



# Biographical Life Course Research

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Studying the Biography-History  
Dynamic

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Ann Nilsen

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## Biographical Life Course Research

“Biographical Life Course Research provides a fascinating comparative/historical account of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of life course study, from the Chicago School to contemporary debates surrounding structure and agency, postmodern individualism, and the ‘cultural turn’ in biographical research. Insightfully, Nilsen details how growing recognition of the gendered character of life courses has enhanced understanding of history and biography.”

—Jeylan Mortimer, *University of Minnesota, USA*

“Ann Nilsen has spent a career thinking deeply about biographical research and in this clear and accessible volume we receive the fruits of her scholarship. She weaves together a vital account of the place of biographical research within the history of sociology with a clear analysis of key concepts and the challenge and promise of the approach. She also showcases her own influential contribution to the field and provides a map of essential authors and their works. This is the ideal volume for teaching biographical and life course research methods, and will be essential reading for students wishing to use this powerful approach in their own studies. Finally, it provides a blueprint for how we might forge better connections between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, using biographical methods to address the great challenges of our times including growing inequality and climate disaster.”

—Rachel Thomson, *University of Sussex, UK*

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*To my family. With love.*

# Acknowledgements

I have tried to make this book accessible for readers new to the biographical life course field, as well as to make it of interest to those well acquainted with this both empirically and theoretically. It has not been easy to find this middle ground. My first degree was in history. Knowledge from that discipline is a valued luggage I carry with me and make use of in my research, empirically as well as theoretically. A book that takes a long historical view would be impossible to write without footnotes. I have included many of those. They serve to keep the main text in flow whilst still including arguments and lines of thought that are of importance to give a broader picture.

I am grateful for having wonderful colleagues and friends in academia generally, across disciplines as well as within different fields of sociology. Here I will acknowledge those with whom I share an interest in biographical life course studies. My workplace is the Department of Sociology at the University of Bergen. With all my colleagues, new and old, I have shared lively discussions, laughter and fun, and the everyday joys and not so joyful events that life at a university department brings. I especially acknowledge, in alphabetical order, general mentors who have retired: Sigmund Grønmo, Kari Wærness and Ørjar Øyen. Special mention to Kristin Tornes for introducing me to this area of research. Younger colleagues were students of mine only a few years back. Kristoffer

Chelsom Vogt has made use of and developed the biographical life course approach in innovative ways in his own research.

A series of lectures for a PhD course I gave as a visiting professor at the University of Uppsala in 2002 was helpful to sow the seeds of what has now become a book. The Institute of Education at the UCL has been my base in the UK for several periods since the late 1980s. Access to good libraries is important for academic writing. The library facilities of the Institute of Education (IOE) have the two-volume edition of *The Polish Peasant* in their great collection. During my many visits, I had a desk at Thomas Coram Research Unit, the workplace of my friend and colleague Julia Brannen. Suzan Lewis is another friend and colleague. She was the best of project leaders for two international projects in which I was a partner with among others Maria dos Dores Guerreira at ISCTE, who is also a colleague and a friend.

One of the most memorable and important conferences I have co-organised was the C. Wright Mills symposium with John Scott in 2012. This was funded by the Department of Sociology with the support of the then Chair of Department, Hans-Tore Hansen. John and Krishan Kumar, who had a presentation at the symposium, have both been visiting professors for several years at the Department in Bergen and have given great social and sociological contributions. A special thank you to C. Wright Mills' daughter Kathryn (Kate) Mills who came over from the USA for the occasion and who wrote the foreword to the edited volume of symposium contributions that John and I published. I acknowledge the contributions from all who have given key notes at conferences and lectures at PhD courses I have organised, especially the following in alphabetical order: Andrew Abbott, Barbara Adam, Daniel Bertaux, Wendy Bottero, Karen Christensen, Gunhild Hagestad, Sarah Irwin, Martin Kohli, Jeylan Mortimer, Jennifer Platt, Ken Roberts, Sevil Sümer, Rachel Thomson and Karin Widerberg.

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Any mistakes and errors in this book are mine alone.

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# 1

## Life Course Studies and Biographical Research: Exploring the Individual-Society Relationship

Social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersection within social structures. (Mills 1959/1980, p. 159)

### Introduction

My focus in this book is on the specific sociological tradition of biographical research that originated in Chicago more than a 100 years ago. Throughout the following chapters I will trace the development of this approach from its beginning in American pragmatist thought and Chicago sociology at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the writings of C. Wright Mills in the 1950s and his inspiration for its revival in European sociology in the 1980s. I will show its relevance for capturing social processes in different societies across historical contexts. This means that discussions about the multitude of topics related to other varieties of biographical<sup>1</sup> research are sacrificed for the sake of

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<sup>1</sup>The conceptualisations of, and perspectives on, studies in this field vary considerably. In the humanities biographical research has somewhat different origins and purposes than those addressed in this book. Some of the methodological debates this has engendered within and between disciplines will be discussed where relevant.

clarity of the arguments that address an approach which connects processes at the individual level with those at the level of society. The history-biography dynamic, as introduced by C. Wright Mills (1959/1980) is the book's analytical frame of orientation. Mills referred to the 'the sociological imagination' as the ability to grasp problems that occurred in the intersections of biography and history within society, and that 'the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between the 'personal troubles of milieu' and the 'public issues' of social structure' (Mills 1959/1980, p. 14). In his contemporary society Mills' ideas were not put into empirical practice in the sense of collecting and analysing biographical material, yet the significance of his writings for the development of life course studies is unquestioned (Elder 1974/1999).

It has been claimed that Chicago sociology was and is, atheoretical. Andrew Abbott (1997) said this claim originated in an idea that 'to be theoretical is to make assertions about the relation of abstractions like "gender", "capitalism", "education", and "bureaucracy"' (p. 1152). Chicago sociology did and does not engage with such abstractions,

In a single sentence, the Chicago school thought - and thinks - that one cannot understand social life without understanding the arrangements of particular social actors in particular social times and places. Another way of stating this is to say that Chicago felt that no social fact makes any sense abstracted from its context in social (and often geographic) space and social time. Social facts are located. (Abbott 1997, p. 1152)

This means contextualising social life and that is precisely what a biographical life course approach does.

The very questions that are at the core of this approach is not new to general sociology. The relationship between single individuals on one side and society on the other, is a topic that has been discussed in numerous

ways throughout the history of philosophy and in sociology.<sup>2</sup> The terms for this discussion have shifted, as has the focus. Since it goes to the heart of what the biographical life course approach contributes to sociological research, it is of importance to start this book with a wider overview and set the discussion of this particular topic within an historical and conceptual framework.

Changes in vocabularies since the 1990s to a certain extent replaced the traditional micro-macro pair of concepts with those of agency and structure. Mills' focus on sociology as having its subject of study in the intersection between history and biography and hence the history-biography dynamic as a fully processual conceptualisation of this specific topic, did not gain much traction until the revival of biographical research in the 1970s and 1980s and was then eclipsed by the pair of terms 'agency-structure'. From a theoretical point of view, the relationship between the two levels micro-macro, agency and structure, or biography and history, is not clear cut, hence the many debates over the issues. Mills' insistence on seeing the two as intertwined in a dynamic process in time was different from other perspectives in many ways; even from some that were, and still are, influential in life course research where dynamism and process are key terms to understand human lives.

In the next sections debates in general sociology about these distinctions are set in relation to historical contexts in which they gained prominence in discussions. After briefly addressing the micro-macro distinction, important theoretical contributions are examined in relation to notions of structure and agency. A characteristic of the writings in general theory is that the gendered aspects of agency and structure are rarely mentioned as part of the mainstream theoretical landscape. Thus a section on

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<sup>2</sup>The discussion is a very old one indeed. Of the sociological classics Karl Marx, based in Hegelian philosophy, rejected the view of individuals as 'atomistic entities' with no ties in social relations. He emphasised that individuals were social beings and did not agree with Adam Smith's individualistic views on humans as isolated entities only driven by self-interest (Sayer 2007). Marx's thinking about the relationship between individuals and society started from conditions in the latter. Sayer (2007) observed how in Marx's thinking about relationships in market forces of production lead to alienation. 'As in religion where things that are our own creations "appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race", so too in economics we find ourselves at the mercy of forces that we ourselves have created (p. 93). Society is therefore of our own creation but appears not to be.

thoughts about gendered dimensions of agency sets the debates within their period specific contexts. Another section is devoted to the discussion of the differences between the structure-agency divide on the one hand, and the history-biography dynamic on the other. Specific attention is given to the wide variety of conceptualisations of the combined structure-agency relationship over different periods. Approaches to the history-biography dynamic have varied in biographical life course research, and these are addressed and discussed in relation to the Millsian starting point.

The final section gives an overview of the chapters in this book.

## Micro-macro Distinctions

An important dividing line in discussions about the individual-society divide used to be, and still is, a distinction between micro and macro perspectives on societies. Alexander and Giesen (1987) for instance, discussed this divide in a larger perspective starting from the philosophical roots in writings about the differentiation between individuals and the state in late medieval society. They observed that when this topic came to be addressed within the realms of sociology as a discipline, the ontological and epistemological issues that had been involved in discussions about this in philosophy, gradually changed and, ‘The questions came to focus on whether action was rational or interpretive and whether social order was negotiated between individuals or imposed by collective, or emergent, forces’ (p. 2). They gave an overview of the classics (Marx, Durkheim, Weber) as well as of thinkers from American pragmatism and their approach to this divide. Mead’s work was addressed in terms of him being a leading thinker amongst the pragmatists. They were critical of some of their contemporaries in the interactionism camp who presented Mead and his writings as purely on the micro side. His ideas could rather be seen as a possible bridging of the micro-macro divide since he presented ‘a microanalysis that is open to more collectivist concerns’ (Alexander and Giesen 1987, p. 9). The micro-macro divide could, according to these authors, best be approached as different levels of empirical reality in research. Collins

(1988) came to similar conclusions when he addressed the discussions about this theme in the late 1980s. His concern was to demonstrate how this divide could be bridged theoretically by way of empirical research, ‘When the substantive work is done, it moves closer to a micro-macro connection, not further away from it’ (Collins 1988, pp. 251–252). Whilst the micro-macro distinction was more debated in earlier days it is still a terminology that has relevance in some areas of sociological research.

## Agency and Structure in General Sociological Theory

The notion of structure has many definitions, not all of them compatible with a processual view, even in life course theory. For instance, Alwin (1995) defined social structure as ‘a set of opportunities and constraints within networks of roles, relationships, and communication patterns, which are relatively patterned and persistent’ (p. 218). The emphasis here was on stability and not on change. The definition thus showed resemblance to many others in the general sociological literature that often drew on functionalist theory and saw structure as a kind of grid or skeleton upon which social processes unfold (Settersten and Gannon 2009). Anthony Giddens (1984), also critical of a functionalist approach, gave the following definition of the term, ‘Structure thus refers, in social analysis, to the structuring properties which make it possible for discernible similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them ‘systemic’ form’ (p. 17). What set Giddens’ approach apart from many others in general sociology in the mid-1980s was his underlining of the temporal and spatial aspects of social structure and thus its transient properties, albeit without emphasising structure as history, as conveyed in Mills’ conceptualisation.

Agency, biography and individual are terms that have different connotations but are nevertheless often used interchangeably in life course discussions. Whereas the term individual is intuitively understood, agency and biography demand closer definition. Agency is associated with action; individual purposive action. Biography is thought of as a

story or narrative about an individual's life course. However, these terms not only differ in definitions, they are also associated with different theoretical traditions that have been influential in various historical periods (Giddens 1984; Mills 1940).

Giddens' (1984) definition of agency has been much cited: it 'refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power)' (Giddens 1984, p. 9). Barry Barnes (2000) was critical of many of the agency definitions provided, Giddens' included. He thus said of the concept that: 'Agency' is said to denote the independent power of the individual, not in relation to rules, or cultures, or anything at all, but in relation to whatever might be cited as a possible constraint upon her' (p. 48). He bemoaned the dualism associated with the distinction between agency and structure,

The relationship between 'the individual' and 'society' or 'social structure', has been addressed without proper regard for social interaction, with the result that 'society' itself has been conceived in unduly individualistic terms and the understanding of its components has been marked by attention to the 'subjective' and the 'objective' at the expense of the inter-subjective. (Barnes 2000, p. x)<sup>3</sup>

Agency is a complex term and has been widely debated in sociology (see e.g. Archer 2000; Barnes 2000; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Giddens 1984). Barnes' (2000) writings stem from a period during which there was much discussion about the individualisation thesis and little attention to structural, or historical, features of society. He dismissed a simplistic view of this notion that merely suggested the independent power of individuals. In doing this he was highly critical of the premises upon which the individualisation thesis rested. He was likewise critical of rational choice theory and the idea that individuals are single, isolated entities

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<sup>3</sup>This lack of a 'third' level in discussions about the topic could perhaps be more creatively addressed if Mead's notion of individuality and the social self were taken into account, as for instance Alexander and Giesen (1987) suggested.

operating from rational motives in a calculative manner.<sup>4</sup> In a discussion about how individual motivations can be understood in relation to agency, Barnes drew heavily on a paper Mills published in 1940. Here Mills discussed different ways of approaching and discussing motives for action and he described how in different times and societies varying vocabularies—sets of terms and concepts—were accepted as standard for explaining motives. He concluded that in order to make sense of these in a sociological way, ‘What is needed is to take all these *terminologies* of motive and locate them as *vocabularies* of motive in historic epochs and specified situations. Motives are of no value apart from the delimited societal situations for which they are the appropriate vocabularies’ (p. 913, italics in original). Mills’ sensitivity to historical context and the variability over time in what terms and concepts were deemed acceptable in explanations of social phenomena, be they motives or other notions, inspired Barnes’ discussion of agency. This way of thinking about sociological terms is helpful in many instances.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) took Mead’s temporal and relational thinking as their starting point in a discussion about the notion of agency in sociological theory. They did this because it is, ‘the work of George Herbert Mead that offers us the most compelling tools for overcoming the inadequate conceptions of agency in both rational choice and norm-oriented approaches’ (p. 968). Based on pragmatist thought they defined agency as,

The temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 970)

They provided this definition in relation to different temporal orientations of agency in their discussion of ‘analytical dimensions of agency rather than action’s structural contexts’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998,

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<sup>4</sup>The idea of single individuals exercising agency in the form of disengaged free choice as is the preconception for rational choice theory, would be unthinkable within a Meadian theoretical framework.

p. 970, footnote 5). This definition of agency is helpful in discussions of the concept in relation to biographical research because of its sensitivity to temporality. But whilst both Barnes, and Emir Bayer and Mische, discussed agency within a theoretical framework and with reference to theoretical debates, in biographical life course studies agency is inextricably related to structure, and as the concepts are used in empirical analyses definitions from this level are included here.

As stated elsewhere, the most prominent empirical study that became important for the revival of life course research, was Glen Elder's *Children of the Great Depression*. He was greatly inspired by Mills' thoughts when he approached the data and had no established theoretical framework to draw on in his analyses of the rich empirical material that the cohort studies provided.<sup>5</sup> The contextualist life course approach that Elder formulated came from the historical sensitivity that Mills suggested sociological studies ought to rest on. Social interaction, as defined by Herbert Mead, was a prerequisite for society as well as for individuality. Thus interacting individuals form societies, and one cannot exist without the other. History and biography are part of the same whole in a dynamic relationship. However, not all empirical analyses of life course data follow Elder's approach in discussions about agency and structure. There are a variety of ways of considering this dimension in research where life course data are analysed.

Two examples from recent quantitative life course studies that put the question of agency centre stage in a discussion of life course trajectories and transitions phases are first Hitlin and Johnson (2015) who, writing from a social psychological viewpoint, did an empirical analysis that included variables about young people's expectations for the future. They observed that agency as a theoretical notion on the one hand, and as an empirical dimensions in life course research on the other, were out of synch. Whilst the theoretical conceptualisations were complex and manifold, they maintained that empirical attempts to address agency did not pay enough attention to temporal dimensions and hence presented static descriptions of the level of individual actions. Another study by Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016) addressed notions of agency and structure from

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<sup>5</sup> See Chap. 2 for details.

the viewpoint of empirical analyses of the transition to adulthood. They examined the role of agency in terms of decision making and choice within structural frameworks for diverse transition pathways. They suggested that investigating the diversity dimension was crucial for conceptualising varieties of agency during transitions.

When agency and structure are discussed separately and singled out as discrete units or processes that each need addressing in their own right, much insight into theoretical ideas and social processes at either level can be gained. However, other aspects of social life may come to the fore only when the two are looked at simultaneously and in relation to one another. For example, gender and social class are aspects of life that are part of the structural features and thus impacts on agency in all societies. How, and in what ways these become actualised, is dependent on historical contexts in particular places and can be addressed by using the terms as 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer 1954).

As the two examples above from empirical research demonstrate, as well as the discussions from the theoretical field, structural elements such as gender were not made a concern in either of these debates. Before looking more closely into the empirical implications of the biographical-history dynamic as put forward in Mills' writings, and how this may help in uncovering how structural aspects intersect with the biographical level, I will give a brief account of how the theoretical aspects of gendered agency, or biography, have been discussed in the theoretical literature over the past decades.

## Gendered Notions of Agency

Agency has been much debated in feminist philosophy and in feminist studies generally. These discussions have often been framed within the cluster of concepts such as agency, autonomy and independence (Code 2000). The oppression of women in history, throughout all known cultures, is an important basis for this framing of the discussions. In the general theoretical writings cited above, agency was discussed in genderless terms. In the feminist literature discussions about the set of concepts agency belongs in, have taken hue of the historical contexts of debates;

what particular themes that had definitional, or framing, power in particular periods. Benhabib (1992) for instance, discussed notions of gender and agency in relation to the fierce debates within feminism at the time<sup>6</sup> that involved questions about essentialism and postmodern theories. She summed up how the prominence of ‘discourse’ misrepresented women’s struggles: ‘women who negotiate and resist power do not exist; the only struggles in history are between competing paradigms of discourses, power-knowledge complexes’ (p. 222).

McNay (2000), who was also critical of the effects postmodern thought had on feminism took task with what she called ‘the negative paradigm of subjectification’ found in the works of Foucault and Lacan where subjectivity was seen as discursively and symbolically constructed, which again would lead to deterministic viewpoints on a passive subject. In this paradigm notions of action were often considered in terms of resistance to dominant norms, which according to McNay would need more specific and varied accounts of agency in order to be effective. The implicit account of agency inherent in this argument was for her an account that ‘leaves unexplained the capabilities of individuals’ to respond to difference in a less defensive and even, at times, a more creative fashion’ (p. 3). She therefore suggested a need for contextualising agency within power relations and called for a regenerative theoretical framework which included temporal aspects of subjective formation, and hence of notions of agency.<sup>7</sup>

In current debates of the topic of gender and agency other concerns than postmodernism have gained prominence. The notion of agency has become a much more frequently used term in general writings, in both

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<sup>6</sup>The temperature in the debates is indicated by the title of one of Dorothy Smith’s (1993) replies to someone in the postmodernist camp in a debate over her standpoint feminism: ‘High Noon in Textland’

<sup>7</sup>‘The term reconfiguration suggests that by slightly rearranging the relations existing between elements within a given theoretical constellation, insights might be generated into ways of moving beyond certain overplayed dualisms and exegetical clichés. I focus, in particular, on the insights that a generative account of subjectification and agency offers into three clusters of issues that have predominated in much thought on the construction of the subject: the relation between the material and symbolic dimensions of subjectification; the issue of identity or coherence of the self; and, finally, the relation between the psyche and the social’ (McNay 2000, pp. 5–6). I cite this quote in full here because it is of relevance for general sociological conceptualisations and theory formations, in addition to its focus on issues of gendered agency.

the public and the academic domains. In the social sciences the past decade has seen attention turned towards the increase in social inequalities, both globally between countries and regions as well as within nation states. These issues have also become more prevalent in feminist theories where notions of identity are often paired with those of agency.<sup>8</sup> When relating to the social inequality theme agency as a concept has been criticised for its atomistic overtones. It is associated with a neo-liberal individualistic ideal that promotes self-sufficiency and is 'ideally suited to the practices and the values of the market economy' (Evans 2013, p. 49) of which are most likely embodied by men (Evans 2013; Madhok 2013; Wilson 2013), and is often clustered with notions of 'autonomy', 'aspirations' and 'free choice' (Friedman 2003; Wilson 2013). These theoretical discussions have not made the historical context a specific and explicit topic. It has rather been referred to implicitly by setting debates into a contemporary terminology when addressing issues of the day such as exemplified here.

However, gendered notions of agency are relevant for biographical life course studies referring to any society and across historical periods. Variations in ways in which agency is gendered are what matter and these are closely connected to the interweaving of structure and agency or history and biography. Examples of empirical studies, my own and those of others, where these dimensions have been given prominence will be referred to throughout the chapters in this book.

## Structure-Agency/Biography-History

In biographical life course sociology, the earliest attempts to address the society-individual theme was in Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918–1920) pioneering work. As will be elaborated on in the next chapter, the origin of their study was in pragmatist thought where Mead's concept of the social self is the core of any notion of society. Thomas and Znaniecki

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<sup>8</sup>The debates over gender identity related to issues of sexuality are not topics of discussion in the present volume.

made a distinction between 'values' and 'attitudes' as a theoretical basis for their empirical study.

Together these two terms would address what is specific to human society where values were 'the changing character of contemporary social life' and attitudes, 'the subjective character of human experience' (Blumer 1939/1979, pp. 19–20). This pair of concepts were used in complex ways in their study. 'Attitudes' sometimes referred to phenomena that could be interpreted as within the realm of psychology, whilst 'values' were associated with sociological dimensions. The concepts were criticised during the Appraisal proceedings in 1938 (Blumer 1939) for their lack of specificity and clarity. These conceptualisations were nevertheless important at the time because it was the first attempt to bring empirical biographical material into a discussion of a topic that had mainly been given theoretical and philosophical attention. The notions never became standard references in sociology but they did mark Thomas and Znaniecki's case for a processual approach to the relationship between individuals and society and as such they have therefore been of importance.

Whichever definition of agency is subscribed to, this aspect of human action does not take place with isolated individual entities. It always involves interactions at different temporal and societal levels. In life course and biographical research, the processual element introduced by time is crucial. Following Mills, a terminology that refers to the history-biography dynamic rather than the agency-structure divide, is helpful for understanding the relevance of historical sensitivity and process. Where a 'divide' indicates a breach in spatial terms, a 'process', or a 'dynamic' signifies a temporal dimension of continuity.

