Neale, Bren. "Conceptual foundations: Rethinking time and the life course." *What is Qualitative Longitudinal Research?*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 23–44. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472532992.0007>>.

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2 Conceptual foundations: Rethinking time and the life course

Introduction

The notion that QL research has the capacity for a rich engagement with time raises questions about how that engagement actually occurs. In this chapter we take up this theme. The reader is taken on a short journey through time to explore the conceptual underpinnings for QL research. Two broad ways of conceptualizing time are outlined here: *fixed*, linear time, the realm of the clock and calendar and *fluid* multidimensional time, the realm of temporality. This distinction is recognized in all fields of temporal research, and is nicely reflected in the everyday metaphors that are used to make time tangible. On the one hand, spatial metaphors (life journeys, passages, transitions, pathways etc.) capture the sense of lives unfolding chronologically through time, with an implied purpose and direction of travel.¹ On the other hand, the imagery of waves, streams, flows, drops and ripples usefully captures the perpetual movement and fluidity of time. In its vastness and ever-present motion, time has been likened to an ocean (Saldana 2003: 5).

Taking both fixed and fluid understandings of time into account is a necessary foundation for QL research design and practice. Time becomes more than a methodological strategy, the medium through which QL research is conducted (however important that is). In its fluid

¹ The use of spatial metaphors, however, should not be taken to imply linearity and orderly sequences. These journeys may be more akin to the wanderings of Odysseus and other iconic and eternal travellers who appear throughout the great literature, oral traditions, art and music of the world.

dimensions, time can also be understood as a rich theoretical category and topic of enquiry that drives the generation and analysis of QL data. It is this latter conception of time, *time as topic*, as opposed to *time as vehicle*, which is the focus here. The discussion explores five ways to map time, followed by a consideration of the temporal dimensions of the life course and its conceptual building blocks. The overall aim is to explore how time, as a rich theoretical category, can feed into and enrich empirical investigation.²

Rethinking time

Studying lives through time seems, at first glance, to be self-evident and straightforward, a matter of creating a moving, chronological picture that charts observable changes and discerns what happens next. This approach rests on conventional understandings of time as an empirical, linear construct, tied to the clock and calendar. Yet lives do not necessarily unfold in chronological order, through discrete stages, in one linear direction or at a uniform pace. Nor do people experience time in these linear ways (Strauss 1997 [1959]: 93; Kelly and McGrath 1988: 55). Time can also be perceived as a non-linear, multidimensional social construct that shapes and, in turn, is shaped through lived experiences. Such ideas are hardly new. They have been developed over the decades through a wealth of socio-historical and temporal theorizing (see, for example, Mannheim 1952 [1927]). The discussion here draws primarily on the work of Barbara Adam (1990).

Adam (1990) draws a fundamental distinction between ‘fixed’ and ‘fluid’ time, in much the same way that Aristotle distinguishes between impersonal, atomistic time (chronos) and flowing, value-laden time (kairos) (Chaplin 2002). She explains that most of our social scientific and common-sense assumptions about time are reflected in clock and calendar time. 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 (a river that flows to the sea), yet it recurs in repetitive cycles (the perpetual

² The discussion in this chapter draws on and develops themes that were first introduced in Neale (2015).

wheel of time). 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, organized and regulated. The assumption is that people experience time in a uniform way. 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. Time becomes a shared background, a taken-for-granted presence, the constant and unvarying medium through which lives are lived and events unfold.

This view of time is a recent social construction within Western industrial societies, yet it is pervasive and of global significance, making it difficult to think beyond or outside it. Time is so extensively embodied in the mechanics of the clock that the clock *becomes* time. Yet this model of time has its source in outmoded forms of scientific explanation and logic (Newtonian physics). Drawing on more recent scientific advances (relativity theory, quantum physics, chaos theory and ecological biology) Adam 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 fluid realm of temporality, time has a kaleidoscopic quality. It is not fixed but fluid, rhythmically and perpetually emerging in multidimensional 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. Past and future, for example, are no longer separate states that progress chronologically, in a linear direction; they are processes that flow into one another, suggesting that our understandings of the past are no more fixed than the future. These flows of time are embedded within our day-to-day lives; they are embodied, subjective and context dependent, inhering in and emerging from our social events and practices. In all their complexity and flux, social practices and events do not occur *in time*; they *constitute* time. Time becomes our creation.

Seeing time in this way transforms our understandings of change and causality. In clock time our focus is on what happens from one point in time to the next. Change is seen as an instrumental, concrete, linear process, and its study an empirical matter of charting and documenting processes and events in chronological sequence. Similarly, causality is implied in the linear, orderly progression from past to present to future; cause and effect are intimately tied to this sense of chronology.

