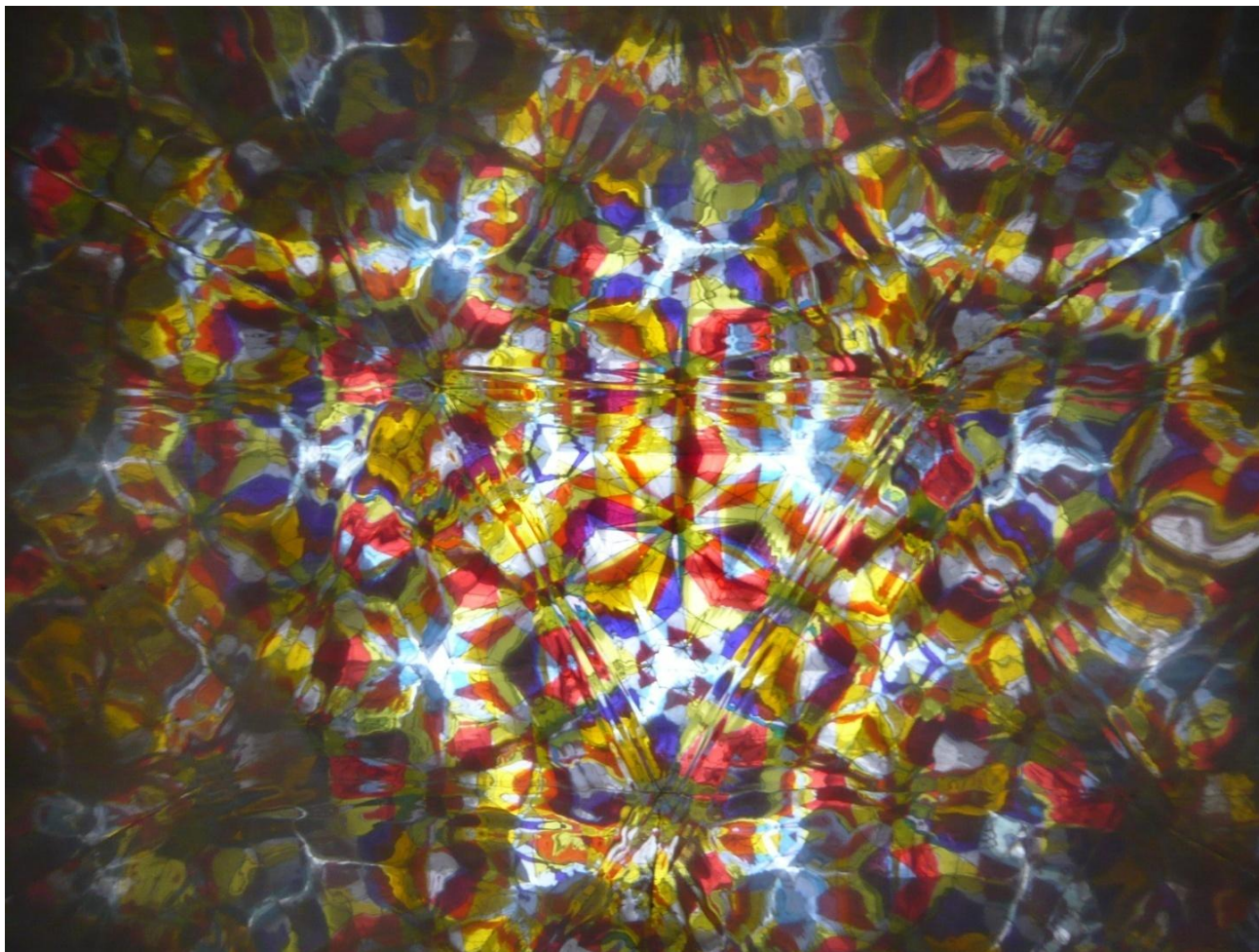
for example, research that measures the spells of time that individuals spend in particular states (eg. unemployment or cohabitation (Leisering and Walker The Dynamics of Modern Society 2000))

time is linked to trend data: generates the long shot, birds eye view, the broad vista: the epic movie