For Mills (1959/1980) the intersection of history and biography was the essence of what he named 'the sociological imagination'. Moreover,

We have come to see that the biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they variously become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieu of their everyday life are organized. Historical transformations carry meanings not only for individual ways of life, but for the very character – the limits and possibilities of the human being. (Mills 1959/1980, 175)

The importance of studying the social world as the intersection of biography and history as suggested by Mills, and thereby emphasising different aspects of context in relation to individual's opportunities and constraints for action, was at the core of the early studies after the revival of this tradition (see e.g. Bertaux 1981, 1982; Elder 1974/1999, 1985; Hareven 1977; Mayer 2004). Bertaux (1982) drew on Hareven's (1977) writings to emphasise how essential Mills' notion of the sociological imagination had been for the development of life course sociology (p. 130). The focus was to be on both structure and agency, from a processual approach. This was further explored in Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame's (1997) case studies of multigenerational families in relation to social class. They sought to investigate the boundaries of an approach that included both aspects in a study of social mobility, a topic which has clear processual qualities attached to it as such mobility over generations happen in historical time,

We have attempted to demonstrate that socio-structural components may be found in those decisions and acts apparently most clearly powered by will: and conversely, that praxis may be found in the very heart of what, viewed from afar, seems to be pure reproduction by direct transmission. (pp. 94–95)

The structural side of the agency-structure relationship has been approached from a variety of perspectives depending on period specific debates in the social sciences. Ken Roberts (1968) is known for his launching of the 'transition paradigm' with its companion concept of 'opportunity structures' in 1968.<sup>9</sup> The transition paradigm was originally an approach to the analysis of young people's entry into education and work and this paradigm bore resemblances to the life course approach, only it focussed primarily on one particular phase of the life course: youth. As Roberts stated (2009, 2018) it was an approach that brought a sociological perspective to a field that in the 1960s was dominated by psychology. In the 1970s there was a debate within sociology between those who favoured a focus on human action on the one hand, and those

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<sup>9</sup>He did not at the time relate his concepts to a life course approach, however he later on reflected on the relationship between this paradigm with that of the terminology of life course research (Roberts 2018).

who advocated social structures as the main object of study for the discipline. Questions such as whether young people's careers were the outcome of individual choice or whether the actual routes young people had access to were decisive, were at the core of these opposite perspectives.

Roberts said of the relationship between structure and agency, the terminology used in the transitions paradigm, and that of opportunity structures that had changed considerably over the decades since his first writing about it:

... seeking the source of change in the opportunity structures that surround young people, thereby initially decentring young people themselves, is more fruitful than probing young people's minds. The constituents of opportunity structures have all changed interactively, and young people have not been agents of change but have had no choice but to exercise individual agency within their reshaped opportunities. (Roberts 2009, p. 358)

The notion of opportunity structures works well within a life course frame of reference. However, the biography-history dynamic demands more attention to the agency, or biography, side of the matter than the transitions paradigm in its purest form offers. Combining aspects of Roberts' theoretical framework in a Millsian history-biography approach gives the structural side a more specific direction since opportunity structures are particular to time and place.

Roberts did not address the gendered side of either structure or agency though, which is no surprise as few within general sociology have done so. Extending the term to include a temporal element, as in 'temporal opportunity structures' (Nilsen 2023) in discussions about young people's thoughts about future work, education and family, captures the gendered element, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

## Summary

To sum up this discussion, the relationship between single individuals on one hand and society on the other was the main topic in this chapter. The biographical life course approach rests on addressing social life from a

processual perspective, as advocated by Mills and echoed in the quote from Abbott in the first section of the Chapter.

The discussion has shown the many ways in which this topic has been approached in the history of sociology. A specific focus was on the particular relevance this theme has had for the focus of this book. The micro-macro distinction was addressed as an early conceptualisation of the individual-society relationship, with reference to important texts on the issue. In Thomas and Znaniecki's pioneering work they made a distinction between 'values' and 'attitudes' as concepts to address these themes. It was as such an early attempt at constructing notions to discuss this issue in relation to biographical research.

The prominence of the agency-structure pair of concepts since the 1990s, was addressed with reference to how these conceptualisations had obscured the Millsian history-biography dynamic from the view of mainstream sociology. Debates in general sociology about the agency-structure distinction were addressed in relation to the historical contexts of their origin. The section outlined arguments from some of the prominent sociologists who have written about the topic such as Giddens and Barnes. Some examples from empirical studies were provided as a backcloth to the discussions about these notions in relation to biographical life course research. Gendered aspects of concepts are seldom addressed in mainstream sociological theory. So also with notions of agency. Therefore a section that discussed this topic in its own right was included in this chapter. It set notions of gendered agency within the historical contexts of debates where these were addressed.

The differences between the structure-agency divide on the one hand, and the history-biography dynamic on the other was addressed, and an overview of the diversity of approaches to the history-biography dynamic in biographical life course research were discussed in relation to the Millsian starting point of this pair of concepts.

## Overview of Chapters

Chapter 2, on the origins of biographical and life course research, draws the lines from American pragmatism which started from a processual approach with time and temporality as central features. George Herbert

Mead's writings have great relevance for biographical perspectives. His concept of the processual self provides an entry point for understanding biographical material. Crucial to the development of this approach was the meeting place provided by Hull House. The women at this charity, Jane Addams in particular, contributed to the methodological innovations of Chicago sociology. The funder of the charity provided a grant for William I Thomas study that he published with Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. This very first example of a sociological study that applied biographical material is presented. A brief section discusses how this work only received recognition when Herbert Blumer chaired the Appraisal proceedings of it at an American Sociological Association session in 1938. The chapter then establishes connections to C. Wright Mills' research. His book *The Sociological Imagination* made the dynamic history-biography relationship an inspiration for later biographical life course research as we know it today. The chapter ends with a discussion of Glen Elder's classic study *Children of the Great Depression* and demonstrates how Elder's inspiration from Mills set his approach to the analysis of longitudinal data apart from those who sought to uncover 'laws of social deviance' through longitudinal studies.

The revival of biographical research in Europe and America is the topic of Chap. 3. Some of the most important contributions to a revival of this tradition are presented and the places and period in which these revivals occurred are discussed. The section on pioneering biographical studies on the continent gives an overview and discusses of the revival of this approach in French sociology with Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, and in German sociology with the works of Martin Kohli and others who provided important contributions to the theoretical perspectives as well as to quantitative life course studies. In the UK sociologist Ken Plummer and the oral historian Paul Thompson were important for the development of biographical studies. In Scandinavia the life course approach was adopted in what was then called 'women's research'. In America Elder's study inspired a more quantitative approach but his groundbreaking longitudinal study of the cohorts living through The Great Depression introduced the contextualist life course approach and a range of concepts.

Chapter 4 discusses the topics of time and temporality in biographical research. These are key notions in a processual approach to sociology. The Chapter addresses the centrality of Mead's writings on time and temporality. His notion of the temporal self was of particular relevance for this tradition. A section on historical time discusses the impact of period specific historical events on intergenerational relations and on the individual level. Family time is addressed in Tamara Hareven's framework as an intermediary temporality between biographical and historical time. Discussions on intergenerational time explore topics such as social mobility and set these in an historical framework that demonstrate how biographical studies can add layers of knowledge about the processes involved that quantitative approaches miss. At the biographical level life course phases are addressed in relation to transitions and variations across cultural and structural contexts. Specific attention is paid to the phase of adulthood since it has largely had a kind of taken-for-granted definition without much attention to variations by gender and social class over historical time. A section on gender and time sets discussions about this theme in its historical context and extends the topic to include temporal aspects of biographical interviews and gendered narratives. In this section empirical examples from my own and other research are used to exemplify the arguments addressed.

The relevance of a biographical approach to studies about the future is the topic of Chap. 5. In a discussion that takes its point of departure in theories of time and temporality, the significance of particular aspects of historical periods for what topics about the future are deemed research-worthy is addressed. The chapter discusses how ideas about Progress impacted on notions of time and temporality during earlier historical periods. In empirical research the future as a topic has been addressed from a variety of perspectives and approaches in the social sciences. Studies discussed in this chapter demonstrate their embeddedness in specific circumstances and particular historical periods. These research topics thus provide insights into how changes at the structural level, be they environmental problems such as climate change, pandemics, or credit crises, in any present are woven into and become topics in individual biographical accounts. The early studies of women and time and gendered thoughts about the future, for instance, originated in a period

when changes in gender relations in all areas of social life happened at a rapid pace in the Scandinavian countries in particular. The chapter shows that whilst gender, age and social class are essential analytical elements of sociological analysis that transcend historical periods, the contexts of their impact are diverse and varied.

Chapter 6 addresses methodological and other controversies in the biographical research tradition. Two strands of methodological debates have run parallel; the quantitative-qualitative divide that foregrounded methodological issues, and the other debate originating in the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, that put epistemological questions centre stage. The quantitative-qualitative dispute has early origins. The discussion as it relates to life course and biographical research have been a constant since the origin of this approach. The methodological divide has persisted over the years and is also related to epistemological debates that have created dividing lines within qualitative approaches. A section discusses the meeting between the different approaches to qualitative biographical research in the social sciences and the humanities. The heated discussions from the 1980s onwards, that were in reality addressing themes in the philosophy of science, are presented in their contemporary contexts. Another line of debate is about notions and attention to historical time and is addressed in the section called 'From history as periods to history as epoch'. Theoretical notions such as 'the individualisation thesis' and a 'de-standardisation' of life courses are terms associated with notions of history in epochal terms such as 'late modernity' and show how this vocabulary became influential.

Chapter 7 starts with general discussions about divides in the wider research community and then narrows down the focus to the biographical life course approach and the various suggestions that have been put forward for bridging methodological divides. Mixed methods strategies across the quantitative-qualitative gap is the title of a section that presents different research designs in such studies that make use of both quantitative and qualitative material. It discusses challenges and potential barriers against incorporating both types of data along a continuum of statistical techniques for causal analyses on the one end, and biographical material for exploring social processes, on the other. Examples from empirical

research illustrate the points raised. Questions of quality in biographical life course research is the topic of a separate section that underlines how different research strategies and approaches invite specific types of questions in relation to e.g., generalisability. The chapter ends with some general reflections inspired by research from this approach in contemporary society.

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# 2

## The Origins of Biographical and Life Course Research

We are safe in saying that personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect type* of sociological material. (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918, pp. 1883–34, cited in Blumer 1939, p. 39, italics in original)

### Introduction

The processual approach that lies at the heart of a life course perspective has its origin in American pragmatism where time and temporalities are essential concepts. Contextualism is another key characteristic of pragmatism and it implies that both data and analysis are concrete and rooted in particular contexts<sup>1</sup> (Kaplan 1961; Abbott 1997). Thus this chapter starts with a discussion of some of the ideas of one of this tradition's founders, George Herbert Mead. His notion of the processual self and his texts are set in a contemporary frame of reference where time and temporality were essential in debates. E.g., in his book *Philosophy of the Present* he discussed these topics in the writings of his contemporaries

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<sup>1</sup> This grounding of problems and data in concrete contexts is in breach with the Cartesian ideal of knowledge as 'abstract generalities of a fictitious world of ideas' (Kaplan 1961, p. 20).

in Europe, Henri Bergson, Alfred N. Whitehead and Albert Einstein, and this will be addressed in Chap. 4.

Another section discusses the city of Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century and the poverty amongst immigrants. The charity organisation Hull House, run and funded by women who were actively engaged in methodological inventions in sociological research, became a meeting point for progressive thinkers and activists. This historical period was characterised by radical and progressive ideas in America and in Europe, circumstances which must be viewed against the backdrop of major historical events elsewhere, particularly in Europe. The Chapter introduces the sociologists involved with the organisation among whom were GH Mead and William I. Thomas, the latter a co-author of the first biographical study ever.

A section of this chapter describes how this work, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, was only acknowledged by the sociological community when it became the object of the American Sociological Association's Appraisal Proceedings, convened by Mead's student Herbert Blumer in 1938. The book he published after the proceedings make fascinating reading and the methods discussions will be addressed below and in Chaps. 6 and 7, as they are still relevant in debates about biographical research. Lines will be drawn to contemporary debates that have moved on from methodological questions to issues of philosophy of science. Where the early discussions were about 'truth' of the personal documents as data, the current debates have centred on if there is 'truth' at all.<sup>2</sup>

In C. Wright Mills' book *The Sociological Imagination* he maintained that the relationship between the individual life course and history, or what I prefer to name 'the biography-history dynamic', the essence of sociology. Mills never did any empirical biographical studies himself, but his theoretical perspectives are of the most important sources of inspiration for contemporary biographical and life course research of both qualitative and quantitative varieties.

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<sup>2</sup> See Chap. 6 for details. In this chapter what is of importance is the historical context of the origin of the debates within the biographical life course tradition.

## George Herbert Mead and the Processual Self

Mead (1863–1931)<sup>3</sup> is one of the four classics in American pragmatism. The other three are William James, John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>4</sup> Peirce formulated a critique against the Cartesian “doubt” as a foundation for new knowledge. Doubt, he observed, could only arise in relation to something that surprises us in the practical reality; doubt that comes from armchair reflections and not from embodied, practical experience could give no grounds for new knowledge (Lewis and Smith 1980, p. 50).<sup>5</sup> New knowledge could only occur from encountering a problem in the real and practical world. Not only that, the experience of being faced with a problem is made by specific individuals situated in particular historical contexts: “This location of the problem in the experience of the individual in its historical setting dates not only the problem but also the world within which that problem arises.” (Mead 1956/1977, s. 59). Such settings are social communities where individuals’ experiences and reflections are socially embedded.

In relation to biographical research Mead’s concept of the self which is both processual and social, is of great significance. The self as a process means thinking in temporal terms rather than in spatial ones. The moments of the self are ‘the I’ and ‘the me’.

Taken together they constitute a personality as it appears in social experience. The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases, there could not be conscious responsibility and there would be nothing novel in experience. (Mead 1956/1977, s. 233)

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<sup>3</sup>In spite of his leaving behind many manuscripts he never published much in his lifetime. His unpublished writings were published posthumously by his students and younger colleagues and are acknowledged as some of the most original writings in his day and beyond.

<sup>4</sup>The origin of pragmatism is said to be in an article Peirce published in 1878 titled ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ in *Popular Science Monthly*. Twenty years later James gave a lecture at the University of California with the title ‘Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results’. In this lecture he revitalised Peirce’s ideas and lay the foundation for what was to become known as American Pragmatism.

<sup>5</sup>The earlier writings of Abraham Kaplan (1961) discussed this topic and maintained that pragmatism’s rejection of the Cartesian mind-body dualism represented a break with the ‘scientific’ knowledge ideal as it sought to ground thoughts about human experience in embodied particular contexts.

The self is a continuous process over the life course because we are social beings. What sets us apart from other beings, said Mead, is our unique ability to think in abstract symbols, which is grounded in the specific qualities of our mind. His ideas have been adopted widely in the social sciences, in sociology, in social psychology,<sup>6</sup> and beyond. Taking temporality as a starting point made his ideas distinct from other thinkers in the social sciences of his day, and the centrality of time and temporality in his writings will be discussed at length in Chap. 4.

Mead's and the processual thinking originated in an era in the USA where pragmatist thought became significant in the sociological community of its day. There are contradictory accounts about whether Thomas, one of the co-authors of *The Polish Peasant*, was influenced by Mead's thoughts. As addressed below there is however evidence that this was the case. Thomas was Mead's first graduate student and they were both part of the same the circle of radical intellectuals. An important meeting place for this group was Hull House.

## Jane Addams and Women's Methodological Innovations

Chicago was a city of immigrants. In 1890 it had in a period of 50 years grown from a small logging community to a metropole with over a million inhabitants (Coser 1977). The rapid population increase led to widespread poverty and social problems. In 1889 Jane Addams<sup>7</sup> and Ellen Starr Gates founded Hull House, which consisted of several buildings. They rented the property from Helen Culver, an heiress who funded philanthropical work among the poor in the city. She later transferred the ownership of Hull House to Addams.

The institution provided a range of offers for the immigrant communities. These included language courses and everyday services such as

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<sup>6</sup>His theories on these topics were formulated in debates with his contemporary John Watson and his Behaviourism. Hence Mead named his approach "Social Behaviourism".

<sup>7</sup>Addams was a pacifist and the first president of the Women's Peace Party which was established in 1917, during WWI. In 1931 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (<https://Janeaddamshullhouse.org>).

nurseries, soup kitchens, cultural events and classes in music, art and theatre. They also provided rooms for trade union meetings. At a time when there was no welfare state private donations and charity were important for combatting poverty and destitution. The first Department of Sociology in the USA was founded at the new University of Chicago in 1890.<sup>8</sup> Mary Jo Deegan (1988) wrote about Chicago sociology in this period and observed that it not only consisted of those who were employed at the newly founded department, but also those who were associated with Hull House. Several of its professors and postgraduate students were associated with Addams' circle of progressive intellectuals at Hull House, including Mead and Thomas (Coser 1977).<sup>9</sup>

Much of the empirical research that has given early Chicago sociology a reputation as pioneers in qualitative methods was done by women who had Hull House as their main base but were also associated, or employed, at the University. The first to use methods such as participatory observation and biographical interviews were women who studied prostitutes (Platt 1996, p. 263). Addams (1912, cited in Platt 1996) collected 'personal stories' from women who worked in shops, restaurants and offices. Addams and other women who did empirical studies at the time were first called sociologists but were later redefined as 'social workers' and moved out of the sociology department to other departments such as department of 'Household Administration' or 'Home economics' (Platt 1996 p. 260). About the term 'case study' Platt (1996) observed: "The origin of the term 'case study' probably had a lot to do with the social worker's 'case history' or 'case work'. Sociology and social work took a

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<sup>8</sup> See Abbott (1999) for a detailed history of sociology as a discipline, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> The first decade of the twentieth century is also known as the Progressive Era in the USA. After economic and social crises in the late nineteenth century and the increase of migrant communities in the cities, the level of poverty rose and progressive political ideas were launched to reduce conditions of social inequalities (Encyclopaedia Britannica [United States – Reforms, Immigration, Industrialization | Britannica](#)) These political ideas were present internationally and culminated in the Russian Revolution in 1917, twelve years after the failed 1905 uprising. In the decades that followed progressive ideas took hold in mainstream politics, the New Deal, Keynesian economics and establishing of welfare states in Europe (Hobsbawm 1994). The Hull House progressive movement was thus in keeping with the general political mood of radical ideas in this historical period.

long time to become disentangled.” (p. 46).<sup>10</sup> Hull House was a meeting place for progressive intellectuals who wanted to change the lives of the poorest in society and to reduce poverty and social inequality overall through various forms of political engagement. This was also a place where women’s rights were discussed. Of the men Thomas stood out as a radical thinker in this respect. His PhD thesis had the title *On a Difference in the Metabolism of the Sexes* (1897).<sup>11</sup>

Helen Culver wished to contribute to research on the immigrant communities of Chicago to get a deeper understanding of their conditions. In 1908 she offered Thomas 50,000 USD to undertake a study on this topic. It was a huge sum of money in its day that offered an opportunity to do a large empirical study, one of, if not the, largest empirical studies in sociology to date.

## William Isaac Thomas at Chicago

Thomas was to have said that he had lived through three centuries when he arrived at Chicago (Coser 1977). By that he meant that his rural upbringing in Virginia had much in common with life in the eighteenth century. His move to Knoxville Tennessee gave him a taste of urban life as did his visit to Germany<sup>12</sup> before he came to Chicago in 1893. He had then already obtained a PhD in English literature and had taught at Oberlin College (Coser 1977). Thomas was Mead’s first student to graduate and he had attended three of his courses (Lewis and Smith 1980, p. 229). Coser (1977) observed that Thomas only to a small degree admitted to any inspiration from Mead’s thoughts. Lewis and Smith (1980) however, point to a correspondence between Thomas and his

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<sup>10</sup> See also Levin (2000) for an in-depth analysis of the development of the relationship between sociology and social work.

<sup>11</sup> Ethel Sturges Dummer, much engaged with social reform for young women of poor origin, funded and initiated Thomas’ study later published in the book *The Unadjusted Girl* in 1923 about young women delinquents and prostitutes (Platt 1996).

<sup>12</sup> In Germany he had come into contact with Wilhelm Wundt’s physiological psychology, which was also an inspiration for Mead. Wundt’s thesis of ‘parallelism’ in psychology states that psychological processes run parallel to physiological ones in the organism (Mead 1956/1977 p. 133).

biographer where he regretted having left out to mention Mead as an important influence in his choice of a social psychological approach. Thomas and Mead were about the same age and Lewis and Smith (1980) believed this may have been a reason for Thomas not to acknowledge Mead's importance for his work.<sup>13</sup>

In common with many of his contemporaries Thomas was broadly read and had an intellectually inquisitive mind. He was especially interested in ethnography and comparative studies, but social psychological studies came in time to occupy a larger place in his field of interest. When he received Helen Culver's funding his original idea was to study different groups of immigrants from Eastern Europe in Chicago. In order to make the project manageable however, he had to narrow it down and so he chose to focus on Polish immigrants only. He knew some Polish language and this helped him to obtain contacts in the immigrant communities in Chicago and was helpful on his travels to Poland. At the start he had not given much thought to what types of methods to make use of in the study. However, Coser (1977) described anecdotally how he literally stumbled across a waste bin and a letter fell out. It turned out to be from a daughter to her father who had emigrated and described family relations in much detail. Thus Thomas, through sheer coincidence, came to think about using such material in his study. It could be added here that he may have had other sources of inspiration, or even actual models, for such ideas. The women researchers at Hull House, a meeting place Thomas frequented, had for a long time made use of 'personal documents' as empirical underpinnings of their studies. Platt (1996) noted how Addams had applied extensive biographical material in her research.

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<sup>13</sup>Mead's work did not receive much recognition until long after his death, which may have to do with his ideas only reaching a wider audience when his collected writings were published by his associates and earlier students (Coser 1977; Lewis and Smith 1980).

On one of his field trips to Poland<sup>14</sup> in 1913 Thomas became acquainted with the philosopher Florian Znaniecki who had extensive knowledge about the dire conditions in the rural areas of the country and the poverty amongst the peasants. This hardship was the reason that many chose to emigrate to America. Znaniecki assisted Thomas in getting access to archive material and when the Great War broke out in 1914 Znaniecki emigrated to the USA and Thomas hired him as his researcher. The collaboration lasted throughout the study period and Znaniecki became co-author of the published work.<sup>15</sup>

Thomas had a reputation as a man of questionable morals that did not sit well with the conservative academic establishment. Many thought his lifestyle discredited academia and wanted him gone from the university. When the FBI in 1918, just after the publication of the first two volumes of *The Polish Peasant*, arrested Thomas for breaching state laws by allegedly transporting prostitutes across state borders, he became headline news in the press. The establishment at the university saw an opportunity to get rid of a troublesome employee and dismissed him without awaiting the verdict from the trial. None of his closest colleagues came out to defend him and The University of Chicago Press, who had the contract to publish *The Polish Peasant*, resigned from the contract for the last three volumes. These were subsequently published by a Boston publisher in 1920. Thomas never obtained a permanent position at a university again and some of Chicago university's most conservative men did their best to erase his name from the institution's memory and from the university archives. The events surrounding Thomas' dismissal from Chicago have

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<sup>14</sup>The map of the European continent has been constantly changing over the centuries. The Poland Thomas visited in 1913 was not the country that exists within its borders of today. Unrest on the continent at the brink of the Great War and shifting alliances between the powers of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, The German Empire and Tsarist Russia affected the Polish territories that were divided between these powers. Internal disagreement between factions of Polish politics is known through the proverb 'A Polish Parliament'. Suffice here to say that it is worth keeping in mind that the history of Europe, and that of Poland is complex, especially during this period, and that such conditions had some bearing on the emigration, from this country and most other European nations at the time.