However, change and causal processes can also be understood in a fluid way: as subjectively defined, situated phenomena that are integral to the world of experience and which pervade all life processes. Seen in this way, complex causal processes defy prediction; they are best discerned retrospectively, by looking backwards and reconstructing past lives from the vantage point of the present day (Laub and Sampson 2003; Andrews 2008). They also defy simple, unitary explanations that link past events with future outcomes. Causality cannot be traced back to a single identifiable moment or event. It is the accumulation of multiple events or experiences, and their complex configurations that assume significance (Pettigrew 1995; Saldana 2003: 8-12). Causal processes emerge in specific contexts of time and place, inviting consideration of the multiple generative mechanisms through which life course changes occur (a theme developed further below).³ Overall, then, these dynamic processes emerge within and derive their meaning from the social practices and unfolding contexts in which they are embedded (Saldana 2003). In contrasting 'fixed' and 'fluid' time, Adam stresses that these are not either/or formulations. Both need to be taken into account as empirical realities that influence everyday 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 discern and investigate the flows and rhythms of time and, crucially, to explore the webs of their intrinsic connections, how they are implicated in each other.

Adam's contribution is far reaching. She creates an alternative vision of the nature of temporal reality, an alternative ontology of time. Nearly three decades on, some progress has been made to import these insights into empirical social science. Yet, perhaps understandably, clock time continues to dominate life course and longitudinal research, particularly in the quantitative tradition. Time remains 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 and the basis for comparison. Indeed, these strategies are used in all longitudinal studies. But QL research

³ A detailed discussion of causality and its use in qualitative enquiry is beyond the scope of this book. Among many insightful accounts, see Abbott 2001 and Elliott 2005.

is also centrally concerned with fluid time, the complex flows of time in human experience. Time as a rich theoretical and social construct becomes a topic of enquiry that drives the formulation of research questions, and enriches the content and analysis of QL data.

Timescapes: Flows of time

Temporal theorists classify time in a rich variety of ways (see, for example, the varied flows of time identified by Nowotny (1994) and Flaherty (2011), who distinguishes between duration, frequency, sequence, timing etc.). For our purposes here, time is mapped along five intersecting planes. While these are porous and flow into each other, they are separated out here to illuminate the interface between temporal theory and research practice, and to provide a foundation for empirical investigation:

- Prospective–retrospective: looking forwards, looking back
- Intensive–extensive: time frames and tempos
- Micro–macro: the scales of time
- Time–space: the spatial dimensions of time
- Continuous–discontinuous: the synchronicities of time

These planes or flows of time have theoretical value, as rich topics of enquiry and analysis, as well as methodological value, feeding into study design. It is their theoretical potential which is the main focus of attention here.

Prospective–retrospective: Looking forwards, looking back

This plane of time is foundational in discerning the dynamic unfolding of lives and the way we orient ourselves to time. As shown in Chapters 1 and 3, looking forwards, prospectively, and looking backwards, retrospectively, are basic approaches that may be combined in the design of a QL study. Our concern here is with the theoretical dimensions of these processes. Fixed time focuses our attention on the chronology of past–present–future, seen as a linear construct that proceeds in one direction and in an orderly sequence. It invites consideration of people's life journeys, the markers and vantage points that locate them on their way, where they have come from, where they are heading (the direction of travel and sequencing of events),

and what propels them onwards or holds them back. This is the basic framework commonly used in biographical interviewing (see Chapter 5).

In the fluid realm of temporality, however, the relationship between past, present and future is more complex. The temporal gaze is continually shifting as people look back and forth in the ever-moving present, overwriting their biographies, reinterpreting wider social and structural forces and confounding any sense of chronology and the orderly sequencing of events. Saldana (2003: 7, citing Jean-Luc Godard) notes that 'a story should have a beginning, a middle and an ending, but not necessarily in that order'. Moreover, past, present and future are simultaneously present and interacting at any one moment in time, and are continually under construction and reconstruction as the temporal gaze shifts. They emerge as interlocking flows of time that are in constant conversation with one another (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015). Understanding how individuals shape their biographies through the fluid stream of time becomes just as important as understanding transitions through fixed chronologies:

Invariably the stories we tell about ourselves, as well as those to which we attend as audience, are always ... anchored on shifting ground. ... We are forever re-scripting our pasts, making sense of the things that happened. This is true not only as narrators of our own lives, but also as narrators of the lives of others. This process of re-interpretation of events is one that is ongoing throughout our lives, as different parts of our past reveal themselves to hold increased importance, or to be void of meaning, depending not only on who we are, but critically, on whom we wish to become. (Andrews 2008: 94)

Every narrative about [the] past is always also a story told in and about the present, as well as a story about the future. This ... is much like the temporal structure of human life itself. ... Understanding a life is understanding the continuous oscillating of ... past, present and future. (Brockmeier 2000, cited in Andrews 2008: 94)

For QL researchers, revisiting past and future at each research encounter is a powerful way to understand these shifting processes (see recursive interviewing in Chapter 5). The process invites consideration of narrative change, changes in perception and the presentation of a life, as well as chronological change (Lewis 2007). In two recent QL studies, Helen, a young

child, and Elizabeth, a woman of retirement age, give compelling accounts of how they came to understand their past lives in a new light (Neale and Flowerdew 2007: 37; Andrews 2008: 87). Such evidence lends weight to Kierkegaard's (1843) famous observation that while life must be lived forwards in time, it can only be understood backwards (cited in Andrews 2008). The past, seen as hindsight, memory, heritage, legacies, reputations and so on, becomes a powerful, subjective resource that plays an important role in life planning, the ongoing construction of social identities and the shaping of moral lives (Freeman 2010).