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# Kaleidoscopic time





# Qualitative Concepts of Time

Conceptualised as Complex flows of time – or Timescapes

Time is fluid, multi-dimensional and infinitely varied. It may encompass biographical time, generational time, historical time, industrial time, cyclical time: time as a social construct (Adam, Hareven)

Time is linked to the textures of real lives: generates a grounded view of individuals and groups, the twists and turns in the story lines – the intricacies and interior logic of human lives – the up close and personal movie





# Temporal Understandings of the Life Course

- **Life cycle:** structured, pre-defined life stages: the benchmarks against which to measure development and behaviour (e.g. Piaget, Kohlberg (6 stages) Berthoud: 8 stages (2000:216, 230))
- 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)



# Temporal understandings of the life course

- **The life course:** An imaginative framework for understanding ageing, social change and how the two are interrelated (Shanahan and Macmillan : Biography and the Sociological Imagination).
- An imaginative framework for understanding the relationship between biography, generation and history – seen as the micro, meso and macro domains of time that we simultaneously inhabit.



# Key concepts: 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 of individuals, collective biographies of groups or organisations (Chamberlayne and Rustin 1999)
- If an individual or group moves from point A to B what triggers a change in direction and what is the nature of the journey on the way? Discern 'change in the making'
- critical moments, epiphanies: Turning points,

# Key concepts: Generational Time

- Individuals as part of a Generational convoy, in two senses: family and kinship groups (Hareven, family time) (aligned vertically through time) and age sets (cohorts; Mannheim) aligned horizontally through time, eg. the beat generation. Generational time allows a focus on linked lives (Elder) and collective agency rather than on individuals as isolated categories. (Judith Burnett)

Generational categories e.g. child, adult, old age, are fluid and shifting as people cross generational boundaries, and as life course categories expand or contract.'

- Inter-generational research designs across both family groups and age sets, eg. Julia Brannen on four generation families; Shah and Priestley on disability across the life course working with different generational cohorts of disabled people, linking generation with history.



# Key concept: Historical Time

- How individuals locate themselves in different epochs and in relation to these external conditions and events, including shifting policy landscapes; the intersection of historical time with critical moments in individual biographies and the collective life chances of cohorts.
- Captured through longitudinal studies, oral and life histories, inter-generational research, historical analysis of extant datasets, documentary research
-



# Temporality: key concepts

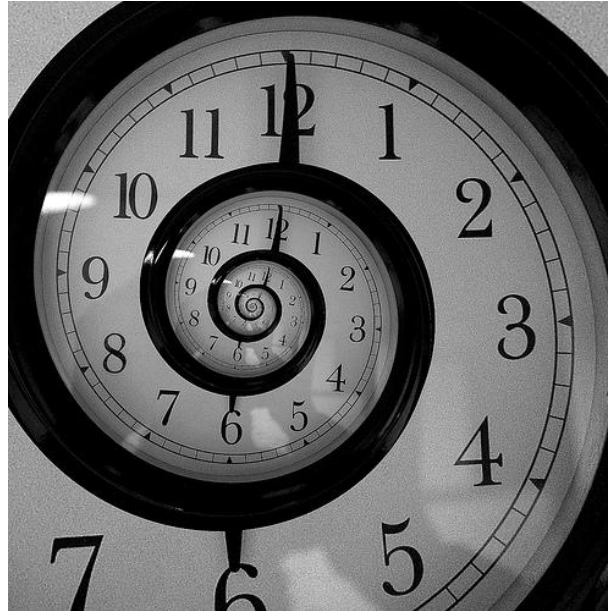
**Timescales** ( jay lemke ): exploring the pace or velocity of change, how we sustain things or bide our time.

**Chronotopes** (Timespace) Bakhtin (1981 [1938] and May and Thrift): 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



# Past - Present - Future

- **Past, present future, hindsight, foresight, insight** The past as a subjective resource, the power of memory, heritage
- Freeman: hindsight produces self understanding and plays an integral role in shaping moral life.
- Subjective understandings of causality (Laub and Sampson).
- The overwriting and reconstruction of biographies from the vantage point of an ever changing present



... life must be understood backwards. But ... it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it – backwards.