<sup>15</sup>Znaniecki went back and forth between Poland and America for a period between the wars. He had various positions at American universities, including Columbia, and the University of Illinois where he after having obtained American citizenship in 1942, had a professorship until his retirement.

later been deemed a stain on American sociology. Thomas did however not give up his research ambitions and he became an associate of a variety of universities, among them New School for Social Research in New York, and Pitirim Sorokin facilitated his visiting professorship at Harvard for a year from 1936. This became his last academic position.

In addition to *The Polish Peasant* Thomas' name is in general sociology associated with social psychology and with the 'Thomas theorem'—'if a person defines a situation as real, it is real in its consequences'. This is often cited to Thomas and Thomas 1928. The origin of this is however much earlier, in *The Polish Peasant*.

## The Polish Peasant in Europe and America

The aim of this study was to gain insight into processes involved in decisions to emigrate and knowledge about how social communities were established in the society of immigration. The wider theoretical ambition was to uncover 'laws of social becoming'. The original five-volume books were later edited and republished in two volumes in 1927. In the original edition volume I and II discussed the conditions in the Polish rural communities, and how a rapid industrialization had impacted on the lives of the peasants, socially as well as economically. Both emigration to Germany and to the USA was described in these two volumes. Volume III was the autobiography of the peasant Wladek<sup>16</sup> that described his life in Poland and his experiences as an immigrant in America. In this volume the rapid changes in the Polish countryside were given as a reason for emigrating. Life as an immigrant was described as leading to problems for individuals because of the move from a tight knit social community in the homeland to an ever-changing life in a new society where durable social bonds were difficult to establish. There were real risks of falling outside of social life and community in the new society. The reorganisation of the Polish rural societies was the main topic in volume IV which discussed problems in primary group relations in such communities and how social and economic changes affected the quality of these. Volume V addressed the

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<sup>16</sup>His full name was Wladislaw Wisniewski.

Polish immigrant communities in Chicago at the start of the twentieth century. Tendencies of increased individualisation and social fragmentation were discussed as were positive indications of social reorganisation amongst immigrants. The empirical material in the study was vast and wide ranging: personal letters; letters to newspapers; archive material and Wladek's autobiography.<sup>17</sup>

This study was ground-breaking in its time. Not only because of its sheer volume but also because it introduced new thoughts on both theory and methods. Today it still stands as one of the largest empirical studies in sociology. *The Polish Peasant* in its entirety rendered a comprehensive image of migration processes at the level of individuals as well as that of society. Hence it is of great contemporary relevance in a situation with increased migration between countries. Reasons for migration varies as do the backgrounds of immigrants. The meetings between people with very different religious, social and cultural norms and practices are sometimes challenging, as they were in Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

## Appraisal Proceedings for *The Polish Peasant*

In 1938 The American Social Science Research Council organised a special appraisal session over a selection of studies in the social sciences with particular attention to methods questions. Members could vote for short-listed works, and from sociology an overwhelming majority voted for *The Polish Peasant* to be the object of appraisal. The respective sessions were presided over by a person assigned with the task of presenting a comprehensive critique and evaluation, while a panel then discussed both the work in question and the critique. Authors were given the opportunity to take part and to comment and clarify. Herbert Blumer presented the main critique of *The Polish Peasant* and the debates from the proceedings

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<sup>17</sup> In the interwar years several autobiographical competitions were launched in Poland as a means of gaining access to everyday history through the lives of ordinary people. This tradition is said to be inspired by Thomas and Znaniecki's work (Lebow 2012).

<sup>18</sup> This aspect is discussed in Eli Zaretsky's (1996) book which includes an excerpt from *The Polish Peasant* that is of particular relevance for the field of migration studies.

were published in 1939 and then republished in 1979 with a new foreword by Blumer.<sup>19</sup>

In his appraisal Blumer assessed what impact *The Polish Peasant* had had on American sociology; whether it had brought new methods, concepts, or theoretical insights. He concluded that this study was much more than an empirical contribution to research on migration processes. It had developed a novel set of methodological approaches and brought up a series of theoretical topics for discussion. The use of ‘human documents’ and the focus on the subjective dimension of experience, were seen as particularly significant. These were aspects that set *The Polish Peasant* apart as a ground-breaking contribution to the study of social change.

Both the methodological and the theoretical focus in *The Polish Peasant* are drawn from a processual approach that originated in pragmatist thought. A key concept in the study was that of *social becoming* which was a processual conceptualisation of the relationship between processes at the individual level with those at a structural level (Blumer 1939/1979, p. 7). The overarching aims of the study were however strongly influenced by a positivist approach to social studies, which in many ways were in breach with a pragmatist way of thinking: they sought to *uncover laws* of social becoming. Blumer was very critical of this idea, not least since the authors never concluded with having discovered such laws. Both Thomas and Znaniecki took the floor and admitted that they had found no laws and that they would not have had such aims or phrased the argument in different words 20 years later.

A theoretical conceptualization that would help combine the individual level with the level of society was the use of the concepts *value* and *attitude*.<sup>20</sup> The first refers to conditions at the level of society whilst the latter is related to individuals’ own frame of reference in relation to the wider set of social values. This focus must be understood in relation to the historical context when these concepts were formulated. In the same way as Mead

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<sup>19</sup> Blumer (1939/1979) stated in the introduction to the last edition of the book from the proceedings, that the *Polish Peasant* had been absent from view in the American sociological debate after the 1950s.

<sup>20</sup> See Chap. 1 for a discussion of this in relation to other concepts to discuss the same interaction of the two levels.

wanted to distance himself from Watson's simplistic stimulus-response model, Thomas and Znaniecki emphasized the double set of dimensions because they did not wish to uncritically adopt a natural science ideal of causality into social research. In contrast to a science ideal that emphasized objective factors only, they maintained that the social sciences should also include the subjective and interpretive dimensions. It was during this discussion that 'the definition of the situation' became a concept because it points to the relationship between values and attitudes. 'The definition of the situation' involves reflections over a specific situation which has originated in a set of social values and through a phase of interpretation the subjective attitudes show themselves (Blumer 1939/1979, p. 27).

Many sides in the debates that were focussed on in the Appraisal proceedings are still relevant in sociological and other social science studies. *The Polish Peasant* was discussed in view of what its influence had been in sociology as well as in social work among immigrants. The debate about who sociologists do research for and in whose interests research may be applied, is as relevant today as it was in the 1938 discussions in the Appraisal proceedings. In sociology *The Polish Peasant* was regarded as having had a more indirect than a direct effect in research. Its biggest impact was said to be the launching of the subjective dimension, as it was called at the time, into empirical research and thus served to open up pathways towards a wider range of methodological approaches in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology. Blumer, the main critic during the proceedings, further developed the ideas about the use of human documents that had been in focus and became one of the most important figures in the establishing of qualitative research in sociology.

## Herbert Blumer: From Social Behaviourism to Symbolic Interactionism

Blumer, as Mead's student, was well acquainted with his thinking. He took important aspects of Mead's *social behaviourism* and developed them into an approach he called *symbolic interactionism*. This approach stems from pragmatist thought in that it shares the idea of social life as

processual. Its emphasis on the symbolic is also drawn from Mead and his theory about the human mind where the use of symbols was what set humans apart from other species. Blumer's development of pragmatist thought occurred during a phase and in an historical period that was very different from the turn of century in which pragmatism originated. The variations in emphasis and focus must be considered in light of these different historical contexts.<sup>21</sup>

From his focus on the symbolic dimension of interaction, Blumer did a lot of research on small group processes. Despite his studies of collective movements he is primarily associated with a sociology where structural features of society were not a main concern. This is only partly true because his chief approach was one which could not easily be identified with reference to the classifications in the post-war period as micro or macro sociology. His research questions and approach have more in common with the intersection of micro and macro conditions, or as Mills (1959/1980) said, between biography and history (See Chap. 1 for a detailed discussion). His writings on methodological questions as these involve philosophy of science themes, are also aspects that bear witness to the depth and richness of his approach that takes it beyond a narrow definition of 'micro' sociology.

Blumer, in good pragmatist tradition, observed that in order to obtain knowledge about processes in social life research would have to be sensitive to the processual character of knowledge itself. Ideals of scientism are built on a static view of reality. In his opinion these ideals had very limited value in social research. The search for scientific laws were futile in the social sciences because all knowledge was contextual in spatial and temporal terms. Sociology can therefore not uncritically adopt methodological procedures from the natural sciences.

In the article *What is Wrong with Social Theory* (1954) he made a case for using theories and concepts that were particular to the social sciences. Theories and concepts in sociology were his main concerns in the article.

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<sup>21</sup> Blumer maintained as late as 1980 that his and Mead's theoretical starting points were the same. He said this in an article that was a response to an article (McPhail and Rexroat 1979) that questioned whether his research programme was a genuine continuation of Mead's ideas. This is a much debated issue, especially with reference to philosophy of science standpoints (Lewis and Smith 1980).

Concepts are central because they are the connections between empirical material and theory. Clear concepts, in contrast to vague ones, are important because concepts are tools to establish theories about the social world. The concepts in the social sciences such as norms, roles, values, social classes etc., are vague he said. They must therefore become more precise but in the process of finding ways of getting round the 'vagueness', it would not help to adopt practices from the natural sciences. His suggested solution to this problem was to identify concepts that were *definitive*, i.e., that refer to classification of objects under particular operational criteria. These were concepts used in the natural sciences. In the social sciences concepts were of a different order and he named them *sensitising concepts*, they were instruments that focus attention towards specific traits in the social world. They suggested a *direction* in which to look, rather than as definitive concepts do, tell us *what* to look for. Sensitising concepts were better suited to studying the social world because this is in a continuing process, its only constant is change. If we use definitive concepts about what social class is for instance, we would not be able to understand social inequalities in various countries or in different historical periods. The fact that social inequality is differently shaped according to temporal and spatial context demonstrates why a concept such as social class must be used in a sensitising rather than in a definitive way.

These concepts were central to the methodological ideal Blumer adhered to; the *naturalistic* research programme (Hammersley 1989). The name comes from Chicago sociology and Florian Znaniecki (1934) used a similar conceptualisation in a text which was a first attempt to write a book on qualitative methods (Platt 1996). In Blumer's naturalistic programme a research practice where association between variables counted through statistical procedures, had only limited value because it did not give access to social life. The use of qualitative methods starting from an exploratory approach that involved observation, interviewing and written sources, was considered a far better sociological methodological practice.<sup>22</sup> Blumer's argument was firmly grounded in the debate

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<sup>22</sup> Blumer's methodological ideas, especially his emphasis on sensitizing concepts, were a main inspiration for Glaser and Strauss' (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* which was an important text in attempts to arrive at a systematic methodological approach in the collection and analysis of qualitative data.

climate of the 1950s. This discussion later gained prominence in the fierce debates over what came to be known as the dividing lines between qualitative and quantitative methods. But these disagreements were not restricted to methods as techniques. They were related to a far broader set of issues involving philosophy of science. An important participant in these debates in America was C. Wright Mills.

## C. Wright Mills: The History-Biography Dynamic

The title of Mills' PhD thesis was *A Sociological Account of Pragmatism: An Essay on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1942). It discussed the works of Peirce, James and Dewey. He later said he regretted that Mead had been omitted from the text and admitted that Mead had been a great inspiration for him in his philosophy of science discussions. This is especially evident in an article (1940) in which he discussed motives for actions<sup>23</sup> and showed how they could not be reduced to psychological states with single individuals but that they were solidly grounded in social relationships and specific contexts. Mead's social self had a prominent place in his argument, that he said was: '(...) quite consistent with Mead's program to approach conduct socially and from the outside' (Mills 1940, p. 442). In another article from the same period Mills (1939) addressed the social and cultural framework of language. Again Mead's theories and conceptualisations had a major place in the discussions. He did however express disagreement with Mead on the nature of 'the generalised other': 'I do not believe (as Mead does) that the generalized other incorporates «the whole society», but rather that it stands for selected societal segments' (footnote 12). Thus Mills opened up for an understanding of the theory of socialisation that incorporated notions of social inequalities and of power. These were both central concepts in his understanding of the social world and of what sociology was to be about.

His empirical research revolved around these topics. In *The New Men of Power* (1948) union leaders in the USA were the focus of critical scrutiny. The study was done before the Cold War set in earnest. This was

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<sup>23</sup> See Chap. 1 for Barnes (2000) approach to this article in a discussion about agency.

a quantitative study done whilst he was employed at the Bureau of Applied Social Research where Paul Lazarsfeld was the leading researcher. The topic in *White Collar* (1951) was the middle classes in service work, ‘the dependent employees’. In this study employees in sales were of particular interest. The way their personalities were to be used as commodities that could be polished in Charm Schools is a topic that has resonance in the contemporary work of Arlie Hochschild (1983) and her concepts of ‘emotional labour’ to capture many of the same processes that Mills wrote about. He observed that the white-collar jobs involved a different type of alienation from that of production work: estrangement from self and from other people. In *The Power Elite* (1956) the theme was power in America. Mills identified three groups that together made up what he called the power elite: the military industrial complex, the political and the economic dimensions. The corporate rich had traditionally had their power base in regional businesses, they were however becoming increasingly national and came to be a managerial elite within corporations that gradually replaced the propertied class who made their riches from ownership. The military had during the Cold War become more autonomous from political control. What Mills termed the political directorate comprised the very powerful few in the state who had strengthened their power in the executive branch of politics. There were in many instances overlapping interests between the three, and some persons, the most powerful of all, belonged in all three dimensions. His argument for naming these an *elite* rather than a *ruling class* was that it would be too simplistic to merge political and economic terms that such a notion would imply, so “we prefer ‘power elite’ to ‘ruling class’ as a characterizing phrase for the higher circles when we consider them in terms of power” (Mills 1956/2000, p. 277).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>This study has gained renewed interest in current European sociology where the term ‘elite’ is used in discussions about increasing social inequalities and how the 1% richest now controls a vast share of the economic and other resources in society. In this sense the current use of the term mainly refers to the financial elite. Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, among other topics discussed intergenerational transmissions of wealth through inheritance as an important reason for the increasing economic inequalities and the widening gap between the richest and the rest. This important study has put social inequality firmly on the agenda and has inspired a number of studies across Europe.

He visited Cuba after Castro came to power in 1959 and after the visit he wrote *Listen Yankee: The Cuban Case against the United States* (1960) from the viewpoint of a Cuban revolutionary. This caught the attention and ire of not only a vast proportion of the American people but also of the FBI. This nevertheless became one of his bestselling books.

He was critical of the state of sociology as a discipline in his contemporary society (Mills 1954, 1959) and maintained that it consisted of two camps: 'The Theory' and 'The Method'. The former were the theorists who saw Talcott Parsons and his Grand Theory as their ideal. In Mills' view this vast theoretical construction had no relationship to the empirical level and was as such useless for understanding social processes. In the latter camp were the empiricists whose main figure he identified as Paul Lazarsfeld, with whom he had been employed earlier in his career.

In his best known book, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959/1980) he formulated an alternative vision for sociology that sought to understand individuals in relation to the society they lived in. The opening lines of the book have a contemporary ring to them:

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: (...). (p. 9)

His starting point for the new vision for sociology was that 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (p. 9). The mindset that he named 'the sociological imagination' was important because it 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (p. 12). To understand the dynamic relationship between the two is the primary task of sociology. The sociological imagination made it possible to work out the distinction between personal or private troubles on the one hand and public issues on the other. The former belongs to the biographical sphere whilst the latter are related to history, to structural features of specific societies. Mills' processual approach to the understanding of the biography-history dynamic laid the grounds for the post-war development of sociological biographical research of both quantitative and qualitative varieties.

## Glen Elder: A Contextualist Life Course Perspective

*Children of the Great Depression* (1974/1999) is a classic text in life course studies. The book was based on longitudinal data from 167 children born 1920–1921. Archival material from The Oakland Growth Study, established in 1931 with close follow ups of the children in a seven year period (1932–1939) and five more follow ups, the last in 1964. In contrast to many other cohort studies, Elder’s analyses that had been carried out in the 1960s and early 1970s when he gained access to the data, had the explicit purpose of studying effects of economic deprivation. This particular topic “was selected for study on theoretical and historical grounds, not in terms of its presumed efficiency in predicting one of more dependent variables.” (Elder 1974/1999 p. 6). He expressed his indebtedness to the work of Thomas and Znaniecki but also to that of C. Wright Mills.

During my graduate work at the University of North Carolina in the late 50s, I encountered a small book with an inspiring title that had something important to say about the study of human lives. In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills proposed as an orienting concept in the behavioural sciences “the study of biography, of history, and the problems of their intersection within social structure” (159, p. 149). For Mills, human lives could be studied only in relation to changes in society. However, he had few empirical examples to draw on at the time. (...) The concept of life course had not yet appeared in scholarly literature. (p. 301)

It was only in the 1960s that Elder came across the Oakland Growth Study. This gave him an empirical basis from which to act on the inspiration from Mills’ work. In his analyses he lay the grounds for a life course theory that he, based on an idea of theoretical orientations from Robert Merton, defined as follows:

I use the term *life course theory* to refer to a theoretical orientation that establishes a common field of inquiry by defining a framework that guides research in terms of problem identification and formulation, variable selection and rationales, and strategies of design and analysis. (Elder 1974/1999, p. 302)

The ground-breaking dimensions of Elder's study was that he did not follow in the tradition of earlier longitudinal studies in social and psychological fields of research. Samples in such studies were often young people whose lives were lived in breach with accepted social norms of their times and who had become so called delinquents. Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck (1930, 1943, 1950) did studies of young men, some who had been in contact with the police, and contrasted them with another sample who had not had such problems. The purpose of these studies was to arrive at laws that could transcend time and place about personality development in youth that could help predict who would become criminals. Elder's study had no such ambitions precisely because his inspiration was Mills' work which sensitised him to the importance of context. In later chapters another important figure in the development of life course and biographical studies, social historian Tamara Hareven, who also collaborated with Elder, will be presented.

## Summary

In this chapter the origin of the biographical life course approach has been laid out in some detail. The processual dimension based on thoughts from American pragmatism and the contextualist life course perspective are cornerstones in this research tradition. George Herbert Mead's thoughts have been a major inspiration in this approach and has been presented in this chapter in the wider context of his contemporary society. The very first study based on biographical material, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William I Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, and its impact on sociological debates beyond its time, was presented with special emphasis on the Appraisal proceedings organised by the American Sociological Association twenty years after its publication. The discussions during this event are a reflection on what was the methodological concerns of the day; questions that still resonate in much contemporary sociological methods discussions.

The community around Hull House was an essential part of the contemporary scene where biographical studies started. Including a discussion of this establishment adds an important dimension to the origin

story, one that is often overlooked, an account of how important women were for the origin and development of biographical research and for contributing to its methodological practices. The heiress who funded Hull House, Helen Culver, was a central figure in the establishing of biographical research in that she funded William Thomas' study that resulted in the publication of *The Polish Peasant*.

This study and the debates it engendered were important for the development of Herbert Blumer's ideas about social science research as a contrast to studies in the natural sciences. His notions of 'sensitising vs. definitive' concepts were significant inspirations for the development of qualitative sociological studies throughout the twentieth century and to this day. They were of particular relevance for Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory, which was of specific importance for the revitalisation of biographical research in the 1980s.

Of equal consequence for biographical life course research in the revival period were the writings of C. Wright Mills', and particularly his book *The Sociological Imagination*. The importance of historical circumstances for the understanding of individual lives set out in this text has been of the greatest significance for the development of biographical life course studies. Its inspiration for Glen Elder's cohort study and his book *Children of the Great Depression* where he launched the concept and practice of a contextualist life course perspective was unambiguously stated by Elder in the afterword of the 25th anniversary edition of this book in 1999. Elder's approach to life course sociology represented a break with approaches and practices in earlier cohort studies where predictions and law-like conclusions were centre stage.

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# 3

## The Revival of Biographical Research in Europe and America

(...) the Chicago school, despite such a promising beginning, before long became the victim of professionalisation among sociologists, and retreated from the immediacy of the city around it to the security of research doctorates based on statistical analysis and abstract general theory. (Thompson 2000, p. 63)

### Introduction

This chapter will focus on a particular phase in the history of biographical life course studies, the phase of revival of a sociological research tradition that had all but been forgotten for the best part of the twentieth century. Several developments in the wider societies and in the social sciences, led up to the renewed interest in the methods and topics that had been prominent in biographical research in Chicago. The 1960s was a time when the large birth cohorts after WWII reached a phase of youth, they had better educational opportunities than former generations because of the expansion of the systems of education in tandem with the

establishing of welfare states in Northern European countries.<sup>1</sup> Their ‘opportunity structures’ (Roberts 1968/2009) were considerably improved compared to those their parents had had.

This was a period when the notion of ‘youth’ as a particular life course phase gained a different meaning for the many in society, rather than the privileged few which had up to then been the case (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Mitterauer 1992; Roberts 1968, 2009). The social unrest in many countries during this period had their origin at the new universities among the large group of students. There was a call for novelty not only in the way subjects were taught but also of the contents. Critique of the positivist legacy was widespread in this period, especially in the social sciences. May 1968 in Paris was a watershed moment for society at large, but also for the social sciences. In the words of one of the most important pioneers for the revival of biographical research: ‘But what really woke me up from my positivist dream was an historical earthquake: May 1968 (...) the sudden *irruption* of social praxis on the quiet scene of mass-consumption society was a deadly blow to my scientism’. (Bertaux 1981, p. 29). This is a snapshot of the historical context during which the revival of biographical research happened.

Changes in epistemological or methodological foci in the sciences, be they the natural or the social sciences, may happen in a variety of ways in different contexts. It is rare that such changes can be described in terms of the Kuhnian notion of a ‘paradigm shift’ (Kuhn 1962), which entails a turn away from what is considered ‘normal science’, to an acceptance of a novel approach that is incompatible with the existing one and replaces this. Whilst ‘normal science’ in the social sciences during the period leading up to the revival of the approach, was characterised by positivist methodological frameworks, the renewed interest in biographical life course research did not entail a complete break with this tradition. Quite the opposite, the two approaches, plus others, co-existed, and still do, if not always peacefully.

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<sup>1</sup>The whole of Eastern Europe was at this time separate from the West during the Cold War. However, most of Southern Europe was also cut off from the relative prosperity that developed in the North-Western societies. This was related to a complex set of geo-political factors during the Cold War and their varying degrees of oppression by right-wing dictators such as Salazar in Portugal, Franco in Spain and military juntas in Greece.