The future, meanwhile, is a neglected site of research, yet it inheres in and shapes every day realities, and has the potential to reveal the nature of aspirations and the seeds of change (Adam and Groves 2007). For example, the extent to which people engage in life planning (the idea of 'choice' biographies) or live in an extended present which curtails their capacity to think about the long term, much less plan for it, are important topics of enquiry (Nowotny 1994). Brannen and Nilsen (2002) suggest that young people orient themselves to the future in three different ways: deferment, which keeps the future at bay; adaptability, which forges a future by responding to contingencies; and predictability, which strives for certainty and security over time. Concepts such as these have provided the foundation for a range of studies of youth transitions (see, for example, Henderson and colleagues 2007).

Imaginary futures are important topics of biographical enquiry (detailed in Chapter 5). Krings and colleagues (2013), for example, found that how their participants viewed the future in 2010 substantially differed from how they saw it in 2008, when their study began. Future accounts are usually seen as reflections of where people are on their life journeys at the moment in which the accounts are elicited. In other words, they are understood to have little or no predictive or causal power (Sanders and Munford 2008; Elliott 2010b; Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015). However, they may have motivational power, the propensity to bring into focus possible future selves, the notion of 'becoming', and thereby to shape, nurture and strengthen inner biographical dispositions (Strauss 1997 [1959]; Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015; Worth 2009). Arguably, how people orient themselves to the future may influence the paths they take, for people cannot work towards future aspirations unless they have the capacity to imagine them (Hardgrove, Rootham and McDowell 2015; Worth 2009). In this way, the conjuring of an imaginary

future may become a trigger point for change (a theme discussed further below and in Chapter 5):

There is, for the adolescent, the demand, or at least the opportunity to direct his thoughts both behind and ahead of the present moment; swinging rapidly from one perspective to another, comparing, predicting, regretting and resolving afresh; planning for the future but preserving continuity with the present; making the best of what has been, ensuring the best of what could come. (Veness 1962: 2)

Intensive–extensive: Time frames and tempos

As shown in Chapter 1, this plane of time is central to QL methodology: it shapes the time frame (the overall time span) for a study, and the tempo (the number, length and frequency) of visits to the field. However, this plane of time also has rich theoretical potential. Time frames and tempos afford rich possibilities for uncovering the experiential dimensions of life course processes: the acuteness or chronicity of change, and whether time is perceived intensively, in the moment, or extensively, stretching over longer-term horizons. Life states, for example, may be perceived as fleeting or enduring, temporary or permanent, while individuals may oscillate between change and continuity, action and inaction as their lives unfold. The work of enduring hardship or sustaining relationships, how people bide their time, is another important dimension of this plane of time. Alheit (1994), for example, identifies two contrasting time horizons in the life course: *everyday time*, which is cyclical and involves spontaneity as well as routine, and *life-time*, longer-term horizons that are retrospectively constructed in linear and sequential terms. How individuals reconcile these different horizons of time in making sense of their lives is a fruitful line of enquiry.

Closely allied to the tempo of time is its pace: our experiences of the rhythms, repetitions and velocity of time, the speed at which time is perceived to pass and whether it is slowing down or accelerating. The pace of time emerges in varied ways, for example, across the generations, where the pace of young childhood or deep old age is noticeably slower than the pace of youth or adulthood. Similarly, the speed and suddenness of change, and whether multiple changes occur in quick succession, are important dimensions of lived experience, inviting consideration of how change

processes are managed (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). As a final example, time use and work–life balance studies, both qualitative and quantitative, have flourished over past decades. These are driven by a concern that life is speeding up and becoming more routinized, regulated and frenetic in industrial society (Crow and Heath 2002; Rosa 2013; Wajcman 2015; Gershuny 2000 and related studies from the *Oxford Centre for Time Use Research*).

Studies of this temporal plane often distinguish between industrial time (the rigid, impersonal tempo of the clock: Aristotle's *chronos*), and family, personal or holiday time (which is fluid, flexible, enduring and value laden: Aristotle's *kairos*) (Hareven 1982). Chaplin (2002) and Harden and colleagues (2012), for example, have explored how families oscillate between and manage these two contrasting tempos in their daily lives. Finally, Lemke (2000) suggests we simultaneously inhabit a whole spectrum of time horizons, from the microscopic (where time is incomprehensible because it is fleeting and moves at lightning speed), to the cosmic (where time is incomprehensible because it is infinite and appears to stand still). The different horizons of turning points, transitions and trajectories (explored below) are embedded within this grand, cosmic scheme.