Søren Kierkegaard



“...when you look back, you see the path or paths that you've taken. The path would obviously not be so clear when you're groping up and finding it, would it? I mean it's rather like going up a mountain, you're sort of looking that way and that track and it looks too steep and you're going round another one. Whereas when you're high up you can look back and see and it sort of stands out much more clearly, things you didn't realize at the time.” (Molly Andrews Narrative research





# Future aspirations

The future as a key site for research  
(Barbara Adam)

- foresight – future aspirations enable us to understand the seeds of change.
- Captured through imagined futures and time lines.

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

EMILIA (YLT, age 15)

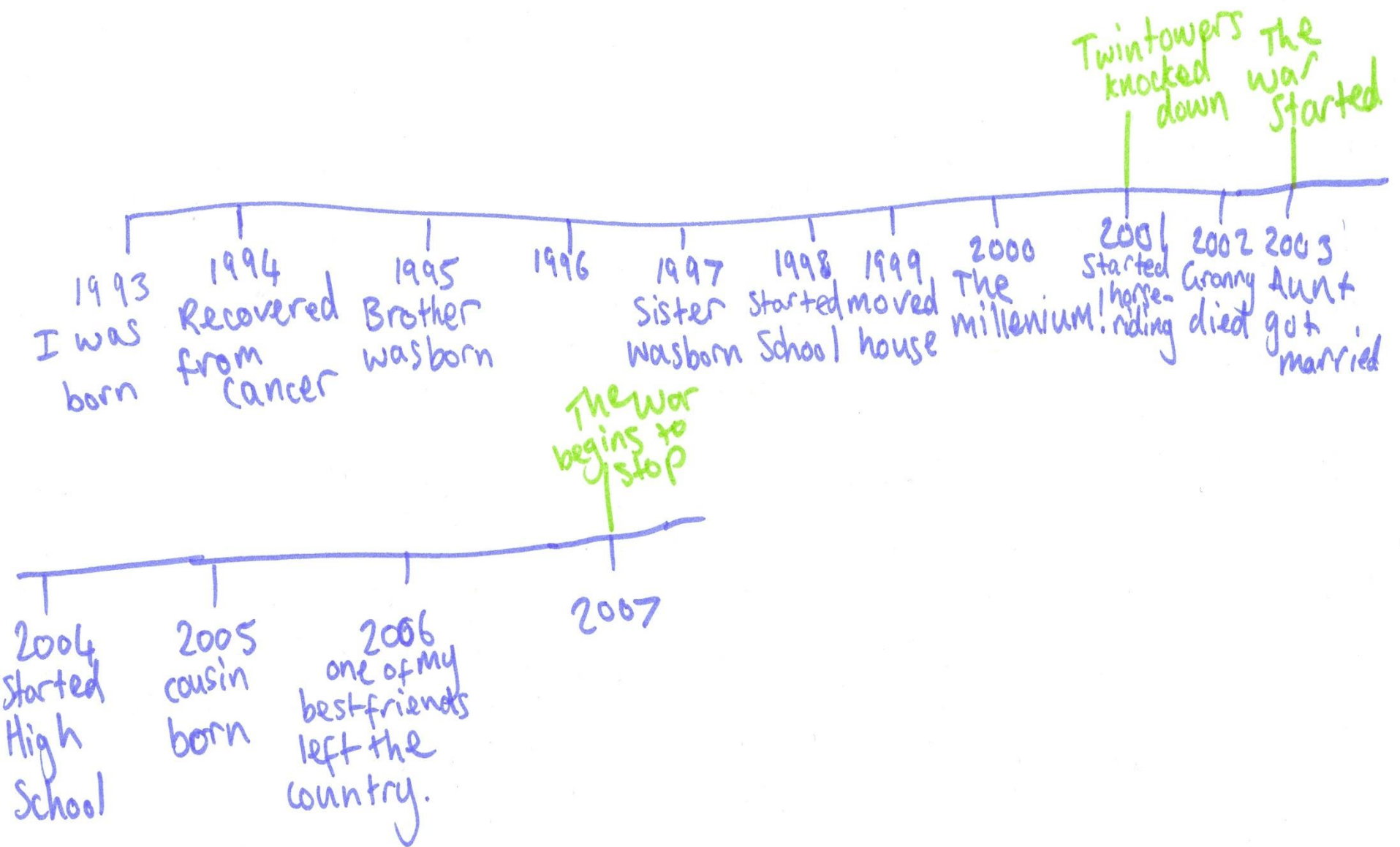
## Future Aspirations

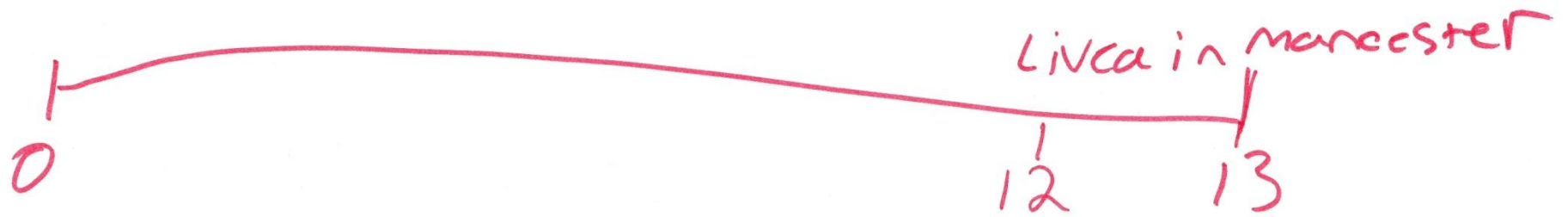
*Emilia: School is very important in my life, cause I go, I spend a lot of my time there and even when I'm at home I've got homework and stuff like that and its going to be very important in future life as well. So if I do badly at school then that's going to damage what I can do in the future.*



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

SOPHIE (YLT, age 15)







## Methodological Strategies

- **Prospective longitudinal studies**, tracking individuals or groups; 'walking alongside' people as their lives unfold:
- extensive tracking (seven up series).
- Intensive tracking through particular experiences or policy contexts (including evaluation and action research, documenting, navigating processes of change).
- Flexibility, creativity and innovation: allowing findings from one wave to inform the next (Smith 2005).

# Challenges: Data generation

- Challenges of maintaining a sample over time; relies on sustaining relationships, and developing strategies for sample boosting