The Chicago tradition in sociology founded at the turn of nineteenth century with its emphasis on human documents was challenged as the positivist methodological approach gained ground at the same time as the post-war development of powerful computers made advanced and sophisticated statistical analyses feasible. The search for causal laws of social life could thereby apparently reach wider the more data that could be processed. Thus, life course studies, especially in America, came to rest on both well-established quantitative methodological procedures and innovations related to the increase in computer power and technology. In Europe there was more of a revival of the classic biographical tradition, and its inspiration came from a range of different approaches. The qualitative branch was more diversified than the quantitative one, especially with regards to theoretical underpinnings. Whilst qualitative methods in general did, and still do, cover a range of approaches and techniques, for biographical research the interview and autobiographical texts continue to be the primary means of collecting data.<sup>2</sup> However, the analysis of such material has over time been done from a variety of different practices and perspectives.

When Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967, there were no other books on the market that made a systematic attempt to suggest ways of collecting and analysing qualitative data and to develop theory from such material.<sup>3</sup> In the post-war period the survey and statistical techniques of analysis to test theories were centre stage. Starting from a pragmatist perspective with Blumer and Mills as important inspirations, Glaser and Strauss offered an approach to analysis of mainly qualitative data that would facilitate the development of new concepts and theories that were context sensitive. Ken Plummer (1983) observed that Glaser and Strauss' emphasis on the value of studying a single case for developing theoretical insights, was an important contribution for the revival and development of biographical

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<sup>2</sup>Data such as photographs and other non-textual sources are often included in biographical material but they are most of the time combined with interviews where interviewees interpret them in conversation with the interviewer.

<sup>3</sup>Florian Znaniecki's (1934) *The method of Sociology*, that had a different approach from that of Glaser and Strauss, was largely forgotten. The difference between the two will be discussed in a later chapter.

research, especially in Europe. The constant comparative method and the theoretical sampling they recommended were however not easily transferable to biographical studies based on life stories. The importance of their book for the advancement of qualitative research is nevertheless undoubted as they put such methods in their own right on the agenda in the discipline of sociology. In social anthropology, oral history, and social psychology methods such as interviews, observation and ethnography formed part of the disciplinary foundation. As will be discussed in a later chapter, the methodological debates in the field of biographical studies have been the site of several controversies over the years. Suffice here to say that during the historical period when sociology was dominated by quantitative research strategies a book that put qualitative methods in its title was rare indeed.

This chapter cannot do justice to the multitude and diversity of biographical research that originated in this revival period. The selection of specific studies mentioned is based on considerations of methodological varieties and impact in the English-speaking<sup>4</sup> part of the academic world. The sampling of studies discussed is confined to those where the temporal and processual approaches from the classic traditions are prominent. Attention will also be given to some of the variations in vocabularies that occurred in the different contexts. These could be seen as related to the historical development of ideas in the various countries as well as to what specific methodological focus that became prominent in studies of the life course.

The German and French contributions have been very influential, not only in engendering methodological debates that will be discussed in a later chapter, but also because of the particular topics they focussed on in their empirical studies. The Scandinavian case is included because of its importance in women's studies in the 1980s and 1990s. The American revival of the life course research tradition, although mainly not in the field of biographical studies, had some notable contributions for the theoretical and conceptual development that was a continuation of Mills emphasis on the history-biography dynamic.

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<sup>4</sup>The presentation and discussion of non-English language studies is restricted due to the author's lack of multilingual proficiency that could make it possible to read texts that has not been translated into English.

## 'A Continental View': Revival of Biographical Research in Europe

The European countries had different research traditions in the social sciences before the re-discovery of the biographical methods of old. The form and substance of these studies as they emerged in the various contexts therefore varied considerably.

A pioneer for the revival of this approach in Europe was Daniel Bertaux in France. His approach to the field was much inspired by C. Wright Mills and the early Chicago school. His vision for sociology was: 'Like C. Wright Mills, a "soul brother" if I may borrow the expression, I believe in orienting the sociological imagination away from pseudo-scientificity, and towards a critical understanding of social history in today's world.' (Bertaux 1981, p. 43). Indeed, he referred back to the time before his acquaintance with this approach when he declared: 'Once I was a positivist. I thought sociology could become a true *science*, and I was eager to make it more scientific' (p. 29). This ambition was not surprising given that his training was in the natural sciences. Influenced by the events of 1968 in France, as stated above, his thoughts about the social sciences shifted radically and he became the leading figure for a research tradition that ran opposite to everything he had believed in earlier.

In August 1978 at the IXth World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala, Sweden, the first meeting in an ad hoc group naming themselves 'The Life History Approach', took place. In a preface to the volume Bertaux (1981) edited based on papers at this meeting, he observed that qualitative methods and the collecting of life histories had been ignored for decades. But he was optimistic for the future of this research tradition and thought it could help break the near universal hold of quantitative methods in sociology.

(But) the methodological orthodoxy that covered so much of the ground of empirical research has begun to thaw; and sociologists here and there are developing a curiosity for approaches to observation and empirically-grounded theory construction other than the survey. All sorts of experiments are in the making, many of which involve the collection of life stories in one form or another. (Bertaux 1982, p. 1)

The participants at the Uppsala meeting came from a variety of countries which included Canada, Britain, Poland,<sup>5</sup> France and Germany. Bertaux was optimistic for the future impact such research may have, and he was particularly pleased to cite John Goldthorpe's (1980) insights from having added life story material in the form of autobiographical notes from a subsample of the quantitative material he and colleagues based their studies of social mobility on: (...) adopting a diachronic or biographical perspective on mobility produces a very different picture from that derived from the synchronic, cross-sectional view of a conventional mobility table (Goldthorpe 1980, pp. 139–140 cited in Bertaux 1981, p. 31).

In a long footnote to his introduction to the 1981 volume he suggested a need to make distinctions between the different terms used in life course research clearer. He proposed that the *life history* is a term reserved for a biographical account, or life story, supplemented with other material about a person's life such as medical and other official records. This was a common method in psychology in the 1950s and was often named *case histories*.<sup>6</sup> According to Bertaux (1981) this was also a common form of data collection in anthropology from the nineteenth century onwards.<sup>7</sup> According to him some social scientists were more enthusiastic about the life history than the mere biography because of the added material in the form of official records. Information given by a single individual could thus be checked for truthfulness against 'independent' information. Although there were plenty of opportunities to get access to supplementary material, Bertaux was sceptical to this way of doing biographical research, "In fact, official records and files are now

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<sup>5</sup>In Poland there had been a more or less uninterrupted tradition of collection autobiographical material after the publication of Wlodek's story in volume III of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920). Contests for people from all walks of life to contribute with their autobiographical texts, be they in the form of diaries or stories of particular experiences, were run by The Sociological Institutes in Poznan (Chalasiniski 1981).

<sup>6</sup>As discussed in Chap. 2 his term was adopted from social workers' terminology (Platt 1996).

<sup>7</sup>The *life story* is told by an individual about her or his own life, often to a researcher who writes it down. This in contrast to the *autobiography* which is written by a person about his or her own life. These accounts may not cover the whole life course of an individual. When focussed on parts of the life they are often called *topical* biographies (Plummer 1983) or topical autobiographies if penned by the person herself.

multiplying so fast in developed countries that the day might come when state institutions will know the trajectory of a given person better than the person himself” (Bertaux 1981, p. 8).<sup>8</sup>

With Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, Bertaux had done a study of French artisanal bakeries. At the beginning of the 1970s in France 90 percent of bread was still produced by local artisan bakers whilst in most other industrialised nations bread baking was done in factories. To explore this topic they used life stories in order to get to the heart of the matter of this sector of production, both with respect to the structural features of it and to the people who worked in the bakeries. Other data included literature on the trade, key informant interviews as well as what little statistics there were available. They collected about a hundred life stories—of bakery workers and bakers both. When they early on in the study approached the latter, they declined to take part but their reluctance faded and later on they agreed to be interviewed. The researchers could thus include both the bakers and their wives. With the help of these life stories they gained insights into the structural features of the bakery trade in France and also helped revive a near forgotten research tradition in Europe.

In the 1990s Bertaux collaborated with British historian Paul Thompson on cross-national studies of intergenerational relations and co-edited two volumes on such research (Bertaux and Thompson 1993/2005, 1997). Both these books demonstrate how powerful biographical methods are for examining a variety of aspects of family relations and how values of both material and immaterial kinds are transmitted between generations in various contexts. In studies of key sociological themes such as social mobility quantitative approaches dominated. Bertaux and Thompson (1997) demonstrated convincingly how biographical material may give insights into the very processes involved in social mobility over historical time that quantitative studies could only speculate on as they relied on data on outcomes rather than the processes

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<sup>8</sup>Forty years on Bertaux’ predictions have come true in ways no one in their wildest imagination could dream of then. In the Scandinavian countries researchers may gain access to records from a range of different institutions and cobble them together to trace trajectories of generations in families in so called ‘register’ or ‘administrative’ data. In addition, all those who are on social media give permission not only to states, but to multinational corporations to own their personal information. The discussion about vocabularies and terminologies does thus involve much more than mere language. It can heighten awareness of methodological as well as other issues.

in their own right. The specific historical contexts of countries can in biographical studies be linked to temporalities at the individual and familial levels to show how the history-biography dynamic is at play in the wider social processes.

*Germany*<sup>9</sup> was during the revival period of the life course perspective still divided into East- and West. Bertaux and Kohli (1984), in an overview of the revival of biographical research in Europe, stated that there were two related traditions in German research. The first was named a cultural or life-world approach to topics such as class consciousness, and the second one was a focus on the structure of narratives in an interpretive tradition where Alfred Schütz' approach was more prominent.

The earliest life story studies were done in West Germany around 1980 and were much inspired by the latter rather than taking the Chicago sociology of old as their starting point. Methodologically a particular form of interpretive sociology developed, where the thoughts of Max Weber and his notion of 'verstehen' was prominent within a phenomenological framework from Alfred Schütz<sup>10</sup> were the leading ideas. In the literature there are a variety of viewpoints on the question about whether there is a particular German School of biographical studies is debated.

Apitzsch and Inowlocki (2000) observed that the term 'The German School' had a reputation as 'an allegedly 'idealist' approach which has little concern for a sociological understanding of social reality and, instead, an overly complicated methodological interest in single case analysis' (p. 53). They stated that this approach was not part of mainstream German sociology and that the main biographical approach used in Germany was imported from the American source in Chicago. This biographical approach was introduced in German sociology in the 1970s, and the work of Martin Kohli and his collaboration with Daniel Bertaux were significant for launching this particular branch of the discipline into the general realm of social science in the country (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000). These authors observed that the specific German history which

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<sup>9</sup> See Wingens (2022) for a comprehensive overview of German life course research where the quantitative tradition is given prominence.

<sup>10</sup> See Chap. 6 for more details on this specific method.

included the Nazi-period, made biographical research face difficulties since accounts from persons who lived through that historical period could not be taken at face value. As a consequence,

the sociological analysis of biographical documents became more and more sophisticated, taking into account the formal features of narration, such as the distinction between narration and argumentation, or the degree of abstractness. (p. 56)

There was in other words a general suspicion against biographical accounts and whether any historical facts or truths could be found in such material.

Empirical studies in Germany during this period included Kohli et al.'s (1983) study of the ageing process in a particular industry. The focus in the study was exceptional in that it studied 'normality' through narrative interviews with workers in three age groups, where age itself was the focus of analysis. The aim of the study was to examine 'how the economic system deals with age and ageing, and at the same time contributes to the construction of the age stratification system' (Kohli et al. 1983, pp. 23–24). The analysis focussed on workers' perceptions in the context of the workplace and their lives in general, thus including a contextualist element adopted from the classic Chicago tradition of this field.

In later years the quantitative approaches to life course studies have become more dominant in German research. The German Life History Study (GLHS) was a survey based study that covered selected cohorts. It started in 1979 and was extended to include the East when The Wall fell and unification happened about a decade later (Brückner and Mayer 1998). This pioneering research was followed by a number of others. The longitudinal studies and panels organised by Hans-Petter Blossfeld and co-researchers, are modelled on a life course design.<sup>11</sup> These and other similar studies will be discussed in relation to methodological topics in a later chapter.

In *Italy* Franco Ferrarotti (1981), who was much inspired by the philosopher Jean Paul Satre's idea of 'mediation' between levels of social life, had done life story research in the 1950s. He was particularly interested

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<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Blossfeld and Mills 2003, Blossfeld et al. 2007, 2011.

in studying consequences of contemporary economic development as well as technological modernisation in Italy at the time. In the process of doing this research he came to the conclusion that biographies of primary groups—rather than individuals—comprised a material that could better capture ‘the mediation between biography and the social system’ (p. 22).

The overall impression is that although many German researchers were influenced by the classic Chicago tradition (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000), similar to what can be found in Ferrarotti’s work, there were nevertheless a certain ‘local flavour’ to both countries’ early biographical studies. As will be discussed in more detail in the next Chapter, in Germany traditions and practices in biographical and life course studies can more easily be traced to the methodological approaches that were strongly associated with phenomenological ideas rather than with the traditions from Chicago.

## The Oral History Legacy: The United Kingdom

In the UK early biographical studies were associated with the oral history tradition. Thompson (2000) observed that ‘Biography is one of the forms in which historians most often use interviews, whether explicitly or not, usually in an informal and exploratory manner to supplement written sources’ (p. 93). He traced the renewed attention to ‘human documents’ to a merging of research interests between sociology and history in Britain after WWII. EP Thompson’s (1963/1966) *The Making of The English Working Class* became an influential classic in that it made *the* experiences of the working-class focus of attention. Sheila Rowbotham’s (1973) *Hidden from History*, focussed on working class women and used archival material to document their lives. The expansion of higher education and the establishing of new universities with interdisciplinary departments created ‘an increasing concern with the historical dimension in social analysis’ (Thompson 2000, p. 73). During this period the large post-war birth cohorts comprised a generation that re-defined the notion of ‘youth’ and set a more radical agenda for society. Focus on lived experiences from the viewpoint of those whose lives were studied, especially groups who had been silenced and oppressed, became essential.

However, at the same time as these research approaches became more widespread, in oral history there were debates about methods. Oral historians were criticised for making use of surveys to underpin findings from interviews since this practice was considered ‘empiricism’ which did not give sufficient attention to subjective aspects of memory (Chamberlayne et al. 2000).<sup>12</sup>

Ken Plummer’s (1983) *Documents of Life* was the earliest European volume to give an account of the history of the biographical life course tradition and its roots in Chicago. He made a distinction between approaches tending towards the humanities on the one hand, and those that favoured the positivistic sciences on the other.<sup>13</sup> Human documents, and thus biographical material, are associated with the former. The life story stood out and,

What matters, therefore, in life history research is the facilitation of as full a subjective view as possible, not the naïve delusion that one has trapped the bedrock of truth. Given that most social science seeks to tap the ‘objective’, the life history reveals, like nothing else can, the subjective realm. (p. 14)

Plummer’s book did not confine itself to a discussion in sociology exclusively, although it was his main subject, nor only to life histories. He discussed the variety of human documents and included letters, diaries, photographs and films, and their use across a range of disciplines and subjects. The bulk of the volume was however devoted to life stories in the social sciences; how these could be gathered and analysed.

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<sup>12</sup>In a later chapter the full impact of such methodological discussions will be taken up in more detail.

<sup>13</sup>This division bears resemblance with Mills (1940) discussion of ‘the scientists’ vs. ‘the humanists’, and is similar to what CP Snow (1959) called ‘the two cultures’. This topic will be discussed in more detail in Chap. 7.

A number of edited volumes about life course and life story research was published in British sociology throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Papers presented at a BSA conference in 1986 'Sociology of the Life Cycle' were published in two volumes in 1987. One of these was dedicated to discussions about general methodological and theoretical aspects of a life course, or life cycle, perspective (Bryman et al. 1987). The chapters in this volume discussed notions of family and generations within a life course perspective. Other topics included were life course phases; intergenerational relations; labour market participation over the life course, and family. The second volume focussed specifically on women's lives (Allatt et al. 1987). The topics covered included gender and generations; concepts of women; women in different life course phases; marriage, employment and childbirth.

In these volumes questions of concepts and terminology were prominent. Bryman et al. (1987) in a discussion about the terms 'life cycle' and 'life course' observed that the latter was the preferred term in American sociology, and referred to Glen Elder and cited Tamara Hareven's 1982-definition which demonstrated that this concept took historical context into account. A life cycle perspective on the other hand, was considered deterministic and non-contextual and was centred on life stages that were deemed more or less inevitable in individuals' lives. As its origin in biology refers to the reproductive cycle of an organism, it was seen to have ideological overtones that came to bear on analyses of women's lives in particular, by referring deterministically to stages (Allatt et al. 1987).<sup>15</sup> The biographical perspective gained importance in Britain, perhaps most of all because of the long tradition of oral history and because of the easy access to the original literature from the Chicago tradition in a common language.

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<sup>14</sup>In a later period Chamberlayne et al. (2000), discussed biographical and life course studies from an interdisciplinary viewpoint and identified three periods in the history of biographical studies in Britain. The first was the period of oral history and the focus on agency in the form of individual experiences across historical periods. The second is a period from the 1980s during which a focus on postmodernism, feminism and identities were prominent. Another feature of this period they suggested was the focus on the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, where a reflective attitude on the part of researchers became important. The third period they identify as one of cultural and historical understanding of agents and agency.

<sup>15</sup>In psychology the term 'life span' has been used synonymously with life course. See e.g. chapters in an edited volume by Alice Rossi (1985b).

## Women's Studies' Contributions: Scandinavia

In Scandinavia, and in Norway specifically, life course research gained ground in sociology through women's studies particularly. In the book series with the title '*Women's Living Conditions and Life Courses*', series editor was the feminist political scientist Helga Hernes, 17 books highlighted a variety of aspects of women's lives in a welfare state society. Whereas most of the books covered a range of topics of relevance for women's lives in general, only one of the volumes was exclusively focussed on the life course perspective (Skrede and Tornes 1983). The chapters in this book covered a range of dimensions related to women's life course, e.g., education, childbirth, employment, marriage etc. Methodologically the empirical chapters had data and analyses based on quantitative and demographic traditions. They highlighted the concepts that were, and still are, key to a life course perspective and as such introduced this approach to a wider scholarly community. One of the co-editors, Kristin Tornes (1983), had a chapter on women and time which was among the early contributions on this particular topic both in Scandinavia and beyond. In spite of the qualitative tradition being part of Norwegian sociology (Aubert 1979; Holter and Kalleberg 1982), using life stories as data in sociology was not common at the time.<sup>16</sup> My doctoral dissertation (Nilsen 1992) was an early example of the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches in the same study.<sup>17</sup>

In Sweden the life course perspective was mainly present in quantitative approaches in demographic studies. According to Eneroth (1988), qualitative studies did not exist in any formal way in Swedish sociology. He described it as invisible in the discipline and outlined a number of reasons for the situation. One of these was the hostility towards what in a debate had been called 'soft data'. The qualitative studies he saw emerging at the time were in social work rather than sociology. The life course perspective became important in educational research in Sweden,

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<sup>16</sup>Qualitative biographical studies were however carried out earlier in disciplines such as social anthropology and ethnology, with anthropologist Marianne Gullestad as the most prominent pioneer. In her 1996 book she did an overview of the autobiographical tradition on social anthropology.

<sup>17</sup>This study will be addressed in more detail in Chaps. 4 and 7.

particularly in Nordic comparative studies of women's education (Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994).<sup>18</sup> In the volume edited by Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman (1994) the notion of 'lifelines' was in focus as this had been a pioneering feature of the Swedish approach to studying women's life courses.<sup>19</sup>

Finland had a long oral history tradition but it was only from the 1980s that the approach gain importance (Fingerroos and Haanpää 2012). In a three generation study of the upper classes of Swedish-Finns, the researchers made use of biographical interviews in combination with other sources of data such as official documents, diaries and letters (Roos and Roos 1984). Methodologically this study related itself to the writings of Bertaux, and theoretically Bourdieu's approach to social class was an inspiration. Their conclusions drew on the importance of historical change to account for changes over generations in their resources and lifestyles.

There had been an overall tendency across Scandinavian sociology for qualitative methods to be confined to the margins of the discipline. For Norway it was only when women's research gained ground in the 1980s in a particular companionship with the state ministries that methodological debates came to include discussions about qualitative approaches (Holter and Kalleberg 1982).

## The Contextualist Approach: Life Course Studies in America

Bertaux and Kohli (1984) commented on the revival phase of biographical research that, 'It is certainly paradoxical that the two countries - namely the United States and Poland - that had the strongest traditions of biographical research before the war (...) have not contributed

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<sup>18</sup> In these studies Norwegian sociologists who had introduced the life course perspective in Norway (Skrede and Tornes 1983) were important inspirations for the Swedish researchers.

<sup>19</sup> In my PhD study lifelines became an important part of my empirical evidence and my chapter in Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman (1994) was based on experiences from the doctoral project in the 1980s. The discussions were also inspired by the then current discussions about the structure of narratives in biographical interviews. See Chaps. 4 and 7 for more details.

proportionately to the present revival (p. 217)'. While this observation is true for biographical studies of the qualitative kind, American sociology contributed to the revival in a very significant way in Glen Elder's (1974/1999) *Children of the Great Depression*. As stated in Chap. 2, Elder was inspired by C. Wright Mills and this work is a milestone for the revival of the life course approach that builds on the classic tradition where the intersection of history and biography has a prominent place.

There was much discussion about concepts, terminology and vocabularies during the revival period in America. Elder (1974/1999) said in the afterword to the 1999 edition of *Children of the Great Depression* that when he started out doing life course studies in the 1960s there were only the concepts of 'career' and 'life cycle', of which neither placed individuals in historical context. As life cycle is associated with the reproductive cycle of organisms common in biology, Elder found it, and the notion of 'career', of little use in the analysis of his data. The life cycle concept, he said, 'is also *insensitive* to matters of social timing and historical location' (Elder 1974/1999, p. 314). The term 'life course' was the better alternative.

The life course is age-graded through institutions and social structures, and it is embedded in relationships that constrain and support behaviour. People are located in historical settings through birth cohorts, and they are also linked across the generations through kinship. (Elder 1974/1999, p. 319)

There is and was a close affinity between concepts in life course research and demography. Concepts the two approaches share are e.g., trajectories, which refer to the chronological sequence of events in a life course (Elder 1985). The life course is thus made up of a series of trajectories in different areas of life such as education and employment. The term *transition* signifies a period of change from one *life course phase* to another, for instance, the transition from childhood to adolescence. Life course events are significant markers in life such as starting an education, finding a partner, etc. A series of events may together signify a transition.