Micro–macro: The scales of time

The centrality of this plane of time within temporal research was established in Chapter 1. As Riley (1998: 29) notes, 'Changing lives ... are in continual interplay with changes in society and its structures. Neither can be understood conceptually without the other.' We have seen above that the temporal gaze may be directed forwards to the future, or backwards towards the past, or it may oscillate between the two. Similarly, in the micro–macro plane, the focus of the temporal lens can be adjusted to produce a close-up vision of individual lives, or a wide-angled view of social or historical processes. The micro–macro plane has been the focus of a burgeoning number of life course studies. Unfolding biographies have been explored in the context of a range of external landscapes, from shifting patterns of education and welfare provision, to forced resettlement and transformations in political structures (Pollard and Filer 1999; Patrick 2017; Scudder and Colson 2002; Holmberg 2012). As shown in Chapter 1, it was Mills (1959) who first provided the impetus for temporal researchers to explore the interface between biography and history. However, he had little

to say about how such a task might be accomplished, leaving successive generations of researchers to grapple with this problem (Giele and Elder 1998: 7; Shanahan and Macmillan 2008: xii).

A useful starting point here is the recognition that biography and history are not discrete domains that can be viewed dualistically. They are part of a continuum of dynamic processes, within which lies the meso domain of collective lives (families, organizations, communities, generations, institutions etc.). The meso domain, the world of shifting social relationships and structures, plays a crucial role in mediating between biography and history (Riley 1998: 45). Nor is it simply located between micro and macro, for it constitutes an interlocking and inter-dependent 'level' of social experience and practice (Riley 1998: 45). Nielsen (2003: 1–2) describes this as a subtle and ongoing interaction that produces societal change through a process akin to osmosis. In like vein, Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological model of human development comprises five interlocking domains of influence that span the micro–macro plane. These are micro systems; meso systems; exo systems (in which at least one linkage in the chain has an indirect influence on the original person, for example the impact of employment on parents, and hence on their children); macro systems; and chrono systems. The last is an 'umbrella' temporal domain that denotes change or continuity in the broader social environment. In Bronfenbrenner's view, these varied domains are nested inside one another, like Russian dolls, and he proposes that research designs should investigate their simultaneous connections (1993: 38).

Bronfenbrenner's framework has been utilized in a variety of policy contexts where there is a need to understand how individual, interpersonal and institutional spheres of life influence each other over time, and to what extent lived experiences mesh with policy processes (Molloy and Woodfield with Bacon 2002; Lewis 2007). Temporal researchers who work across this plane frame their enquiries in a variety of ways, exploring, for example, the intersection of individual, family and industrial time (Hareven 1982), or biographical, generational and historical time (Neale, Henwood and Holland 2012; Holland and Edwards 2014). Broadly similar schemas underpin large-scale longitudinal studies, this time couched in the quantitative language of age effects (biographical processes), cohort effects (collective processes across a cohort) and period effects (broad historical processes). Elder's comprehensive life course paradigm (1994; Elder and Giele 2009) follows a similar pattern, spanning the agency

of individuals, linked lives or social ties to others and historical and geographical location.

Re-focusing the temporal lens still further permits a close-up view of these micro–macro domains, and reveals further flows of time embedded within them. In the micro domain, for example, it is possible to discern both ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ constructions of biography, the former permitting insights into the psycho-social dynamics of identity and the place of emotions in the construction of psycho-biographies (Nielsen 2003; Thomson 2010a, 2012; Du Plessis 2017). Drawing on the work of Chodorow, Nielsen (2003: 1–2) suggests that an individual’s psychological make up, the formation of subjectivities and motivations, can be seen as historical phenomena, inviting exploration of the inter-dependent dynamics between emotional realities, cultural constructions and historical context, in short, between self and society (Nielsen 2003).

Similarly, the meso domain encompasses collectives of different scales, from small-scale family, friendship or interest groups, to larger institutional structures, to the complex machineries of government. It is in this domain that social structural configurations shape and re-shape human relations of care, support, dependency, solidarity, division, power and inequality. Finally, in the historical domain, transformations in society are evident at both local and global levels. The tempo of such changes may range from abrupt ‘watershed’ moments (the fall of the Berlin wall), to incremental processes such as the evolving place of women in the labour market, or the gradual shift from religious to secular society (Miller 2000).