- Data collection tends to be eclectic at outset because it is impossible to know what data might be significant over time. Funnel approach needed.
- QL research generates very large data sets, viewed longitudinally.
- Data may always have a provisional feel, as data collection may go on indefinitely
- The value of a QL data set may take years to accrue, particularly its historical value



# Challenges: Data Analysis

- Data analysis is complex and time consuming
- Proceeds in two dimensions simultaneously
  - Analysis of cross sectional data: each point in time
  - Analysis of longitudinal data within each case: production of case profiles and case histories
  - An iteration between the two: understanding where lives converge or diverge.
  - Tools for analysis: framework (Lewis) Life history charts (Gray); use of timelines





## Challenges: Ethical considerations

- Ethical challenges of qualitative enquiry enhanced where long term relationships exist between researcher and researched
  - Confidentiality/Informed consent as ongoing process
  - Researcher/researched relationship affects both over time, balancing intrusion and support, establishing boundaries.
  - Are we evaluating lives, practices, experiences or learning from them? A particular issue with practitioner based research.



# The power of QL research

- A powerful tool for knowing and understanding the social world in a different way, understanding the interior logic of lives, discovering the unimaginable.
- Can address some of the grand challenges of social science in a world of rapid social change.
- Seeing things qualitatively through the lens of time 'quite simply changes everything' (Barbara Adam)



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- Visit the Timescapes website for further information of QL methods, ethics, publications, resources and events.
- Find out about our affiliation scheme for QL researchers.