An early and significant contribution to life course research came from demographer Norman Ryder (1965). His definition of an important concept in this research tradition, *cohort*, is: 'the aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experience the same event

within the same time interval' (1965, p. 845). He made a distinction between two subvarieties of the concept:

Historians of the arts tend to use the term 'generation' for cohort, in a rebellion against conventional historians' use of chronological sections. Demographers studying fertility time series 'away from the period-by-period format toward an appraisal of temporal variations from cohort to cohort'. (Ryder 1965, p. 845)

Thus Ryder's definition of generation was reserved for kinship structures only and in that sense differed from Karl Mannheim's, whose writings on generations from the 1920s were important in their own right but came to be essential in life course research during and after the revival period. In 'The Problem of Generations' (Mannheim 1923) he addressed historical change through the lens of generations which he considered 'collective agents of change'.<sup>20</sup>

Tamara K Hareven was an American social historian who did pioneering studies in life course research. In the late 1960s she was at Harvard University and while there participated in Erik Erikson's seminar on biography and history.

Erikson's approach dramatized for me the importance of studying lives over time and of focusing on the interaction between life history and history. Whereas Erikson concentrated on the individual life cycle, I began to search for ways to understand the interaction between individuals and the family as a collective unit, under changing historical conditions. (Hareven 2000, p. xvii)

Hareven's focus was thus different from that of Erikson's. Her essential contribution to the understanding of time and temporality in life course studies, a topic on which she was a pioneer, will be discussed in a later chapter. Like Elder, Hareven started out from a life cycle perspective, and like him she found it wanting: 'Dissatisfaction with the family-cycle approach led me in 1976 to invite Elder, who had developed the life-course approach, to collaborate with a group of historians on its

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<sup>20</sup> See Nilsen (2014) for a more detailed overview of these concepts.

application to historical analysis.’ (Hareven 2000, p. 13) and she found that this approach added a dynamic dimension in the historical study of the family. Her own definition of the life course approach was, in contrast to Elder’s, related to the family as an intermediate level between the individual and society, ‘The life course approach is concerned with the movement of individuals over their own lives and through historical time and with the relationship of family members to each other as they travel through personal and historical time.’ (Hareven 1982).

The revival in the US of the life course and biographical traditions in the form adopted from the 1970s were inspired by Elder’s study. These were mainly quantitative with some notable exceptions which included Hareven’s work on biographical approaches to the family in an historical perspective.

John A Clausen, a sociologist who did a number of studies from a life course perspective, also involving longitudinal studies, made use of biographical material (Clausen 1998). He introduced a distinction between life reviews, life stories and life histories. His research on young delinquents had started in the late 1930s. His earliest experience with the materials he called life reviews was in autobiographical accounts of young men who had been involved in delinquency and crime. ‘Their life reviews were highly subjective retrospective accounts prepared for a particular purpose’ (Clausen 1998, p. 190). He adopted this term from the work of Erik Erikson but he used the concepts in different ways from those of Erikson’s in his distinction between the spontaneous autobiographical review and the elicited accounts. The former, he said was told and written with no guidance whereas the latter involved researchers and how their study aims would give structure and direction to the review. Clausen himself preferred a combination of these two methods of collecting biographical material. In his overview of the history of this tradition he observed that William James had made use of personal accounts in a study of religious beliefs in 1906, more than a decade before Thomas and Znaniecki did their ground-breaking study. However, it is worth noting, as discussed in Chap. 2, that the women researchers and social workers associated with Hull House collected life stories and made use of human documents in their work and their research, even before James’ study cited here.

In an edited volume that gave an overview of the development of life course sociology Giele and Elder (1998)<sup>21</sup> observed that it had been difficult to find approaches that could integrate the structural qualities of societies with those of the dynamic ones. Each co-editor had in their respective ways contributed to the development of the American revival of the life course approach: Elder in his studies of the California cohorts, and Giele in her research on women where she had compared women's life courses across cohorts (Giele and Elder 1998, pp. 7–8). They suggested that fields that had particularly benefited life course perspectives in post-war American research were the social sciences as well as history and demography. Methodologically they underlined life history and longitudinal surveys. The sociology of ageing had gained from this perspective in particular (Riley 1998). Within research strategies to ageing, psychological approaches that divided the life course into phases and stages had been particularly influential. On inspiration from the life course perspective this research area developed novel approaches to the field that were less static.<sup>22</sup> The life course perspective in the USA has mainly been applied in longitudinal and cross-sectional quantitative studies. Over the years Elder himself has refined and made his definition of this concept more detailed. What he has named 'the emergent life course paradigm' (Elder 1994) has been adopted widely in American sociology and social psychology and will be addressed in a later chapter.

The pioneering qualities of the post-war American research in a life course perspective have been in what topics researchers deemed important to investigate. These included, in addition to areas such as ageing, life course transitions between phases of childhood and youth; transition to the phase of adulthood, and that of retirement. A variety of aspects of age and ageing were thus prominent themes in studies of the life course in general (Riley 1988). The work of Norwegian sociologist Gunhild Hagestad, in collaboration with established American life course

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<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that in an otherwise wide reaching and comprehensive volume on American research and perspectives on life course research, there is only one reference to C. Wright Mills in this overview, and that is for the title of his book 'The Sociological Imagination' with not much mention of its contents.

<sup>22</sup> See Chap. 4 for further discussions about the different terms associated with the varieties of disciplinary and subject approaches in this field.

researchers, were of great significance for the understanding of changing age norms for transition phases in the life course as well as aspects of ageing relating to varying historical contexts (Hagestad and Neugarten 1985; Settersten and Hagestad 1996).

The women's movement was important in American society as it was in Europe from the 1960s onwards. There were considerable contributions to the understanding of the lives of American women from a life course perspective during the revival period (Neugarten 1985; Riley 1985; Rossi 1985a). These studies had different foci compared to most European, and particularly Scandinavian studies, where the welfare state was vital for the improvement of women's lives in all age groups (Hernes 1987).<sup>23</sup> What little welfare state existed in America, was described as a positive contribution to women across the life course:

The relationship of women to the welfare state hardly needs documenting. Women with children are the overwhelming majority among the beneficiaries of the main "means-tested" income maintenance programs (...) the programs that make women a little less insecure also make them a little less powerless. The availability of benefits and services reduces the dependence of younger women with children on male breadwinners, as it reduces the dependence of older women on adult children. (Fox Piven 1985, pp. 277–278)

So whilst most, but not all, of the American studies were done from a contextualist life course approach, a good many were not as they had ambitions of finding causal relationships that could be used for predictive purposes independent of time and space. This latter point is related to the dominant position of the quantitative methods in American sociological empirical research in general, as well as in the biographical research's revival period and beyond.

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<sup>23</sup>The notion of 'state feminism' was defined as a concerted effort from state political institutions, women's movement and women's organisations toward a common goal of improving women's lives and opportunities in society (Hernes 1987).

## Summary

This chapter has discussed some important contributions to sociological research during the revival period. The selection of countries and studies has been limited to those that in some sense took the Chicago heritage into consideration and developed it further in their own contexts. Qualitative methods did again come on the sociological methods agenda in many countries during this period. Glaser and Strauss book on *Grounded Theory* and the debates on qualitative methods that emerged at this time, lay the grounds for a re-discovery of the Chicago tradition since the authors made direct references to American pragmatism, Blumer, and also to the work of Thomas and Znaniecki, as their main inspiration.

The chapter has demonstrated that the revival took on different forms and directions depending on specificities of the national contexts. In some countries, like France, the time for this tradition's re-emergence coincided with social events on a large scale. In the UK the critique of positivist approaches had links to the well-established oral history research, whilst in Germany the debates about biographical research took place in the long shadows of the Nazi period. Other research topics that emerged during this time, such as feminism and women's studies, called for alternative methods and approaches to the established ones that were founded on positivist ideals. In this way they opened the field for biographical and other qualitative research designs. As Chap. 6 shows, the methods debates that gained traction in the 1970s continued in the following decades, and they are still a force to be reckoned with in academic discussions.

During this period there were many discussions about terms and concepts and their usefulness in biographical research. Particular attention was paid to differences between static versus dynamic notions. Some of the variations in vocabularies are associated with specificities of national contexts. Ideas and approaches have developed different hues depending on the history of the countries and contexts they originated in. These are again associated with variations in methodological focus. For instance, in the USA where quantitative methods came to dominate, the types of concepts discussed were different from those in France and the UK; the generation concept has its origin Germany, whilst cohort is a term associated with American research. Such differences are also evident in approaches to terms relating to time in biographical life course studies, as the next Chapter shows.

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# 4

## Time and Temporality in Biographical Life Course Research

Time is both destiny and necessity for all human societies, even if their language does not have a separate concept for it. (Adam 1990, p. 9)

### Introduction

It is customary to equate Chronos in Greek mythology with time.<sup>1</sup> In later Greco-Roman mythology a different figure, Khronos, was the god of time and was depicted as Aion, eternity personified. Time has been a main subject for philosophy but the purpose of discussing the topic here is that time and temporal processes are at the basis of a biographical life course perspective, it is at the foundation of what life course research is about.

Conceptions of time have changed over the centuries and across cultures (Adam 2004). In the Western world Modernity is named as an

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<sup>1</sup> Graves (1992) described Cronus as the father of Zeus who in order to prevent his children to dethrone him swallowed them each year. Zeus escaped this fate and in this myth Cronus is eventually banished to the farthest west to a remote British isle and he never returned to Greece (p. 40).

epoch<sup>2</sup> when many previous concepts and practices changed as secular notions took over for ideas about a religious world order (Kumar 1995). Notions of time was said to have taken on new meanings with the advent of industrialisation and capitalism, which involved a shift from task-oriented to clock-oriented work, thus making time a means of social control of workers (Thompson 1967).

Psychologists have studied time and the human mind and come up with a number of conceptualisations of how time is experienced and approached. From these studies it has been suggested that the mind functions on a temporal framework (Adam 1990).<sup>3</sup> This is in line with Mead's theory about the self and the mind discussed earlier: both are temporal/processual and social and are thus of specific relevance. The first section of this chapter is devoted to an in-depth discussion about Mead's ideas on time and his temporal notion of the self.

Historical time is a dimension that is prominent across the chapters of this book. The discussion in this Chapter is specifically related to history as a level of temporality in its own right in biographical life course studies. The section provides examples from research that has taken upheavals and changes in contexts over time into consideration, such as studies of cohorts before and after unification in Germany. This section will also discuss examples of how the institution of the family is a middle level of temporalities that brings an added layer of time contexts to bear on analyses. Tamara Hareven's pioneering work on this is discussed as an essential analytical framework. Variations in terminologies in this research tradition will be discussed throughout the chapter in view of the temporal levels they relate to and the historical contexts they originated in.

The biographical level is divided into phases and stages that are socially and biologically defined in specific contexts. These phases are demarcated by chronological age and by social norms that vary between periods and

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<sup>2</sup>The notion of Modernity is an epochal one rather than a periodisation (Anderson 1998). Its origin is sometimes dated to the renaissance while others hold the Enlightenment, or The Age of Reason from roughly the seventeenth century, as its beginning. The topic of epochs vs. periods will be discussed in more detail in Chap. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Time forms the rhythm of everyday life. LeFebvre's (2004) theoretical approach to this important layer of time are of great significance. It is with some regret that an elaboration of this topic falls beyond the focus of this book.

places. The timing of events in the life course is related to periods of transitions between specific phases. In life course research much attention has been on the transition from youth to adulthood. A section of this chapter discusses this theme in more detail and also problematises the definition and status of the adult individual and discusses different notions of adulthood associated with gender and social class.

During the period of the revival of biographical research in Europe gendered aspects of the social world were in focus. A specific section of this chapter discusses the biographical level and how time has been of particular relevance in studies of gender differences in temporal experiences; how time is perceived and related to. Key texts on gender and time from the 1980s and 1990s are presented with reference to important traits in their contemporary periods. Closely associated with discussions of gender and time, are the temporal methodological aspects of biographical interviews. They are discussed here rather than in the chapters specifically assigned to methodology since the topics they cover overlap with temporal concerns taken up in this chapter specifically.

## **Mead's Notions of Time and the Temporal Self**

Mead's texts have been given a brief presentation in the chapter on the origin of biographical research. As stated earlier in pragmatist philosophy knowledge is not obtained by abstract thought such as in Cartesian philosophy. Nor is knowledge timeless. Knowledge is social, and is based on addressing problems that occur in specific times and places,

This location of the problem in the experience of the individual in its historical setting dates not only the problem but also the world within which that problem arises. [...]

Such worlds dated by the problems upon whose solutions they have appeared are social in the sense that they belong to the history of the human community, since reflective thought is a social undertaking and since the individual in whose experience both the problem and its solution must arise presupposes the community out of which he springs. (Mead 1938)

The social and temporal aspects of reality are underlined in this quote. In contrast to the individualism of Cartesian perspectives, pragmatism addressed the individual in her or his social setting. The importance of the historical context is that it dates both the problem and the solution arrived at in a social environment.

Mead's focus on time and temporality has been acknowledged as ground-breaking not only for studies related to biographical and life course studies, but the social sciences in general.

Barbara Adam (1990) said about Mead:

Mead's temporal theory of time (...) affects the very foundations of social theory. It goes far beyond mere scientific trimming. Taken on board, it radically alters the way social reality may be understood and theorised. (p. 38)

Perhaps a pioneering quality of Mead's texts is in their involvement not only with other social science writings but with philosophy and subjects in the natural sciences. Challenges to the mechanistic world view, and thus to 'standard' notions of time, were an important element of philosophy and physics at the turn of the twentieth century. Mead's writings on this are a conversation with the texts of his contemporaries Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Albert Einstein (1879–1955). *The Philosophy of the Present*, which was published in 1932 after Mead's death, is a collection of lectures<sup>4</sup> that he had intended to edit and revise for publication later. The questions he addressed in this volume were concerned with contemporary issues of the age; the relativity of time and the processual approach to both the social and the physical worlds.<sup>5</sup>

In another collection of his writings published posthumously, *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (1936)<sup>6</sup> a chapter discussed Bergson's ideas in relation to Whitehead. Mead was particularly

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<sup>4</sup>The first four chapters of this book were Carus Lectures as read at Berkeley for the American Philosophical Association in December 1930 (Preface to Mead 1932 by Arthur E Murphy).

<sup>5</sup>According to Murphy (in Mead 1932), Mead was engaging with the work of Bergson in relation to his own writings on relativity and emergence.

<sup>6</sup>All page references in the following paragraphs are to this work unless stated otherwise.

critical of Bergson's idea of *elan vital* as an inherent movement in nature. However, he acknowledged that Bergson's ideas represented a break with a Newtonian mechanistic world view and that his doctrine 'is one which implies that there is a process of evolution going on in nature, a process in which there is a constant creation of that which is new' (p. 295). Bergson's emphasis on that which is 'in flux' was his approach to time,

The fundamental process going on in all things Bergson said appears in what we call "time", or duration, as distinct from space. And one of the fundamental tenets of his philosophy is that this duration, this process which is going on, can never be presented adequately in spatial terms'. (pp. 296–297)

Spatial statements of time involved instants of time as discrete events with no relation to one another. To Bergson (and to Mead) reality was in the duration, where the past and the future were a flow in the present. Bergson was also in agreement with pragmatist thought that sought to bridge the mind-body divide of Cartesian philosophy. For both Mead and Bergson consciousness was temporal and processual. 'The experience of the present moment is what it is because of what took place just before it, and what is about to take place'. (p. 309). How we envisage the future is in the present: 'If the future is in the experience, it influences it (...) What we are going to do is determined by what we are doing' (p. 300).

Mead's concept of time is complex. It has particular relevance for biographical research because of his temporal and processual notion of the self. Learning to become a social being involves different types of play. When the child first learns to 'take the role of the other' it is a temporal situation: he or she is first another than self, then shifts perspective and acts as other. In the second stage of the development of the self, the 'generalised other' is integrated into a fully developed self (Mead 1977). There are two temporal components of the self, the 'I' and the 'me'. The 'I' is in the present and corresponds to Mead's notion of time where the present is the site of action, including interpretations of that which has passed; the 'me', and that which is to come, the future.

The “I” of this moment is present in the “me” of the next moment. (...) It is as we act that we are aware of ourselves. It is in the memory that the “I” is constantly present in experience. (Mead 1977, p. 229)

In Mead’s theory of time the ‘event’ is what makes a clear distinction between the past and the present. The event is always in the present. In his notion of the self the ‘act’ is the event that distinguishes the different phases of the temporal self and makes it a process rather than a static unit.

The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases. If it did not have these two phases, there could not be conscious responsibility and there would be nothing novel in experience. (Mead 1977, p. 233)

The temporal self is presented in some detail because it has bearing on the biographical approach in life course studies.

Biographical accounts, be they autobiographically written texts by an author, or based on biographical interviews between an interviewee and a researcher,<sup>7</sup> invariably involve a person’s past and her or his future, as seen from the viewpoint of the present. The contextualist life course approach also views the personal present in an historical context of time and place. The interpretations done in a personal present will bear the characteristics of the present conditions of both the person and the society people find themselves in as well as their personal experiences from the past. This topic is addressed in more detail in a later section with examples from biographical interviews with women.

## Historical and Intergenerational Time

‘Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’ (Mills (1959/1980, p. 9). Understanding biographical accounts with reference to the historical period is of the essence in this approach. The term historical period refers

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<sup>7</sup>Kohli (1981) drew a distinction between the written autobiography and the oral narrative. This specific point will be a topic in a later chapter discussing methodological questions.

to historical time in a chronological sense with reference to specific places, e.g. Greek Antiquity. In the life course vocabulary historical events is another central concept that refers to social upheavals, war, and disasters, that may impact individuals differently depending on their chronological age, placement in the family, and the size of the cohort they belong to (Riley 1988; Ryder 1965).<sup>8</sup>

Historical period has an impact on all relationships and practices. The post-war baby boomers in the West, born at the start of what Hobsbawm (1994) called the Golden Years, when Keynesian economics and regulation of markets, such as capital markets and housing markets were the norm, experienced structural social mobility,<sup>9</sup> i.e., groups in society are moved upwards on the occupational and social ladder because of changes to the structures of education and employment. During this period the patterns of transition to adulthood changed in fundamental ways compared to what had been norms in the parent generation.<sup>10</sup>

Some recent studies have investigated social relationships across three or more generations in families with a focus on care and work (Brannen et al. 2004), and intergenerational transmissions of values both material and immaterial (Nilsen and Vogt 2021), while others have paid more specific attention to social mobility (Bertaux and Thompson 1997). Common to these studies is the attention to generation as kinship, in line with Ryder's definition above, and not generations as collective units of change, as in Mannheim's approach. Intergenerational studies have the potential to transcend current compartmentalised boundaries in sociology; for example, family sociology and studies of social mobility can be considered equally crucial when studying intergenerational processes over time.

Tamara Hareven's work, discussed in earlier chapters, set the family into a temporal framework of life course research. Relationships between

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<sup>8</sup> See Chap. 3 for more detail on these concepts.

<sup>9</sup> This could also be thought of in terms of intergenerational mobility because these cohorts spent longer time in education than their parents, and entered a labour market in a time when full employment was the norm. However, the changes were more to do with structural changes than with individual motivation, hence the term structural mobility captures what happened more accurately (Roberts 1968, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Over time these changes affected women's life courses in particular, a topic that is discussed across the chapters in this book.

generations, children-parents-grandparents, form the basis of family units that are central in all known societies. These intergenerational bonds may be strong or weak, long lasting or breached early in life. This temporal level, family time, used to be central in earlier life course studies, but for a while gradually faded from view as the individual took over as the primary focus in much research, including in biographical studies. Hareven (2000) stated the importance of intergenerational transmissions in relation to historical change, 'Each generation encounters a set of historical circumstances that shape its subsequent life history and that generations transmits to the next one both the impact that historical events had on its life course and the resulting patterns of timing' (p. 155).

The life course is not viewed as a set of fixed stages that individuals move in and out of at particular ages. The concept of timing in the life course denotes the flexibilities involved in transitions. 'Timing thus designates when an event or a transition occurs in an individual's life in relation to external events, regardless of whether a transition conforms to or diverges from societal norms of timeliness' (Hareven 2000, p. 153). Hareven suggested that three characteristics of timing were important for the understanding of life course changes. These are first timing of biographical transitions; second is the synchronisation of the biographical transitions with family ones; and third is how historical forces impact on and shape transitions and their timing.<sup>11</sup>

The historical study of the life course offers an opportunity to understand the issues of synchronization of individual time, family time, and historical time. It enables one to study these interactions on the behavioural level through the timing of life transitions and on the perceptual level through individuals' own perceptions of their timing of transitions in relation to the social time clocks. (Hareven 2000, p. 152)

It is of interest to note that she emphasised the families' own time clocks, which meant that the families' traditions and needs were at the heart of their response and adjustments to wider social change. Sometimes the periodisation of families did not fit into the established historical

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<sup>11</sup> A detailed discussion of these can be found in Hareven (2000) pp. 154–157.

periodisation. The life course approach thus made feasible the study of the synchronisation of individual lives with that of the larger processes of social change. Hareven discussed how the family was an intermediary between individual timing and historical processes. Individual timing of transitions of life course phases, such as leaving the family home and finding gainful employment, could involve tensions in the family if not done in the sequence and at the times deemed appropriate by family traditions. Thus notions of timing and of timeliness vary between families within and between different societies and cultures (Hareven 2000).

Family relationships have been of interest in various disciplines and research fields beyond biographical research, not least in oral history traditions. Bertaux and Thompson (1997, 2007) for instance, emphasised the family as the primary channel of transmission of crucial practices and values such as language, land, housing, social standing, religion, aspirations and attitudes. In questions of social mobility, which has always been a key issue in sociology, the importance of the family's role is without question. In quantitative studies however, the role of the family beyond father's occupation and education, has rarely if ever, been an issue of interest (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997). Bertaux and Thompson on the other hand, in their biographical studies of this subject, found that individual social mobility was often generated by family dynamics over two or three generations, if not more. For instance, the number of children in a family affects the life chances of each child, so that those most likely to experience upward social mobility were those with few siblings. This said, family resources play a major part here, so that those with many siblings who came from high income and status families need not experience any fall in social standing over generations. For those with few resources the family size was more decisive for the outcome of social mobility relative to parents and grandparents. However, '(...) parents cannot hand down social status to their children: they can provide them with some resources, which the children may or may not appropriate for themselves and put to effective use' (Bertaux and Thompson 1997, p. 20).