While the value of working across the micro–macro plane is beyond doubt, it can create challenges for researchers. Methodologically, building macro-historical time into QL studies that have a limited longitudinal reach requires creative approaches to design, sampling and data generation, as the chapters below will illustrate. A more pressing and seemingly intractable issue concerns the theoretical challenge of teasing out micro–meso–macro influences and discerning their relative salience in how lives unfold. This raises doubts about the feasibility of disentangling, let alone explaining the multiple factors across the micro–macro plane that shape and transform lives (Giele and Elder 1998; Elliott 2005: 110–11; Brannen 2006: 150). Working round this problem requires a shift in focus. Rather than seeking unitary or definitive causal explanations, it may be more productive to aim for theoretically driven, ‘plausible accounts’ of the constellation of social mechanisms and historical processes through

which life course changes occur (for an example, see Winterton and Irwin 2012). It is worth recognizing, too, that since these accounts are socially and spatially situated and generated at particular moments in history, they are context dependent and their meaning is inherently provisional (Elliott 2005: 111).

Time–space: The spatial dimensions of time

This plane reflects the ‘when’ and ‘where’ of time: the intrinsic connections between time and space as a means to locate and grasp the meaning and significance of events and experiences. While clock time is spatially adrift, abstract and ‘empty’, fluid time is grounded in real-world events and practices. It emerges within and is made tangible through the varied spatial settings of people’s lives, which may be distinctive in terms of geography, topography, culture, language and so on. May and Thrift (2001: 3) observe that multiple, dynamic time, ‘is irrevocably bound up with the spatial constitution of society (and vice versa)’. Indeed, space and place are central to our understanding of the unfolding life course. The cultural environments into which people are born and grow up (from ghettos to leafy suburbs) exert a powerful influence on their sense of self, and how they position themselves in relation to others (Compton-Lilly 2017). At the same time, a simple change of locality may be instrumental in enabling people to establish new patterns of living, forge new identities or escape old ones (Elder 1994; Laub and Sampson 1998).

Working across this plane has produced some pioneering lines of enquiry in recent years, described variously as geo-dynamic or geo-biographical research, or latitudinal or transnational ethnography (Barnard 2012; Falola 2015; Schmidt-Thome 2015; Lee 2015). Taking a ‘latitudinal’ approach, Barnard (2012) broadened his longitudinal ethnography of the Naro peoples of Botswana to include related hunter-gatherer groups living in multiple sites across the southern states of Africa. The spatial comparisons enabled him to discern more clearly the historical forces involved in changing hunter-gatherer culture (see also Howell 2012). As a further example, Lee (2015) traced the journeys of young Korean immigrants from New Zealand, where they had spent most of their childhoods, back to their homeland. She then followed up those who subsequently returned to their host country. By using a mixture of prospective tracking, ethnographic techniques and life history interviewing, she was able to shed light on how

transnational identities and a sense of belonging are forged for those whose lives straddle two cultures.

Locating particular places in time makes it possible to discern how time is etched upon a landscape. This may occur at intensive as well as extensive tempos. For example, in his geo-temporal study of how local cityscapes are transformed from day-time to night-time, Back (2007) explores the tangible impacts that this transformation has for local residents and their sense of security, protection, power and danger. In this study, temporal variations through the course of a day create different experiences of space. But spatial variations may also create different experiences of time (May and Thrift 2001: 3; Chaplin 2002). Shaw (2001), for example, using accounts from the Mass Observation Archive and other documentary sources, investigated how the intensity and pace of social time varies across cultures, and across different spaces within cultures (urban/rural, industrial city/small town life). She found significant variations in the amount of time allotted for work, rest, meals and other tasks of daily living. Time keeping also varies, in some cultures (such as Germany) driven by a rigid adherence to clock and calendar, and in others (Finland, Brazil and large parts of the global South) exhibiting a more unhurried approach, where people gather over hours or even days. Time in these slower places is more elastic and forgiving; 'finding time' to oneself, or simply 'being' as opposed to always 'doing', is more highly valued. While time-space is pervasive in life experiences and processes, it offers particular scope for the investigation of geo-biographies, temporal geographies, migrations and resettlement, and for the study of 'liminal' (betwixt and between) spaces that create a different quality of time (Zerubavel 1981; Hockey and James 2003).

Continuous–discontinuous: The synchronicities of time

This plane of time was first identified by Aristotle as a central component of his distinction between *chronos* (fixed) and *kairos* (fluid) time (Bastian 2014). Synchronicities cut across all the flows of time outlined above, raising questions about how individuals oscillate between past, present and future, personal and social time, biographical, generational and historical time, short and longer-term time horizons, faster and slower paces of existence and between biographical continuities and change. In short, we can consider here how people balance, reconcile or synchronize

these different temporalities. There are many ways of exploring these temporal oscillations. In his large-scale longitudinal research, for example, Elder (1974) explored the impact of an adverse historical event (the Great Depression in the 1930s) on the life chances of varied groups of children. He found that those who lived through the Depression during their teenage years were more resilient than those who experienced this event as young, dependent children. Their radically different experiences were due, at least in part, to the differential timing of this historical event in their unfolding lives. Elder's findings sparked a widespread interest in how historical events are synchronized with life course processes.

On a smaller canvas, researchers have explored the timing of life course events within individual biographies. The timing of a transition into parenthood, for example, may be a challenge for those who do not conform to dominant perceptions of an appropriate age to have a child (Shirani and Henwood 2011; Neale 2016). Similarly, the discontinuities that may arise between individual lives and 'mainstream' practices and experiences has yielded an enduring interest in how people re-align or reconcile their values, narratives and practices over time. For example, studies of people involved in crime or addiction, or otherwise leading stigmatized lives, have explored how they oscillate between sub-cultural and dominant values and practices. Interesting insights have emerged about how people manage or reconcile lives that may be at variance with orthodox pathways and practices, and what factors may lead them from one to the other (see, for example, the case study of a prostitute in Plumridge and Thomson 2003; and Lopez-Aguado's 2012 study of a street-gang intervention programme).

Discontinuities between personal lives and the mainstream can occur in a rich variety of ways, for example, through changes in working environments, migration, transitions into parenthood, retirement or unemployment. Changing tempos can lead to a sense of dislocation as people find themselves marching at an unfamiliar, hurried pace, or languishing in a world that feels too unstructured for comfort (Shaw 2001, May and Thrift 2001). Living 'out of time' may be a temporary state, and as 'time out' from a pressured or challenging life it may be highly valued (see Baraitser's (2013) exploration of family 'mush' time). But where it is associated with unplanned or unwanted transitions that become entrenched, it can have a significant impact on life trajectories and on future health and well-being.

For those undergoing challenging biographical disruptions (bereavement, illness, job loss, forced migration etc.), time may seem to shrink, creating a

sense of disorientation or dislocation from the mainstream, such that the seamless flow of life from past to future is disrupted (Bury 1982, Lovgren, Hamberg and Tishelman 2010). People commonly talk of 'taking each day as it comes' or 'living in the moment'. Living 'out of time' means shortened time horizons, a sense of time as fleeting or ephemeral, which can make future planning impossible and lead to risky practices. In their QL study of the financial implications of poverty, for example, Dearden and colleagues (2010) found that people acted rashly in running up huge debts. The overriding preoccupation with survival in the here-and-now led to a loss of care and concern for the past (burning bridges), and for the future (risky behaviour, a lack of aspiration, the loss of hope). This is the sense of liminality (time-out-of-time, betwixt and between) documented by Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) in his study of the rites of passage. The concept of liminality has been utilized in a wide range of contemporary studies to make sense of social processes such as chronic or terminal illness, poverty, 'doing time' in prison, transitional states, forced relocation and homelessness (see, for example, Kelly 2008; Neumann 2012; Szakolczai 2012, Bryant 2016; Blows and colleagues 2012).

Intersecting timescapes

The five planes of time outlined above form a provisional basis for discerning how theoretical understandings of time may feed into empirical investigation. These planes are clearly not discrete or stand-alone, for they intersect and flow into one another. Past, present and future, for example, can be understood at different scales of time (biographically or historically), in different spatial contexts, and through differential experiences of the tempo, pace and synchronicity of time. Endless possibilities exist to refine these planes, and to discern myriad connections across and beyond them. 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.

Time and the life course

As shown in Chapter 1, life course research is centrally concerned with the flow of human lives, the positions that people inhabit in the life span; their life chances and experiences relative to others; and the dynamics of these

processes through the intertwining of biographical and historical time. The study of individual biographies or life journeys is a central component of life course research (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf 2000). The focus may be on the dynamics of specific 'phases' of the life course (e.g. youth, older life), or transitions between these phases, or from one status or circumstance to another (e.g. into and out of schooling, parenthood, employment, poverty, ill health or crime). The factors that shape life course transitions are important themes, along with the mechanisms that mark or trigger change. 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 grand parenting; or the 'work' trajectory through education and un/employment into retirement. The intertwining of these varied trajectories and how they influence each other is also a key site for investigation. It is through the long sweep of a life over decades that 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 (Elder 1974; Giele and Elder 1998).

Understanding the life course in terms of the flow of human lives brings to the fore another of its key features: it is essentially a dynamic process, bound up with flows of time. While time is deeply implicated in the way that the life course is understood and researched, relatively little attention has been given to its temporal dimensions. Indeed, much longitudinal and life course research is empirically driven and under theorized (Reiter, Rogge and Schoneck 2011). Yet the life course can be understood in both 'fixed' and 'fluid' ways: in other words, how the life course is perceived depends in large measure on how time itself is perceived. From the perspective of 'fixed' time, life is seen to unfold as a predictable passage through a number of predefined developmental stages relating to the institutions of family, schooling, employment, health and so on (Berthoud and Gershuny 2000). The course of a life is conceptualized as a socially defined and institutionally regulated sequence of transitions which are reinforced by normative expectations (Heinz 2009, 474, 9). Much like 'fixed' understandings of time, the life course is assumed to have a universal linearity and a seeming objectivity that places it 'outside' those whose lives are under study. It has been likened to an escalator that carries us along in a uniform direction (Glaser and Strauss 1971; Riley 1998).