In an article comparing Norwegian and UK housing transitions in the life course using an intergenerational lens (Nilsen 2020), Hareven's conceptual framework was helpful. Such transitions differed between the generations in both Britain and Norway as the historical changes that had

affected the respective housing markets were extensive. Both countries had undergone the same type of deregulation of the housing markets in the early 1980s. The UK had had a large sector of council housing in the cities, whilst Norway, a much more scarcely populated country, had had different ways of regulating the market in the post-war era, mainly by subsidised state loans to housebuilding in the small towns and the countryside, and co-op blocks of flats in the cities. The main focus in the paper was on examining and comparing how intersecting temporalities at different levels of context impacted on the timing of moving out and subsequent housing trajectories for three generations in the same families in the two countries. The findings showed that the conditions for the grandparent generations in both countries were affected by the regulation policies in the postwar era. Working class grandparents often lived in multigenerational co-residency before they had the opportunity to move into two-generation family housing. For the parent generations the educational and housing opportunities had improved in both countries and they moved out from their parents at an earlier age. They also had opportunities to buy a flat and to enter the ‘housing ladder’ before the prices peaked. The children generations’ conditions were affected by the deregulations in the 1980s that has gradually turned questions of housing into issues of assets rather than dreams of a home. One of the conclusions relating to generational differences was for the youngest generation that,

The interviews indicated that they had all found ways of living at home in an “independent” way that did not necessarily involve financial independence but the size of their parents’ home allowed them enough “private space”. Family time and biographical time were not in synchrony as their options for not living at home were limited. (Nilsen 2021, p. 491)

This article demonstrated how period specific changes that happened gradually impacted on different generations in decisive ways. The long term effects of deregulation of housing markets are more evident in the lives of the younger generations compared to their parents’. Class differences are becoming more pronounced as the young from families who do not have the means to help towards a mortgage, have to live in rented accommodation in often dubious conditions. The steep rents make it

very difficult, if not impossible, for these cohorts to save towards a mortgage in the future.

In other contexts historical changes have been more sudden and wide reaching. For instance in Germany<sup>12</sup> a number of life course and biographical studies of intergenerational relations were carried out after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Hillmert (2005) did a cohort study comparing changes in the transition to adulthood between East and West Germany over time. The dataset was from the German Life History Study and included cohorts born between 1919 and 1971. These cohorts included some who had lived through economic depression, a world war, the communist era, and the fall of the Wall. During the cold war the two Germanies had different systems of education and labour markets. The east had a standardised school system whilst in the west the system was more differentiated. In the east employment was guaranteed during communism and the post-war era was characterised by high employment also in the west up until the early 1970s when unemployment increased. The housing markets in both countries were regulated. The findings from the study suggested that the market driven changes in the west created insecurities in the transition to adulthood for cohorts born in the 1950s whereas in the east the timing of transitions to adulthood remained stable over cohorts and happened earlier in the life course than in the west. After the unification the effects for the youngest in the east created a break with patterns that had been established for the older cohorts. The author concluded,

It is obvious that, with a relative lack of deterministic norms of behaviour in modern societies, institutions have tremendous significance for shape and structure of the transition to adulthood. This is especially apparent in the divergent developments of life course patterns under the conditions of two different German states. (Hillmert 2005, p. 170)

Historical and intergenerational time and temporal frameworks impact on individuals and have consequences for perceptions and experiences at

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<sup>12</sup>A number of quantitative longitudinal studies have been done in Germany, on how intergenerational transmissions are related to wider patterns of social inequality (e.g., Blossfeld et al. 2011).

the biographical level. In biographical life course research this level is divided into phases and stages that are socially and biologically defined in specific contexts.

## Biographical Time and Life Course Phases

Chronological age is important in society for many reasons. Ryder (1965) stated legislation as one, which is still relevant e.g. getting a driving licence, the right to vote etc. The social element of age is related to age specific norms for timing of events in the life course, for instance education, employment, cohabitation etc. The norms for timing between phases do not only vary between societies but also across historical periods within the same society. The naming and identifying of specific life course phases are a matter of historical, social and cultural variation. However, not only phases in themselves are flexible over time, so also are terminologies and vocabularies in discussions about these in sociology and beyond. The terminology related to individual level data from qualitative approaches has changed considerably from the turn of the twentieth century to the notions that are common in contemporary research. In Thomas and Znaniecki's work the vocabulary was that of personal documents as data, be they autobiographical writings such as diaries and letters, or interviews. In the revival period the naming of these empirical sources were discussed in detailed ways, and distinctions between various types of material were drawn.<sup>13</sup>

It has become common to use the terms life story and biography interchangeably in today's studies. Martin Kohli's (1981) definition of biography is still relevant: 'The mode by which the individual represents those aspects of his past which are relevant to the present situation, i.e., relevant in terms of the (future oriented) intentions by which he guides his present actions (Kohli 1981 p. 65). Inspired by Kohli and by Mead's notion

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<sup>13</sup> Examples of this is distinctions between the life story told by an individual about her or his own life to a researcher, contrasted with the autobiography which is written by a person about his or her own life. When focussed on parts of the life they are often called topical biographies (Plummer 1983) or topical autobiographies if penned by the person herself. See also Chap. 3 for national variations in vocabulary and terminology.

of the temporal self, I have defined biography as, 'a story told and interpreted in the present, about events and experiences in the past, and expectations for the future' (Nilsen 1996/2008 p.83).

Transitions in the individual life course, especially the transition to adulthood, have been subjects of debate in much research, within and beyond life course studies (Brannen et al. 2018; Eliason et al. 2015; Mortimer and Moen 2016; Nilsen et al. 2002; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016). The different phases or stages in life have also been problematised in their own right. It has become customary to make three broad distinctions between life course phases: childhood, youth, and adulthood.<sup>14</sup> Hareven (1978) stated that particular age groups become problematised as an issue depending on wider social and economic circumstances. Whilst childhood as a phase had been discussed for more than a century, youth was only singled out as a specific phase early in the twentieth century in Hall's (1904) book *Adolescence*. This was the first instance when youth was identified and discussed as distinct from other life course phases (Jordan 1978). In the last century, and especially after WWII, young people were singled out for special attention in sociology. This was in part due to the large post-war birth cohorts and the expansion of the system of education and a booming labour market in the three decades that followed. The focus on youth in sociological research generally, and in life course research particularly, has only deepened and become more extensive since the 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

Adulthood is considered the longest of life course phases but the social boundaries of this phase are blurred (Nilsen 2021; Pilcher 2012). It is the most taken for granted of the three defined phases and has hence not had any specific definition (Pilcher 2012). It has generally been considered to be a phase in life defined by age but also related to aspects that are 'socially and culturally determined' (Hareven 1976, p. 14) and it marked 'the mature individual' who is autonomous and independent from the family of origin (Erikson 1978). Chronological age defines when a person is considered an adult in terms of the law, with variation in age norms

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<sup>14</sup>There have been many debates about these distinctions, and a focus on how the length and contents of these have changed over the decades.

<sup>15</sup>More discussion about this life course phase is found in Chap. 5.

between countries and across historical time (Buchman and Kriesi 2011; Jones 2009). Although markers of adulthood change over different periods they have traditionally involved a series of transition events that include moving out of the parental household, getting an education, finding gainful employment, being able to support oneself financially, finding a partner and starting a family (Elder 1985). Current research has suggested that this transition can no longer be regarded as a series of discrete events in a linear sequence, especially as structural changes demand a longer time in education in preparation for gainful employment (Settersten 2004; Benson and Furstenberg 2007; Jones 2009). Ideas about adulthood are connected to overarching ideals in a given society; what values and practices are held in regard and what aims are deemed worthy of striving for, for individuals and for society at large (Nilsen 2021).

When and how to be an adult has thus been an important, but implicit, question in research. There is an association between this life course status and notions of agency. Financial independence from the family of origin has been thought of as one of the most important markers of adulthood. The very notion of independence carries with it some connotations. It is connected to individuals and individuality, and it is associated with agency and can have many meanings: freedom from coercion; detachment from relationships, or as individualistic self-sufficiency (Friedman 2003). The related concepts of agency and autonomy are both at the outset gender neutral but they are associated more with men's lives than with women's, and with white, upper middle class, Western men in particular over other men and women (Evans 2013). As a contrast to the concept of autonomy with all its ambiguous connotations, feminist writers launched the term 'relational autonomy' (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000).<sup>16</sup>

Empirical studies have demonstrated the diversity in interviewees' interpretations of notions of adulthood. The variations are suggested to be systematic with reference to gender, class and historical periods. In analyses of interviews with three generation Norwegian families I made a comparison across generations, along these dimensions in interviewees'

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<sup>16</sup>In early feminist writings the concept of 'rationality of caring' (Waerness 1984) drew on the same body of thought.

perceptions of adulthood (Nilsen 2021). Among the findings were class and gender based contrasts that highlighted variations in notions of this life course phase and the associated transition patterns in trajectories. Relationality and independence were used as sensitising concepts in the analysis and demonstrated how ideals of adulthood expressed in interviews changed over time in the life course as both general societal ideals and personal experiences varied with circumstances. For instance gendered norms that felt confining for the grandmothers had all but disappeared in contemporary society and did not affect the granddaughter generations to a similar extent. Autonomy and freedom in important dimensions of life had become taken-for-granted for the younger generations of women. For the older generation of men there were class differences in what was considered to be an adult man. Early financial independence from family was an ideal. They associated being an adult man with what type of support they could provide for their families since the breadwinner ideology was strong in this age group (born before WWII). I named the types of issues that were associated with being an adult man as follows; among men of working class background 'everyday bread and butter issues' were central. Amongst upper middle class men it was a matter of 'longer term financial support'. An apparent paradox was in the accounts of the younger generation of the middle class young of either gender. In spite of having received generous transfers of financial and other forms of support from parents and grandparents, they still insisted on ideals and personal experiences of adulthood as being self-sufficient and independent of parental resources.

Two sides of context may help to explain this. Bertaux and Thompson (1997) pointed out that when personal resources and structural forces support one another, the tendency is for the structural forces to take on an 'invisible' quality. The 'structural forces' in this instance in part referred to the privileged background that had become a taken-for-granted aspect of life. Another part of the structural forces that underpinned this were overall values and ideals in society; in Norway as in most Northern European countries ideas of independence are regarded as positive while dependence is considered negative and even shameful. Thus, the ideological backcloth of this historical period across the Northwestern hemisphere encouraged ideals of independence and self-sufficiency (Sennett

2003). The analyses indicated that from this viewpoint, intergenerational transfers become part of the 'personal resources' that are supported by a structural-ideological climate of independent self-sufficiency, thus intergenerational support can serve to maintain taken-for-granted ideals of independence in notions of adulthood. Being in need of support in the sense of being poor however, was a source of shame (Shildrick and MacDonald 2013). Ideas of independence 'by necessity' in notions of adulthood in the working class became a matter of pride in circumstances where intergenerational support was not an option and independence from welfare state benefits were for many related to personal dignity.

The biographical development over the life course thus involves going through a series of phases and stages. As the studies cited indicate, these are structurally defined and temporally framed depending on specific contexts. The gendered aspects of life course phases and biographical timing have been specific fields of study. The next section therefore provides an overview over how this topic has been approached in feminist research in the near past.

## Gender and Time in Early Feminist Studies

The focus in second wave feminism was on women's conditions in the public and private domains, with the sphere of production and reproduction, and in paid and unpaid work. Adam (1989) argued that feminist theory could benefit from including temporal dimensions into analytical concepts and framework. Temporalities of women's lives were seen as different from men's both in the everyday and in life course terms, and did not correspond to the individual, linear, chronological time that was considered the standard way of thinking about time in Western culture (Adam 1989; Davies 1990). According to Davies (1990) in an overview of life and work history analyses about women, time itself was not sufficiently problematised, 'Time is treated generally as historical time, chronological time or in terms of individual social trajectories all of which are based on one particular understanding of time' (p. 581). Based on findings from biographical interviews with women about their everyday lives, she maintained that relational time was often left out of the picture and

thus important parts of women's lives were not on the research agenda. She drew upon the concept of 'rationality of caring' from Norwegian sociologist Kari Wærness (1984), in particular, to pinpoint how a notion of relational time could help explore how women's care for others affected the temporality that framed women's lives at all levels. Davies (1990) suggested that the notion of 'process time' could help capture other forms of time that are invisible because of the dominant concepts of time and temporality in our societies. This term was not defined in contrast to linear/clock time, but as an important additional temporality that would capture other dimensions of social life, particularly in women's lives. 'Process time seems to be particularly related to caring work, emotional work, maintenance work, solidary labour, and creativity; that is, to much of the work that fills women's lives.', however, 'it is possible that the term *embodied time* is more applicable.' (Davies 1990, p. 583).

Glucksmann (1998) aimed to explore the potentialities of temporality as a concept for gaining a deeper understanding of differences between and within genders in relation to work particularly. She concluded that the public-private divide so important in analyses of gender, were actually distinguished by their different relations to time and the different temporalities organising both. Whereas this split had previously been thought of in spatial terms such as between home and work, Glucksmann emphasised temporality as an equally important dimension to take into consideration. Empirically she did an oral history study on women doing casual work and weaving during the inter-war years in Lancashire. Like Davies (1990) she related these differences to the division of labour between men and women in the household as well in society at large.

A number of other studies on gender and time were done in this period, many inspired by Davies' work. Leccardi and Rampazi (1993) focussed on gendered temporalities from longitudinal data on men and women. Their analysis concentrated on temporal experiences of the past as well as thoughts about future lives. They found gender differences described in similar terms as those in Davies (1990) research. Writing in the same period, Jurczyk (1998) was inspired by Davies' concept of 'masculine time' as a dominant form of time in society. She launched a similar notion of 'feminine' time as a 'particular construction of women's time' (p. 287).

Another strand of research in the late 1990s focussed on women's thoughts about the future with reference to their work as primary care takers in families, hence the tension between work, occupations and family was a common theoretical backcloth during this period. Oechsle and Geissler (2003) interviewed young, childless, German women in the late 1980s about their future plans. Their study adopted a life course perspective in the work-life-balance tradition rather than referring to the literature on women and time. They concluded that conflicting demands from the temporal structures of the occupational sector and family commitments affected variations in life course planning. From a similar theoretical approach McLeod and Yates (1998) did a longitudinal study of secondary school pupils in Australia in the 1990s. They concluded that girls had high ambitions but that these were thought to perhaps come into conflict with demands from caring responsibilities.

The studies above were carried out in a period when much focus was on gender specific, and particularly women specific, orientations to time based on the gender division of labour and women as primary caretakers in families. The examples show varieties of how gender and temporalities were approached in the late 1980s and the 1990s. There are a whole range of other studies from similar perspectives on this topic that could well merit mention but can for space reasons not be included here.<sup>17</sup>

## Gendered Temporal Narratives

We not only live life in time, we also talk about it within temporal frameworks. With specific relevance for biographical research are the discussions in the late 1980s about temporal aspects of biographical accounts. These were discussed with reference to the term 'narrative', and questions about gender specific narratives were addressed (Nilsen 1996; Riessman 1991).

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<sup>17</sup> Interested readers may get inspiration for further readings from this period in these writings' lists of references.

The origin of the term narrative is in literary theory and linguistics.<sup>18</sup> Mishler's (1991) review of narrative analysis discussed a classic text by Labov and Waletzky (1967, cited in Mishler 1991). They defined a narrative as a 'distinctive type of "recapitulation" of experience that preserves the temporal ordering of events in the real world' (Mishler 1991, p. 83). It is however, not straightforward to define the term precisely and for all purposes, hence many definitions are currently in use depending on what is in focus. Researchers such as Polkinghorne (1988) and Riessman (2008) who both have discussed the topic for decades, say the term may be loosely used synonymously with 'story'.

Temporality is an important element of narrative.

The temporality of human experience is punctuated not only according to one's own life (for example one's fiftieth birthday) but also according to one's place within the long-time-spans of history and social evolution (e.g. the 1980s). (Polkinghorne 1988, p. 126)

This observation corresponds with many of the insights from pragmatist thought in general, and from the contextualist life course approach in particular. In biographical research the term narrative spread quickly and was used in a variety of ways.<sup>19</sup> One of the most prominent researchers in the field of narrative analysis, Catherine K. Riessman, was surprised and somewhat sceptical by the term's widespread use,

More than ten years ago, I began to be uneasy about what I called the tyranny of narrative, and the concern has only increased. It is not appropriate to police language, but specificity has been lost with popularization. All talk and text is not narrative. (Riessman 2008, p. 5)

The temporal element in a narrative approach has appealed to researchers when doing analysis of biographical accounts. But it seems wise to heed

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<sup>18</sup>Vladimir Propp's writings on narrative structure from the late 1920s in the Soviet Union where he used old Russian folk tales as his empirical material, is said to be an important origin of narrative theory (Mishler 1991).

<sup>19</sup>The approach became very popular from the 1980s onwards and was part of the 'linguistic turn' that will be discussed in a later chapter.

Riessman's words and be specific about the use of terms and vocabularies whatever they are. Her (1991) studies were early examples of the usefulness of this approach to identify how gendered temporalities and narrative styles were related. A chronological narrative style was long thought to structure all biographical renderings. This notion was inspired by the classic novel focussing on the development of a single individual<sup>20</sup> and the narrative style is associated with Modernity in the industrialised Western world (Polkinghorne 1988). In other cultures styles of narrating are related to other forms of approaching time (Okely 1992), e.g. among the Hopi Indians (Whorf 1956).

The biography as a genre in literature was associated with Western, white, upper middle-class men (Stanley 1992). Some studies in the 1980s and 1990s suggested that one variety of narrative styles among women had more in common with diaries than with standard autobiographies (Okely 1992). But research also identified variations within gender, between women. Riessman (1991) found different narrative styles between Anglo-American women and those of Hispanic origin. Whereas the former used a chronological narrative style, the Hispanic women had an episodic organisation of their narrative. She observed how this could affect interviewers' understanding of the story told:

The lack of shared norms about how a narrative should be organised, coupled with unfamiliar cultural themes in the content of the narrative itself, created barriers to understanding between the Anglo interviewer and the Puerto Rican narrator. (Riessman 1991, p. 217)

In this period, the late 1980s, I did a mixed-methods life course study of three cohorts of teachers and engineers for my PhD. Questionnaires were sent to three cohorts of graduates from colleges of the respective educations, and I did 44 biographical interviews with women from the total questionnaire sample of men and women (Nilsen 1992). Three years later I received a Research Council grant that made reinterviewing of a subsample of these women feasible. The original purpose for this follow-up

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* published in 1749 is said to be the first novel in what is known as the classic genre, focusing on one individual's development over the life course.

study was not methodological but was meant to focus on how their occupational careers in the years since the first interview had developed. However, when I started reinterviewing I realised that there were methodological aspects I had not made part of the research question for this specific study. I ended up exploring what I called shifts in 'present problem focus', 'The way someone understands and interprets can be seen as a result of a point of view which is grounded in her present' (Nilsen 1996, p. 20).<sup>21</sup>

This way of thinking about biographical interviews was not common at the time. What was in focus then was narrative style more than notions of time as such. Since I had interviewed the same women at different points in time the 'present problem focus' became a topic of interest when I compared interviews done five years apart. It was not that the core elements in their stories had changed, it was rather that whatever was in focus in their personal lives in the present of reinterviewing, became a filter through which the past and the future were recounted.<sup>22</sup> In the two cases presented in the article their present foci had changed considerably in the period, which was really not that long, between the interviews. For Grete, a 52 year old school teacher, her professional achievements were at the forefront of her concerns during the first interview. This was a lens through which she interpreted her past and how she thought about the future. At the second interview her husband, who was older than her, was retiring and she thought this might bring challenges to their marriage and their everyday life, since she would continue working. This was a worry that affected her thoughts about both past and future.

The other interviewee, a young engineer I named Vigdis, had come out as a lesbian since the first interview. She had suppressed this aspect in her life earlier and had been embarrassed of even letting herself think of

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<sup>21</sup>To my embarrassment I must admit that in spite of having given a course for Master students on Mead's thoughts a few years prior to writing the article in question, and being clearly inspired by his notions of time in my analysis, I made no reference to it! I do not know the reasons for this omission but believe it may be due to my younger self's somewhat narrow interpretation of what *feminist* temporalities and biographies were about and what texts could be relevant references.

<sup>22</sup>In the article I also discussed the element of the interview context and the importance of the interviewer for interviewees' feelings of being able to tell their story in what was for them a narrative style they felt comfortable with. This point will not be elaborated on here since time is the primary focus.

the possibility of being attracted to women. When she finally came out she was surprised about how well her family and friends greeted these news. In her mind this experience was so profound that her whole past had to be re-interpreted and the way she envisaged the future was very different from her first interview.

The two accounts are examples of how Mead's ideas about the temporal and processual self is a concept with exceptional analytic strength when used in analyses of biographical accounts. However, the processual aspects are easy to overlook in material based on only one round of interviews with the same persons. It was only in the second interview some years later that this element emerged in my analysis.

A line of discussion in this article related itself to a then prominent topic associated with narratives in biographical and autobiographical styles, the notion of 'epiphany'<sup>23</sup> which had to do with a fundamental 'turning point' in the direction of life. It involves life shattering experience that can alter the course of a life, or give radically different meanings to, and interpretations of, past experiences and expectations for future life. In the literature interviewees who have experienced such turning points in their lives are thought to render biographical accounts that are clearly structured around the epiphany and hence 'better' biographies because it gives the story a clear narrative structure around a plot (Mishler 1991). Few biographical interviewees will have had these type of turning points in their lives. In the two examples cited above, Vigdis realising she had a different sexual orientation to what she had let herself believe earlier, is an example of an epiphany and a turning point. But those who do not experience such life changing events still have a life story to tell. Grete's husband's retirement would affect her present and future, but this phase is among the expected events in a life course,

Yet Grete's story is just as important and significant, and can shed light not only on her personal experiences and interpretations of these, but also transcends the personal level. Both accounts thus become examples of 'private troubles' that are also related to 'public issues' (Mills 1980). (Nilsen 1996, p. 26)

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<sup>23</sup>The concept is religious in origin and is related to Christianity and often to the disciple Paul's epiphany on the road to Damascus (Mishler 1991).

Looking back on this article nearly 30 years on, I can see all the tense discussions about gender and about methods of that period present between the lines. This was a challenging time to do biographical research, especially if the focus was on women. Suffice here to say that the attention to narratives in biographical accounts that became important in these years were helpful for the development of the field. They opened up wider opportunities to relate biography to time and the temporal self in Mead's theoretical writings.

## Summary

This chapter has covered a lot of ground in its focus on the variety of ways that time and temporality are essential in biographical life course research. It started out with a brief overview of how time as a concept has varied in historical and cultural contexts and how these have been used to define and discuss the order of societal events and their relevance for human societies. Terminological shifts in the vocabularies of biographical life course research have taken place over the more than hundred years since it was launched. The various concepts were discussed in relation to the temporal levels they are related to.

Mead's writings on time and the temporal self have been discussed with reference to their significance for the biographical life course approach and the development of this in various periods. His pragmatist views on knowledge and the social world in general were inspirations for Mills' thoughts on the biography-history dynamic. Historical time and the impact of historical events on both topics of research and in people's everyday lives have been addressed in a separate section. Braided into discussions in this section was the focus on the level of family and intergenerational time. Attention has been given to how sudden or gradual social change are experienced and acted upon by families and how events have affected intergenerational relations over long periods of time. The writings of oral historians such as Tamara Hareven in the US and Paul Thompson in the UK in collaboration with sociologist Daniel Bertaux in France, have been discussed as examples of such processes. More recent European and Scandinavian studies that I have been involved in, were also presented. Together these studies show how a focus on intertwined temporalities is helpful for analysing how social processes on many levels are entangled in temporal frameworks.