The contrasting approach offers a malleable view of the life course, underpinned by a more grounded, fluid understanding of temporal

processes. It rests on the premise that the life course is socially constructed through lived experiences, subjectivities and the agency and social interactions of individuals and groups (Harris 1987; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). While recognizing the structural opportunities and constraints within which all lives unfold, this approach foregrounds the variability of life journeys, and the many different ways in which these journeys are crafted by individuals across time and place. Social constructionists, from Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) onwards, have reflected this fluidity in their research (Neale 2015). Harris (1987: 27–8), for example, sees the life course as, ‘the negotiation of a passage through an unpredictably changing environment’. Moreover, the life course itself is far from a fixed entity. As Hockey and James observe, ‘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’ (2003: 57). This fluidity provides a challenge to the idea of clearly separated life phases or stages, linked through a linear and orderly set of steps that occur at prescribed times (Bynner 2007, Grenier 2012, Woodman and Wyn 2013).

Rethinking turning points, transitions and trajectories

Exactly how biographies are shaped, and what kind of causal mechanisms operate as part of these processes, are crucial questions for QL researchers and for life course research more generally. Turning points, transitions and trajectories, the conceptual building blocks for life course research, are vital tools in addressing these questions. A burgeoning literature has debated the meaning and definition of these concepts (Hackstaff, Kupferberg and Negroni 2012), although, interestingly, relatively few accounts link these constructs or seek to discern their intersections. The discussion below seeks to clarify the interlocking nature of these building blocks, and bring to the fore their fluid, processual character.

Turning points (trigger points)

The notion of a turning point is used here as a loose umbrella term to capture the plethora of critical events, defining moments, interactions or epiphanies that can act as mechanisms or triggers of change (Kupferberg 2012: 227). The rich metaphors used to describe these phenomena reflect subtle differences in their nature, suggesting the need to use these concepts

with care (Clausen 1995; 1998; Carlsson 2012). A finely grained, qualitative lens is needed to discern these processes, which perhaps explains why they are often omitted in accounts that are concerned with wider structural processes of change (Wingens and Reiter 2011).

As the name implies, turning points are often viewed in instrumental and linear terms to mean a concrete change from one state to another. Elder (1985: 35), for example, suggests that they 'redirect paths'; more recently, they have been described as *fateful or critical moments* – points in the life course that are 'highly consequential for a person's destiny' (Giddens 1991: 112; Thomson and colleagues 2002; Holland and Thomson 2009). Certainly, these phenomena may be bound up with critical life events or experiences, turning points in the literal sense, for example, at the moment of a birth or death. Conversely, they may be artfully constructed, socially prescribed and carefully planned, for example, the ritualized entry into marriage, or the marking of a change in status, such as the awarding of a degree. Such events are instrumental through their expressiveness, combining core 'speech acts' with powerful symbolic representations that place people at the fulcrum of change. The idea that turning points have instrumental efficacy, involving a concrete change in the direction of individual or collective lives, is pervasive in the literature. It is for this reason, perhaps, that they are often subsumed within the broader category of transitions. Yet this tends to obscure their distinctive nature and their potential significance as causal mechanisms.

An alternative and less instrumental understanding of these phenomena stresses their subjective, fluid nature and their subtle influence through the flows of time. First, and perhaps most evidently, turning points are triggered in discrete and often striking moments in time. They have a fleeting quality. Their power lies in their propensity to create or instil changes in an *inner biographical disposition*, a process in which individuals or collectives take stock of their circumstances, assess this reality, understand it anew, and conjure a new imaginary future (Strauss 1997 [1959]; Hareven and Masaoka 1988; Clausen 1998). Howell (2012) for example, documents how an Indonesian community, the Chewong, arrived at a rapid rethink in their core beliefs about the status of Rattan, a sacred forest plant, which then enabled them to take advantage of new and lucrative opportunities to harvest the plant and use it for trade. While these arresting moments in time do not constitute life change in themselves, they are the potential agents or triggers of change (and for this reason, it may be more fitting to describe them as trigger points rather than turning points). They are also

simultaneously forward and backward facing, the lynchpins for bridging continuities and discontinuities and marking and creating boundaries between past and future (Clausen 1995; Abbott 2001; Kupferberg 2012; Carlsson 2012). By their very nature, then, turning points occur in the moment, crystallizing elements of past and present circumstances, changing perceptions, identities and understandings, and opening up the possibility of an alternative pathway for the future.