The biographical level is for analytical reasons divided into phases and stages that are socially and biologically defined in specific cultural and historical contexts. Life course phases have been discussed with reference to their varying age specificity in diverse societies and historical times. Likewise, the timing of events and transitions in the life course have been examined with particular attention to the phase of adulthood, and the many and varied notions associated with this phase depending on gender and social class.

Gendered aspects of the life course have been in focus since the revival period. A section of this chapter has therefore presented debates about time and temporalities as these were problematised in gender studies that were prominent during the early period of the revived biographical research. From the 1990s onwards there has been an increased focus on the temporal aspects of narrative structures in biographical accounts. This topic, whilst it could be regarded as a purely methodological one, has been discussed in this chapter foregrounding the temporal sides of debates around the themes of interviews and narratives. In Chap. 6 aspects of these discussions will be revisited within a methodological framework.

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# 5

## The Future as a Topic in Biographical Life Course Approaches

The continuance or disappearance of that which arises is the present passing into the future. (Mead 1932/2002, p. 53)

### Introduction

In Chap. 4 time different levels of temporality related to biographical life course research were in focus. In spite of some overlap with the former chapter the focus here is on the importance of a biographical approach to studies about the future. This approach is particularly relevant for capturing the connection between temporal levels as it provides insights into how changes at the structural level, be they environmental problems such as climate change or credit crises in the present, are woven into and become topics in individual biographical accounts. The chapter provides examples from a variety of contexts and approaches.

From an historical point of view the idea that the future could be foretold and anticipated, is novel. The idea that humans, not deities, were in command of their own fate was important for how the future was imagined; not as something that was ordained by religion, but by directions of

development decided by and acted upon by human agency. Thus originated the idea of Progress—that societies evolve towards an ever more developed state,<sup>1</sup> and that history is a tale of a linear temporal development of the social world (Kumar 1995).

In empirical research the future as a topic has been on and off the agenda over the years. Following Mead's thoughts on time, the present is the location of events that decide what aspects of it are brought into a focus on thoughts about the future. Confining the discussion to biographical life course research the topics that are found of interest to relate to in how the future is envisaged, are always grounded in a present situation in any given society.

Barbara Adam (1990) observed that studies about the future were often related to social planning and clock time was the main temporal aspect drawn into discussions. The studies she referred to were done in the period from the 1970s until the mid-1980s (Adam 1990, pp. 96–97) and although not stated directly it is clear that issues relating to specific periods and places impact on what aspects of the future are brought into research questions. It is therefore of interest to tie the studies discussed in this chapter to the historical periods they originated in. The chapter thus starts with a wide sweeping overview of some important trends over historical periods, including ideas that have been prominent in sociological research. In studies involving thoughts about the future at a societal level environmental concerns have been of importance. A section of this chapter therefore discusses such themes. Young people's thoughts about their future life is a topic that has been covered in many studies. In addition to a general discussion about this issue, the chapter introduces social class as a specific theme in addition to presenting a gender sensitive approach throughout.

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<sup>1</sup>This mechanistic notion of time as linear and development in terms of stages, are found in the writings of Darwin and Spencer in the nineteenth century (Kumar 1995).

## The Future Across Historical Time

In the 1990s discussions about time and temporalities implied that there was a fundamental shift in time perceptions happening during the period leading up to the new millennium. Many studies were theoretical and contrasted the future with the historical development of the twentieth century, a period historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994) named *The Age of Extremes*. The social and economic changes during an age of stability and economic growth in the Western world between 1945 and the mid-1970s, saw the establishing of welfare states and increased social mobility as systems of education were expanded and higher education became accessible to more students from non-academic backgrounds. The large baby boomer cohorts born in the immediate aftermath of the second world war became the first to experience a ‘democratisation of youth’—more young people stayed in education for longer, access to contraceptives became important for women to take control of their own reproduction. The women’s movement became a force for change, especially in the North-Western part of Europe<sup>2</sup> and North America. After the mid-70s Keynesian economics gradually lost ground to a deregulation of the economy in most countries. This marked the end of what Hobsbawm called the *Golden Age* and affected the welfare states, the financial, and housing markets and contributed to increased social and economic inequality within and between the world’s nation states (Stiglitz 2012). The Wall fell and an intended globalised division of labour moved manufacturing jobs from the industrialised West to Eastern European and Asian countries in order to cut costs that included both worker’s wages and costs for covering demands put on production units by national worker protection legislations.<sup>3</sup> Many industrial communities in the Western countries were left behind as workplaces were taken away, for instance in the UK (MacDonald and Shildrick 2018).

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<sup>2</sup>The Scandinavian countries were pioneers of women friendly policies in their welfare states (Hernes 1987; Nilsen et al. 2012; Wærness 1978).

<sup>3</sup>The ‘low cost countries’ were low cost for many reasons. Among these were extremely low wages, little in the way of worker protection legislation so in many contexts factories were in reality sweatshops.

In the decade leading up to the turn of the millennium there was much focus on the individual in social research and less so on the structural side of matters. Such perspectives could be thought to be associated with an increase in focussing on the uncertainty of the future. Lack of attention to the structural level could exacerbate uncertainties in people's lives as the biography-history dynamic was no longer part of debates. If people are led to believe that life is an individual endeavour where structural factors have no relevance, the future will be regarded by the same standards (Brannen and Nilsen 2005).

German life course researcher Karl-Ulrich Mayer (2004) commented on the situation where external structural forces were seemingly deemed obsolete in discussions about life course and biography,

Sociologists have newly celebrated the significance of human agency (...) and the individualisation of life decisions and life styles in patchwork biographies (...). Fewer daily working hours, coupled with considerable disposable income, open up a variety of self-chosen milieus and habitus. [Comparisons to pre-World War II] seem to echo pictures of an old past. If at all, it appears as if it is the lack of limits of options, the unlimited flexibilization and pluralisation that pose the post-modern condition. Under such premises it seems almost odd to raise the question of how life courses are shaped by forces external to the individual person, how historical conditions, the good or bad fortunes of national citizenship or institutional arrangements built the tracks that individual trajectories are bound to follow'. (pp. 161–162)

The focus on the individual during this period at the end of the Cold War coincided with a time when major Western powers, the UK and the USA in particular, had governments that strongly backed 'individual enterprise', deregulation of finance and so-called neo-liberal policies. Fukuyama's well known paper 'The End of History?' published in 1989, the same year the Wall fell, added to the voices that together said something about the 'zeitgeist' and of the beliefs popular at the time.

This snapshot of conditions in the second half of the twentieth century is an important backcloth for understanding the types of perspectives and approaches on studies about the future that were carried out in

biographical and other sociological fields. In much of this research time itself as well as temporal orientations were said to have changed significantly over the latter half of the century.

David Harvey (1990) contrasted contemporary society to earlier periods in history with a focus on the changes in capitalism, especially with reference to transportation and communication that had affected the spatial and temporal aspects of life. His concept the time-space compression was central in his theoretical ideas about the changed relationship between time and space that had occurred in the twentieth century. Others focussed on the changes in meaning attached to the future. Since the future was actually 'present in the present', the future was humanly constructed in the present (Adam 1990). Notions such as 'the extended present' (Nowotny 1994), where the future has ceased to exist as a temporal dimension in its own right because of an 'overload' of choices in the present' that determines the future, were widely discussed (Adam 1995). The future was however also associated with 'risks' and 'uncertainties' (Bauman 1998a, b; Beck 1992; Giddens 1994).

Zygmunt Bauman (1998a) observed that not all groups of people were equally able to manage risk and to feel in control of their lives in the present, much less in the future. Access to space-time resources was shaped and differentiated by relationship to the labour market. As welfare states were cut back, access to wage work, or lack of such access, became markers of qualitatively different types of resources. Those in the 'first world'—the world of work—live *in time*, albeit they feel constantly short of it. For them space is not an issue because it can be transcended as they wish, they can go anywhere they want to. Those in the 'second world', the world without work, are constrained by the space they inhabit and have an excess of *time* (Bauman 1998a, pp. 88–89). In the literature the insecurities in people's lives during this period were thought to impact on how the future was imagined. For those with access to resources insecurity was not a main topic. For the many with little or no access to the resources needed to feel in control of their lives and of their future, uncertainty and insecurity remained a fact of life. Bauman (1998b) made a distinction between the 'tourists' and the 'vagabonds'. The former could travel and change location as they liked since they were inhabitants of the 'first world' and in command of their resources. 'Vagabonds' of the

‘second world’ on the other hand, were expected to drift to places where work opportunities were available. In contrast to tourists, they were not in control of their own time or had resources to choose location according to personal preferences.

On a more general level environmental problems of the long-term future were high on the agenda at this time. Adam (1995) said of these that they had ‘the effect of widening the gaps between the time-scale of the problem, the time-span of concern and the horizon for action’ (p. 132).<sup>4</sup>

Empirically in biographical research the future has often been the topic in studies of young people and their ideas about their future lives. In the last decade of the twentieth century such studies were particularly prevalent. There are probably many reasons for this but historical events and the general ‘zeitgeist’ of belief in the single individual and ‘it’s all up to you alone’ that added to apprehension in the face of social and economic changes and the new millennium, could be important factors to take into consideration.

## Thoughts About the Future and Wider Societal Issues

Thus period specific conditions are not only of importance for types of topics focussed on in theoretical writings,<sup>5</sup> they also impact on how people envisage, or imagine, the future, both in relation to their own lives and that of society as whole. Concerns about the natural environment, recently with specific focus on climate change, are not new to the social sciences. In studies of time Adam (1990, 1995) has been a pioneer in theoretical ideas on the subject, ‘Environmental change is one aspect of

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<sup>4</sup>Adam and Groves (2007) presented a novel philosophical framework for studies about the future where environmental concerns were prominent.

<sup>5</sup>An example of this is Adkins et al.’s (2023) article on recent changes in temporal features of capitalism where assets have taken over from commodities: ‘The asset economy actively structures, distributes and differentiates time, setting asset-owners on pathways to futures filled with the prospect of capital gains, further investments and intergenerational transfers of wealth, while leaving non-asset-holders to tread water in a precarious and seemingly never-ending now’ (Adkins et al. 2023, p. 360). This argument bear resemblance to those of Bauman (1998a, b) cited above.

globalisation that is difficult to ignore. It affects people's health and enforces changes in routine daily actions' (Adam 1995, p. 125). These concerns affect all levels of time and temporalities, thoughts about the future not least.

In the mid-1990s a small grant gave me the opportunity to interview two cohorts of men and women about their thoughts of their future lives. The overarching research questions were related to if and how environmental topics were thought about in relation to the future at an individual level. The interviews followed a biographical design and topics included all aspects of future life; education, employment and family. Thoughts about the distant future were approached in questions about how they envisaged life would be like for their children. Theoretically a grounded approach opened up an opportunity to allow concepts to emerge from the data. I found that ordinary, everyday terms such as dreams, hopes and plans were helpful for identifying temporal horizons in young people's thoughts about future life (Nilsen 1999). Dreams were defined as thoughts about the future that belonged in a timeless and spaceless realm; 'one day' of the dream had similarities to fairy tales 'once upon a time'. Hopes were more tangible in the sense that they were seen as belonging in the dimension of what was conceivable in that they had time and space associations. The most concrete of these terms is a plan. It has a set time horizon and a space or place association, and there is an element of control involved. In a sense a plan is a short-term projection of the present into the immediate future. 'Where the feeling of control ends and uncertainty begins, hoping takes over for planning' (Nilsen 1999, p. 180).

The young people's thoughts about the environment, which in the mid-1990s included a number of issues such as hazards from new technologies, including GMO and nuclear technology, depletion of the ozone layer etc. came up in the interviews. A topic which has since come to dominate the discussion of such issues, global warming, was at that time considered only one of many future threats for humanity. In the analysis these were conceptualised following Beck's (1992) distinction between 'risks' and 'threats' which were important notions in discussions about

topics related to environmental issues at the time. Risks<sup>6</sup> were thought of as events where some form of predictability and insurance against bad outcomes were possible (Beck 1992).<sup>7</sup> Threats on the other hand referred to phenomena that were beyond the realm of prediction and occurred outside the boundaries of linear time. The non-linear quality affected the observable cause-effect relationship; the distance between cause and effect in temporal and spatial terms became too vast to grasp intuitively, in contrast to those associated with risk-like events.

Because of the blurring of the causal relationship involved threat-like events seemed difficult to relate to within a biographical temporal framework, thinking about the long-term future in connection with threatening events that in and of their nature were beyond the temporal boundaries of everyday life, was challenging for the interviewees in my study. When the distance in time and space between cause and effect became too extended, the causal relationship between them became difficult to comprehend. In the article I used the concepts of 'pollution' and 'environmental threat' as examples to illustrate this point. Pollution from car fumes is immediately observable for the senses. The relationship between cause and effect, between many cars and high degree of pollution, was easy to spot since both occurred within the same space-time scope. In the article I referred to these in Beck's concept of 'risk'. When effects of a cause happened long after the event that caused it, the phenomenon sorted under Beck's concept of 'threats',

(...) phenomena sorting in the risk category are perceived by people as more concrete and understandable, within the limits of their biographical time horizon and location in space. The outcome of events relating to threats are more difficult to imagine, because of their being seen as too distant and abstract to comprehend. (Nilsen 1999, p. 189)

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<sup>6</sup>The term 'risk' can have many meanings. In Richard Sennett's analyses he drew on theories of probability calculation, and the 'regression to the mean' in any set of random events, meaning that any previous event has no impact on future events; all events are isolated, one cannot predict the outcome of one event from any previous event (Sennett 1998).

<sup>7</sup>Beck (1992) related the concept of insurance with taking control over the future in the sense that it is about controlling the outcome of events that have not yet taken place. It involves calculating the probability (the risk) of certain events happening at some future point in time.

The long-term future in itself re-emerged as a topic in studies after the millennium, but this time not only in relation to environmental issues. Carmen Leccardi (2005) addressed identity aspects of temporal elements of biographical construction in a study comparing accounts of young people in the 1980s and the early 2000s. Of particular interest was the notion of temporal acceleration, that originated in Harvey's (1990) writings, as well as notions of fragmentation, which has become prominent in studies using cultural approaches on time. In Australian youth research the future has been a prominent topic. An example was Julia Cook (2015) who did interviews with Australian young people about their thoughts about the long-term future. She found that a certain strand of pessimism for the long-term was counterbalanced by a more optimistic and hopeful attitude towards the short-term. On topics beyond the personal Cook found that positive attitudes to technological progress were seen as contributing to a sense of hope for the future of humanity.

A vast number of studies have been done about thoughts about the future in relation to environmental issues. However, the few referred here are a small selection of those with a biographical research design.

## Young People's Thoughts About Personal Futures

The biography-history dynamic, so essential for a contextualist life course approach, is highlighted in cross-national studies. When people's lives in one country is compared to similar groups of people in a different national context, that which is taken for granted in life becomes visible. In the late 1990 I joined a group of European colleagues in a study of young people's thoughts about future work and family (Brannen et al. 2002).<sup>8</sup> In an article based on Norwegian and UK data from the project, Julia Brannen and I published an article about young people's thoughts about the future (Brannen and Nilsen

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<sup>8</sup>The co-edited volume includes chapters from all the countries involved in the study. The main report was called *Futures on Hold*, countries included, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

2002). Our analysis presented three main models for young people's thoughts. These were all associated with differences related to gender and social class. Our typologies were in contrast to theoretical ideas at the time that maintained that as the life course had become de-standardised, social class and gender were more or less obsolete in social analysis as 'the choice biography' had taken over for the 'standard biography' (Beck 1992; Beck-Gernsheim 1996; Giddens 1991).

The data from the project included both focus groups and individual interviews. In the article we analysed focus groups with men and women separately, born in the early to mid-1970s. We identified three types of approach to the future among the interviewees, depending on their education and the prospect this gave for their future employment. Those in vocational training were a couple of years younger than the university students and were very much involved with their present lives and did not think much about the future at all, hence they were characterised as what we called a model of *living in the present*. University students reflected more on job prospects in the future. The young women were also worried about having to defer childbirth until they had permanent employment. We called this type the *adaptability and a contingency mentality* model. The last group we analysed were young working class Norwegian men, and young British men of Asian origin. The latter were first generation academics in their families and although they were only 18–19 years of age they were very aware of responsibilities to their families and the expectations to succeed. The model of *predictability and long term security* identified this group and the Norwegian young shipyard workers who were around the same age.

By taking a contextualist life course approach to our analysis we demonstrated that the way young people thought about the future was very much associated with social class as well as gender. The de-standardisation of the life course, in the sense that life course phases had become obsolete, was not evident in our analysis.<sup>9</sup> The way the young thought about

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<sup>9</sup>A number of other empirical studies at the time had similar findings regarding the de-standardisation of the life course and the lack of impact of gender and social class (e.g. Thomson et al. 2002; Jones 2009).

the future was, in keeping with Mead's theoretical framework, from the viewpoint of their present situation as young people embedded in social contexts of their various societies. They were on course to a future that was to a great extent affected by the opportunity structures their various gender and class specific contexts had to offer.

This article was cited and to a certain extent misquoted in another article in *Sociology*, (Anderson et al. 2005). These authors wrote an article based on surveys with young people aged 20–29 about their plans for the future, They used the term 'planning' for all types of thoughts about the future they had identified in their material. Their data suggested that young people felt in control of their lives and exercised forethought 'over quite long periods of time with respect to many aspects of their futures' (p. 139, cited in Brannen and Nilsen 2007, p. 153). Their data consisted of households, some single, others living in couples. Based on their material which was very different from ours, and used in a completely different design from our biographical approach, they criticised us for claiming that young people did not plan ahead. Our response to this tried to clarify a number of misrepresentations these authors had made of our text (Brannen and Nilsen 2007). I include this debate here because of its topic, but also because it has some bearing on the discussions of methodological questions relating to the biographical life course approach. It illustrated the many difficulties in taking results from a biographical design and criticise these based on findings from research based on a survey strategy. When surveys are used as empirical evidence, the topics that could be captured in a processual way are divided up into discrete units where the processual qualities of conceptualisations are challenged. This was one of our main points in the discussion with Anderson et al. (2005). Our studies (their critique included my 1999 article as it was cited in Brannen and Nilsen 2002) were based on qualitative, biographical interviews and we concluded our discussion with these authors with a reference to the Meadean time perspectives that takes the present as a point of departure,

(...) it is important in studies focusing upon orientations to the past or the future to consider how the *present context* of people's lives shapes how people think about the past and the future. (Brannen and Nilsen 2007, p. 158)

The meetings between research from two different designs can sometimes easily lead to misunderstandings, as in the instance cited above. More often than not however, survey researchers do not engage with results based on qualitative strategies. From such a viewpoint Anderson et al.'s taking our analysis into consideration in their discussions may be optimistically interpreted as a step in the right direction toward building bridges across methodological divides in sociology, if not methodologically then at least by referring to studies done from completely different approaches.

The research discussed in this section are examples from a period around the turn of the millennium when issues of the future were high on the agenda in a number of studies (e.g., Thomson et al. 2002; Thomson and Holland 2002).<sup>10</sup> The debate engendered by Brannen and Nilsen (2002) also indicated that the study of young people's thoughts about future life during this particular period was deemed important by researchers from different approaches and empirical designs. It also opened up for demonstrating the strength of a biographical life course approach to issues where time and temporal dimensions were main concerns.

## Class Specific Futures: Social Mobility

What types of questions about future life particular studies focus on are often reflections of attitudes that are common place and accepted in the society in which they originate. Topics that involved time and temporality in the 1950s were frequently related to social mobility. The movements between class position are temporal processes. In the early days such studies often focussed on ways of increasing the opportunities of

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<sup>10</sup>These are examples of publications that are based on a longitudinal study of young people in England in the late 1990s. Thomson and team developed different types of innovative biographical approaches in their analyses.

families, that is men,<sup>11</sup> from ‘lower’ classes to become upward socially mobile.

What was, and still is, named ‘mobility channels’ were mainly the system of higher education. Thus much research focussed on questions about why there was such a slow increase in sons from of working class families who entered higher education in order to gain employment in middle class occupations, and thus improve their future prospects. During this period research questions included individual motivational factors more than structural ones.<sup>12</sup> In the 1950s, as today, the quantitative survey approach was dominant in studies of social class and social mobility. It was a period of conservative views and attitudes in Western sociology, and research questions that in our contemporary society would be deemed on the dubious side, especially those related to sex,<sup>13</sup> class or race, were common. In the individualistic approaches to social mobility—the issue that incorporated orientation to the future at the time—studies focussed particularly on what became known as DGP, ‘Deferred Gratification Pattern’ (Schneider and Lysgaard<sup>14</sup> 1953). This pattern was identified as:

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<sup>11</sup> At this point a digression into a gendered argument is in order. The focus was on men because of the gendered division of labour in society in general and the division of labour in the home during this height of the ‘housewife’ period (Oakley 1974/1990; Waerness 1978). The majority of women in Western societies did not have gainful employment during the historical period when the male-provider-model prevailed, although there were class differences as working class women were more likely to have low skilled jobs in order to add to the family income. As Joan Acker observed in the early 1970s, it did however take a long time for studies of social class to include women at all: ‘Very few sociologists have [even] recognised that they have, with the exception of the study of the family, constructed a sociology that tends to deal with only the male half of humanity’ (Acker 1973: 936). Rosemary Crompton (1989) was also critical of the way class analysis, and particularly studies of social mobility had not included women.

<sup>12</sup> See Chap. 1 on discussions about the structure-agency division for a comprehensive overview of differences between specific approaches. The research of Roberts (1968, 2009) is particularly insightful on the topic of social mobility from various perspectives.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of ‘gender’ had not entered into the mainstream research vocabulary in the social sciences at the time.

<sup>14</sup> Sverre Lysgaard was otherwise known as a progressive amongst the classics in Norwegian sociology. His writings on conditions for workers and their workplace relationships with co-workers and their collective relationship to management at different levels, applied a contextual case study approach that focused on the different structural systems in the workplace.

(...) characteristic of the so-called “middle-class,” members of which tend to delay achievement of economic independence through a relatively elaborate process of education, tend to defer sexual gratification through intercourse, show a relatively marked tendency to save money (...) The deferred gratification pattern appears to be closely associated with “impulse renunciation”. (Schneider and Lysgaard 1953, p. 142)

The pattern was thus related to temporality and to how different social classes approached the future, in the long term and the short term. The ‘lower classes’ were deemed to focus on the immediate present and not able or willing to defer any gratification that could be gained in the here and now, or in the short-term future. Such findings were again connected to patterns of social mobility, or lack of such, as in Schneider and Lysgaard’s study. Psychological research about social class and time orientation concluded that the focus on the immediate present and instant gratification was related to personality development that could potentially lead to deviant character traits (Leshan 1952). The prejudices associated with these studies were obvious. As Schneider and Lysgaard (1953) observed, such findings were sometimes taken to indicate that ‘(...) lower class persons may conceivably have a certain contentment that keeps them attached to an existing social order even when, from the point of view of other classes, they “live like animals”<sup>15</sup> (p. 148).