This brings us to a second feature of these phenomena. Since they occur in the moment, their longer-term causal efficacy can only be determined through a backward gaze (Hareven and Masaoka 1988; Abbott 2001). While trigger points may have significant power at the moment in which they occur, their effects may be short lived. The subjective significance and meaning attached to a particular trigger point may shift over time, with some assuming enduring causal power, while others fade into insignificance (Plumridge and Thomson 2003; Holland and Thomson 2009; Jost 2012). They are best perceived, then, as subjectively defined phenomena, inhering in particular narratives of change, constructed with hindsight and, therefore, identifiable only in retrospect (Strauss 1997 [1959]; Denzin 1989, Clausen 1998; Abbott, 2001, George 2009).

This way of understanding turning points represents a challenge to the idea that one single, discrete event, experience or epiphany has sufficient causal power to bring about another event, or to effect a concrete change in the direction of a life or, indeed, that individual agency alone can bring about such changes (Carlsson 2012: 4). In other words, if turning points have any causal efficacy, what is likely to make a difference is their cumulative impact and how, in combination, they are situated and understood in particular contexts of change. Unlike fixed, instrumental entities, trigger points may accumulate in varied ways: as incremental nudges, or 'rehearsals' along a pathway (Thomson and colleagues 2002, Holland and Thomson 2009; Negroni 2012); as 'eddies' or 'drifts' or zigzag pathways in varied, sometimes random, and sometime conflicting directions (the forces of push and pull, to and fro, as people try out new paths and revert back to old ones, Howell 2012). They are, indeed, subject to a host of intervening social, structural and historical circumstances that impact on future pathways (Carlsson 2012). Since they are embedded within broader time horizons, the transitions and trajectories that make up the life span, they are not free floating and do not operate in isolation; they are part of the interplay between individuals and the social worlds

they inhabit (Carlsson 2012). Overall, then, turning points operate at the crucial nexus between social structures and personal and collective agency (Kupferberg 2012: 227).

Transitions and trajectories

Transitions are dynamic periods of the life course that constitute a passage from one concrete status or circumstance to another (Miller 2007; Shanahan and Macmillan 2008). They may unfold over varied periods of time, at different paces and intensities, sometimes occurring almost imperceptibly through a mixture of biological, biographical, collective and historical change. They also vary in the extent to which they are planned, prescribed, managed or desired by those involved. They may take the form of a series of mini transitions, marked by key milestones and prompted by a series of trigger point along the way. For example, the processes leading to and following a birth, death or chronic illness, or the preparations leading to a marriage and its aftermath, are all transitional periods marked by an accumulation of trigger points which, taken together, provide the momentum for change.

Transitions, in turn, are embedded within longer-term trajectories, the longer sweep of a life across the life span. These longer spans of time are marked by periods of continuity and steady states, as well as change. They are what Abbott (2001) calls 'master narratives', and they are influenced by a host of intervening factors across the micro–macro plane (Clausen 1998). Over time, it is possible to discern how varied trajectories intersect to create a unique biography; to explore how they are shaped through particular circumstances (e.g. 'upward' or 'downward' paths through privilege or poverty); or how they may unfold differentially (converging or diverging) for those with shared beginnings (Laub and Sampson 2003). Among many fruitful lines of enquiry are those that explore how, or whether, a particular transition (e.g. an early entry into parenthood) impacts on an overall trajectory (e.g. the broader socio-economic fortunes and life chances of young parents, Neale and Davies 2016). Over the longer term, too, the impact of external forces and the twin processes of continuity and change, stability and volatility on emerging trajectories are more clearly discernible, giving a particular pattern and shape to unfolding lives (Clausen 1998). Abbott (2001) reminds us that trajectories have an inertial quality: they are marked as much by stasis as change: enduring states, recurring patterns

and structural equilibrium that may well overwrite, absorb or iron out the ripples of transitions and turning points.

Seen as interlocking processes, trigger points, transitions and trajectories share some of the characteristics of Bronfenbrenner's ecological domains of influence (see the micro–macro plane, above). They, too, are nested inside one another, like Russian dolls, but, in this case, operating across different horizons of time. It is the dynamic interdependence of these temporal processes that is the source of their meaning (Shanahan and Macmillan 2008). This suggests the need to take all three into account in exploring how dynamic processes unfold.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has explored the conceptual underpinnings for QL research, stressing, in particular, the fluid, processual nature of time and the life course, and the interlocking horizons of turning points, transitions and trajectories. Thinking through these concepts is a foundational part of the design and development of a QL study. In order to support this process, five timescapes or planes of time have been outlined above, along with some pointers for how these might be used as topics of enquiry. Overall, the chapter illustrates the fundamental importance of engaging with time in the design and conduct of a QL study. Taking time into account is crucial, yet how time is understood, its nature and parameters, is no less so. Our vision will be impoverished if we focus solely on the clock and calendar. QL research has the capacity to bring lived experiences and flows of time into a common frame of reference, and to provide a bridge between sociological theories of time and more empirically-based life course and longitudinal studies. Adam (1990) observes that seeing things through the lens of time changes simply everything. In like vein, this chapter suggests that seeing things *qualitatively* through the lens of time produces a richness of understanding that can transform our vision of the social world.