In contemporary sociology social class and social mobility are mostly approached from a structural perspective rather than an individualistic one, and the focus currently dominating is that of social inequality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This quote is from a different study and the Schneider and Lysgaard did not appear to subscribe to such notions.

<sup>16</sup> In studies of social mobility the survey and statistical analyses have been the most influential approaches and data. An important exception to this is Bertaux and Thompson’s (1997) study of social mobility based on biographical interviews. This study did not involve thoughts about the future as a specific topic, hence the presentation and discussion of this is in Chap. 4.

## Social Inequality in Research About the Future

Period specific events such as the 2008 financial crisis added weight to a wider sense of uncertainty in societies as the crisis ‘came out of the blue’ and was predicted by no one in the mainstream,<sup>17</sup> economists or politicians. Social inequality has never left the sociological field as a topic of research. However, after the 2008 crisis it was pushed up on the agenda of research interest. Thomas Piketty’s (2014) economic-historical study of the unequal distribution of capital in society had a strong impact on the interest in social and economic inequality as a research topic.<sup>18</sup> As an increasing percentage of societies’ wealth is in the hands of fewer and fewer families, inheritance—the intergenerational transmission of wealth—contributes to upholding and enhancing patterns of social and economic inequality. Intergenerational transmissions as a topic are therefore a ‘social issue’ as much as a matter of ‘private trouble’ (Mills 1959/1980).

Historical changes that affect beliefs and attitudes about the future can be seen in view of the concept of opportunity structures. Roberts (2009) maintained that some aspects of opportunity structures have remained constant over the post-war period; chiefly those that affect the upper echelons of the British class system. They have always had access to the best schools and thus gained entrance into the elite professions in any society. For other social classes, in Britain as elsewhere, there have been more significant changes. While the labour market in the 1950s and 1960s provided more working-class job opportunities than now and young people could be ‘job hoppers’ at their wish, there were boundaries for job changes, ‘movements were mostly between similar kinds of jobs’ (Roberts 2009, p. 357) which is in contrast to ideals of upward social mobility.

Notions of choice were as important then as now, mainly because young people in the 1960s and 1970s felt in control of their lives since there was no shortage of job opportunities. Among sociologists at the time individualistic perspectives involving choices were criticised. To

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<sup>17</sup>There have been those in economist circles who have maintained that they predicted this crisis but there are disagreements about the issue.

<sup>18</sup>See Bottero (2019) for a pragmatist approach to the topic of social inequalities.

compensate for the over-emphasis on choice many did analyses of opportunity structures and focussed on aspects of young people's surroundings such as 'role models in families and neighbourhoods, and the expectations of teachers and peers at school' (Roberts 2009, p. 357). Changes in the system of education in the UK, as in most of the countries either in or associated with the EU, have been similar over the past decades and involve more time in compulsory education, more emphasis on academic subjects and less on vocational options (Hobsbawm 1994; Nilsen 2020, 2023; Roberts 2009). According to Roberts (2009) in spite of significant changes at the structural level, social class is still a determining factor for what options and opportunities are available for young people. 'Whenever social class differences are suppressed at one level in education, they consistently and immediately pop-up elsewhere' (Roberts 2009, p. 360). In the labour market there have been changes in the occupational structures towards a majority of 'good' job opportunities in non-manual employment. The manual jobs that are available are low paid and often part-time jobs in the service sector (Vogt 2018). This broad brush picture of period specific conditions must be taken into consideration in studies about how the future is thought about and envisioned in contemporary sociology .

In 2013 a grant from the Norwegian Research Council gave the opportunity to do a study on intergenerational transmissions in the transition to adulthood.<sup>19</sup> Data consisted of biographical interviews with members in 23 three generation families from various social backgrounds in Norway, and nine in the UK. These data have been a rich source to draw from in a number of publications that have been presented elsewhere in this book. In studies where intergenerational relations were a theme the historical context was foregrounded. The temporal element was thus extended in that family time became an intermediate level between historical and biographical time (Hareven 2000).<sup>20</sup> Inspired by Hareven's work on synchrony and intersecting temporalities and Mead's notion of

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<sup>19</sup> The project had a comparative element with the UK and Professor Julia Brannen, my collaboration partner in a number of research projects and co-author on many articles, did interviews with nine UK families for the project.

<sup>20</sup> See Chap. 4 for details.

time, I published two articles in 2020<sup>21</sup> where this aspect of time was prominent.

In one of these (Nilsen 2020) the future was important in a comparative analysis of young English and Norwegian men's thoughts about their lives in the future. The overarching question the article sought to address was 'whether perceptions of the future are affected by how well timing at the biographical level, related to family time and resources, harmonise with historical time defined as features of opportunity structures in the particular national contexts' (Nilsen 2020, p. 660). Two cases from each country were selected for analysis. A typology based on social class related to the educational levels of fathers and grandfathers in the families, the paper conceptualised those with privileged backgrounds as having an orientation to the future as *confident continuity*. The two young men from skilled worker backgrounds had an attitude towards their future lives that was characterised as *cautious contingency*. The typologies were valid across the national contexts in spite of the differences between the UK and Norway on a number of aspects since they were based on traits that over historical time had had similar development in both countries. The temporal theoretical starting point was in Mead's concepts of the present as the location of both past and future.

For the two from privileged backgrounds,

there was a continuous trajectory between past, present and future at the levels of biographical and family time. Thus the future they envisaged in the present was not only contingent upon their personal decisions in the past and in the here and now; their attitude of confidence was related to future trajectories that have come to be regarded as a standard for a successful transition to adulthood in wider contemporary society. (Nilsen 2020, p. 674)

For those of less privileged backgrounds their present circumstances were not as they would have liked them to be. Neither had higher education and their living with parents was out of synch with family time and with their peers as most young people their age had moved out of the parental

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<sup>21</sup>They were both published online in 2019 and on paper in 2020.

home. Theirs was an attitude that would keep the future at bay—‘the gap that had to be bridged in order to make their occupational ambitions achievable was too wide to consider in the present. The future they would like to have seemed in the present more like a dreamscape than a realistic destination’ (Nilsen 2020, p. 675). This typological divide must be considered in view of characteristics with structural features of the two societies in this particular historical period. Compared to conditions for older cohorts when in their early 20 s both the system of education and the labour market have changed so much as to make it very difficult to find gainful employment when not having a degree. As one of the interviewees in this article said, ‘I feel there is too much emphasis on studies nowadays. You *must* have a bachelor or a master’s degree!’ (Nilsen 2020, p. 670).

In the mid-1990s project on young people’s thoughts about the future I interviewed a younger and an older cohort about their thoughts on future life. The interviews were done approximately 20 years before those of the Intergenerational study. I put the interviews from the two projects in ‘conversation’ with one another (Irwin and Nilsen 2018) to analyse differences in young women’s thoughts about the future. There were differences but also similarities between the two cohorts, one born in the mid-1970s and interviewed in the mid-1990s, the other born in the mid-1990s and interviewed in 2015. The in-depth contextualist analysis of the biographical interviews demonstrated some underlying patterns that could not be grasped immediately. Mead’s notion of time and the focus on the present and Hareven’s concept of ‘timing’ at the biographical level, together with Hareven’s focus on ‘timeliness’ at the societal level, was the temporal-conceptual starting point for my analysis. This framework was extended with the notion of ‘script’ in the life course literature and Ken Roberts concept ‘opportunity structure’ became an important conceptual inspirations in the grounded analysis.

What differences emerged could best be described with reference to the notion of *temporal opportunity structures*. I defined these as including both temporal and structural period specific elements that affect thoughts about the future, and ‘in addition to the notion of opportunity structures’ emphasis on social class, temporal opportunity structures add a gender sensitive element in that it takes timing and timeliness of life

course phases and events into consideration' (Nilsen 2023). This gendered aspect is important because women's life courses are significantly different from men's because of the limited period of fertility. For middle class women the boundaries of this period fall within the same phase as occupational careers are built, often in very competitive environments where men are in a majority in the highest positions. The focus on the 'correct' timing of life course events and transitions, and the 'timeliness' of these in relation to what is considered socially approved trajectories had more impact in the younger cohort. Whereas the context for the older ones could be characterised as 'flexible opportunity structures and trajectory options', the younger ones faced a 'choice discourse and restricted norms of life course timing'. The very non-gendered standards of the temporality built into the opportunity structures made them more restrictive for women because of the short period of fertility in the life course. What also emerged in this analysis was the changing aspect of social class in the two cohorts. Women from upper middle-class backgrounds in the younger cohort expressed a more stressful situation in their thoughts about the future compared to what the older cohort from similar backgrounds did at the same age,

Social class is important for men and women alike (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005). The choice rhetoric that has become an institutionalised feature of social structures is easier to associate with middle-class life courses where both level and type of education give access to more arenas of opportunities than a standard working-class trajectory offers. Streamlined, genderless life course ideals are difficult for anyone to live up to but for women they become particularly constraining. (Nilsen 2023)

The aspects of social class that came across most clearly in these analyses are related to the changes in opportunity structures in Roberts' (2009) sense: there are much fewer secure job opportunities available for young people without higher education, this is the case for both men and women. Since the female dominated jobs are mostly in the service sector, and these jobs have become increasingly insecure and underpaid, the temporal opportunity structures for young women with no higher education, are as stressful as those with degrees from university studies. The

main differences are the lack of secure and steady employment for those with no academic degrees.

The most important difference between interviews with young men and women about their future lives, is that family and children sometime in the future come up unprompted in women's thoughts about future life, regardless of social class. Young men more often have to be asked specifically about this issue as other topics seem to be more at the forefront of their thoughts about their future lives (Nilsen 2020). Although education and employment are equally important in the lives of men and women, family and children seem a more taken-for-granted part of life in the future for young women. This comes across in many studies on the topic: the timing of children and family is important in relation to future employment and occupational careers (Baker 2010; Cook 2018; Gill et al. 2016; Halrynjo and Lyng 2010; Hockey 2009). Genderless ideals about the timing and order of life course events, the temporal opportunity structure, have gendered effects across social classes.

## Summary

The biographical life course approach is particularly suitable for capturing the connection between temporal levels, which is demonstrated in examples from studies about how young people think about the future. Biographical interviews offer opportunities to study these topics in very helpful ways when they are analysed with reference to the different levels of temporalities from the biographical to the historical.

The chapter has demonstrated how the impact of events during specific historical periods are of relevance for identifying topics about the future that are important from a sociological point of view. The focus on themes has varied according to historical circumstances. It has been argued for instance that the foregrounding of the individual to the expense of processes at the structural level, could be an effect of changes in historical and political circumstances from the latter part of the twentieth century. Where necessary for the understanding of particular periods studies based on other approaches than biographical ones have been

drawn upon, particularly in research about the future where the focus is on social inequality.

Wider societal themes have been important in studies about the future, themes that go beyond questions relating to the personal biographical level. Young people's thoughts about environmental issues have been discussed as examples of this. Such studies demonstrate how a biographical life course approach may provide a wider understanding of how such topics are connected to and grounded in the context where life is lived. Environmental concerns have been an issue in the discipline of sociology over the past decades. As demonstrated above these matters were prominent in the 1990s' studies of young people's thoughts about the future of society. Such concerns have only increased as new environmental issues have become prominent. Threats of disasters from nuclear powerplants in the aftermath of Chernobyl in 1986, affected the theoretical approach in theories about 'risk society', as Beck's successful books from the decade demonstrated. As the consequences of climate change have emerged and become evident, this topic has risen to prominence among the many environmental concerns that have become themes in sociological research in contemporary society.

The chapter took its starting point in the backcloth of ideas about Progress and how these replaced a belief in the future as created by deities with one where humans are in command of not only their individual future, but that of wider society. This shift did also involve a change in temporal outlook and thoughts about time in general. In empirical research the future as a topic has been on and off the agenda over the years. Studies discussed in this chapter have demonstrated how they are embedded in the historical periods they originated in. It has for instance been shown how the early studies of women and time, and gender specific thoughts about the future, were related to the then current changes in gender relations on the labour market, in politics and in the domestic sphere. The chapter has shown that whilst gender, age and social class are classic analytical elements of sociological studies that transcend historical periods, the topics their analytical distinctions are brought to bear on, vary considerably.

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# 6

## Methodological and Other Controversies

Biography resets in motion the *Methodenstreit*. It thus presents a unique opportunity for reopening a thorough debate on the subject of the logical, epistemological and methodological foundations of sociology; an occasion for the renewal of thought on the foundations of the social. (Ferrarotti 1981, p. 21)

### Introduction

From the viewpoint of the current situation two strands of methodological debates over life course and biographical research have in recent years run parallel. The oldest one is the quantitative-qualitative divide that has foregrounded methodological questions. The other originated in the 1980s in the period of the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, when epistemological issues became the most significant subjects of attention.

The first debates can be traced to the beginnings of biographical research and Thomas and Znaniecki's work. In this chapter I will revisit some of the topics that were raised in these arguments in their period specific contexts, which included a different set of vocabularies from the ones that characterise contemporary sociology. In Blumer's 1939 volume

from the Appraisal of The Polish Peasant questions about the trustworthiness of ‘human documents’ were discussed. The quantitative-qualitative methodological divide has persisted over the years partly due to technological advances that has made statistical techniques more sophisticated and of interest in their own right. Epistemological debates of newer origin have created dividing lines within qualitative approaches.

The ‘cultural turn’<sup>1</sup> in biographical research is discussed in a section that focusses on the meeting between the different approaches to biographical research in the social sciences and the humanities. The heated methodological discussions from the 1980s onwards, that were in reality discussions about themes in the philosophy of science, are presented in their contemporary contexts. The ‘cultural/narrative turn’ and the controversies over realism vs. constructionism as epistemological starting points were the main dividing lines in these arguments.

Different layers of temporality are at the core of a biographical life course approach. The final section of this chapter is therefore about a shift in focus at the historical level from history addressed in terms of periods to history approached in epochal terms; modernity and postmodernity eclipsed the standard life course vocabulary, especially in cultural studies approaches. Other notions associated with such perspectives include de-standardised life courses, choice biographies and increased individualisation. The writings of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, that were the main figures in the debates about these issues, gained prominence in general sociology as well as in biographical research. A discussion of this trend, and its consequences in terms of rendering the structural level in the history-biography dynamic of lesser importance, concludes the chapter.

## Developments in Qualitative Methods

The vocabulary in methods debates has changed significantly over time. In a discussion of the shifting terms in methodology, Platt (1996, pp. 44–46) observed that although participant observation was done in

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<sup>1</sup>I use ‘cultural’ and ‘cultural/narrative’ turn interchangeably as they designate the same debates.

the 1920s it was not given its name until the 1940s. Methodological debates in biographical studies were mostly confined to psychology and the very terms that had been used to describe the biographical research, changed in the decades after the Appraisal proceeding. For instance, Abel (1947 cited in Platt 1996, p. 51) who had done biographical research on Nazis called what had previously been named 'life histories', 'biograms'. These were defined as written 'at the request of the researcher in order to address a chosen problem, and is solicited in large quantity from members of a specific social group who are given directions on the desired content and form' (Platt 1996, p. 51).

The general category of 'personal documents' that was considered to cover many types of data that included letters, diaries, autobiographical and biographical texts, were no longer part of the vocabulary in post-war sociology. The different types of documents were rather referred to as specific kinds of data, if considered to be data at all. The term 'survey' had also changed its meaning from referring to a wide variety of information about particular communities to become the name of a specific method. In the pre-war era the main dividing line between what we today name quantitative and qualitative methods was named the case-study<sup>2</sup> method versus the statistical method.

The quantitative-qualitative divide has been a recurring topic of discussion in the general methodological literature. Hammersley (1990) stated that the increased influence of quantitative methods in sociology had its background in the effects that positivist ideas had in the natural sciences. He traced these ideas to Vienna and Berlin in the 1920s where they formed the basis of what came to be known as 'logical positivism' (pp. 96–97). European sociology also became affected by these discussions, particularly in the post-war decades.<sup>3</sup> Of particular relevance for biographical studies is the gradual turning away from biographical accounts and to quantitative data in longitudinal designs.

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<sup>2</sup>As mentioned in a previous chapters this term is borrowed from social workers' case histories (Platt 1996).

<sup>3</sup>A particular variety of this controversy in the social sciences had its origin in Germany in the 1960s. It was called the positivist dispute and started as an argument between Popper and Adorno (Keuth 2015).

This was also the main cleavage in the methods discussions relating to biographical research and is reflected in the discussions during the Appraisal proceedings for *The Polish Peasant* in 1938 (Blumer 1939). As stated in an earlier chapter the proceedings were mostly concerned with debates over methodological issues. The whole discussion was permeated with what were considered important topics of the day, *objectivity* and *neutrality*. In 1938 ideals of ‘scientism’<sup>4</sup> were prominent in American social science and were present in the debates among the social scientists who took part in the Appraisal proceedings. Differences between objective and subjective data were discussed and argued over. Blumer was asked how he viewed the relationship between statistics and human documents, to which he replied:

I think the statistical approach will generally, though not necessarily, confine itself to what it calls objective factors, in other words, external influences playing upon human beings which can be counted, and responses which likewise can be counted. Thus, the statistical approach will tend to ignore this mediating factor of subjective experience which Thomas and Znaniecki emphasise as essential. For this reason the statistical approach will tend to remain one-sided. (p. 115)

The most heated discussions at the symposium were those involving different types of empirical evidence, particularly the use of ‘human documents’ such as letters and biographical material. Could such documents be trusted? How to measure reliability and how could ‘interpretations’ be tested? Blumer himself was unsure of whether sources that are built on subjective interpretations could be judged by criteria of representativity and generalization, ‘it is easy to see why human documents become suspect as a scientific instrument’ but he still maintained that such methods had relevance in sociology:

To renounce their use in scientific investigation of human life would be to commit a fatal blunder, for theoretically, they are indispensable and actu-

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<sup>4</sup>The term covers practices that had much in common with a variety of positivism in their insistence on the natural sciences as the ideal the social sciences should opt for (Hammersley 1990; Platt 1996).

ally they may be of enormous value. The effective use which has been made of them by Thomas and Znaniecki is ample demonstration of this value. (p. 80)

In his reasoning Blumer seems to adhere to the common view of a divide between the 'process of discovery' and the 'phase of justification' (Kaplan 1964). In the first phase openness to ideas and an orientation to the problem field rather than a strict definition of research questions are important. No clear rules apply and in many studies which would otherwise not consider interviews reliable sources of data, they are allowed during this process. The context of justification on the other hand is characterized by a fixed set of rules. And Blumer's argument in relation to human documents and their validity and reliability was clearly related to this second phase whereas his insistence on such documents' relevance for sociology is founded in viewpoints related to the first process. The distinction between the two phases, or processes, of research stems from a 'scientific' tradition. Ideals for humanistic social research with qualitative methods that would open the field up for a full inclusion of subjective experiences and human documents, had yet to be formulated. Blumer had at this point not yet articulated his critique against variable research or carved out any clear position in relation to Mead and his pragmatist ideas.

From the viewpoint of a present reader his attention to how human documents could reach a scientific standard may seem a bit peculiar. But he was clearly fond of the idea of finding a way to include such material in sociological research. He admitted that it was problematic to establish criteria of truth and objectivity for biographical material and that it therefore may be difficult to differentiate between truth and fiction in such sources. He also saw that there were dilemmas in relation to what kinds of documents could be included in research if human experience was to become a part of social studies. These would invariably involve subjective accounts of such experiences, and it would then be necessary to arrive at some standards of research credibility for these studies. Indeed Blumer himself at a later point in time made efforts to address this problem area, not least in his 1954 article where he lifted the issue from a mere methods matter to a case of incompatibility between the social

sciences and the ideals of the natural sciences. More of this later, first a few words about an attempt to address the issues that *The Polish Peasant* study raised in its own right. One of its co-authors wrote a book on the advantages of human documents as data and suggestions for analysis of these.

In Florian Znaniecki's (1934) book on sociological methods he launched the idea of analytic induction as an alternative to statistical methods. Analytic induction involved the study of a few cases in depth rather than focussing on a large number of cases with few variables: 'Emphasis must be put not on the quantity of cases, but on the thorough acquaintance with each case under observation' (Znaniecki 1928, cited in Hammersley 1989). Through this method, he maintained that it would be possible to produce theoretical laws that were universal in character, which in itself is an aim that is in breach with a pragmatist ideal of contextualised knowledge. According to Hammersley (1989) Znaniecki did not provide examples of analytic induction practice but his ideas influenced Herbert Blumer,<sup>5</sup> who later came to become an inspiration on Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and their formulation of Grounded Theory (1967). Analytic induction did not have much impact in its day on methodological practices that were more and more dominated by quantitative logics and advanced statistical techniques. Although starting from an approach in case studies, the preoccupation with discovering laws set Znaniecki's book apart from later attempts to formulate practices of doing qualitative research.

Blumer himself took task with the 'variable driven' branch of social research of his day. As discussed in Chap. 2, he made a distinction between concepts in the natural sciences—definitive concepts, and those in the social sciences—sensitising concepts. The former tells researchers what to look for, whilst the latter indicates a direction in which to look (Blumer 1954). He made comparisons between the social and the natural sciences in his debate with social scientists in the quantitative branch. The quantitative tradition had a grip on the methods field in the social sciences, and Blumer made it his mission to unmask the disadvantages for the

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<sup>5</sup>Hammersley (1989) referred to Lindesmith and Cressey and their respective methods texts as having been influenced by Znaniecki's work (pp. 166–172).

social sciences in wholeheartedly adopting the practices from the natural sciences into studies of social life. Blumer did however not write any texts on methodological procedures.

One of the prominent sociologists who debated the situation of the discipline in post-war contemporary USA, was C. Wright Mills. He was not directly involved in methods debates but as pointed out in previous chapters, he brought more overarching arguments into the discussion and commented in critical terms on the dominance of quantitative methods (Mills 1954). The state of the discipline at the time, in his view left a lot to be desired. He made a distinction between sociologists who favoured the 'The Theory', a field dominated by Grand Theory, and 'The Method', which was the domain of statisticians as 'Scientists'. The latter, he said, would have liked to wear white coats and 'are out to do with society and history what they believe physicists have done with nature' and 'the most frequent type is The Higher Statistician, 'who breaks down truth and falsity into such fine particles that we cannot tell the difference between them' (Mills 1954, p. 569). He was equally critical of 'The Theory' and made distinctions among those who favoured it based on whether or not they claimed to understand what it was about,

To many of those who claim to understand it but who do not like it, it is a clumsy piece of irrelevant ponderosity.

To those who do not claim to understand it but who like it very much - and there are many of these - it is a wondrous maze, fascinating precisely because of its often splendid lack of intelligibility.

Those who do not claim to understand it and who do not like it - if they retain the courage of their convictions - will feel that indeed the emperor has no clothes. (Mills 1954, p. 571)

He was sceptical of the knowledge that research based on these two extremes of theory and methods could produce. The theory was too far removed from any reality to be of much help in making sense of social life. The statistical methods would be of no use either. He thus called for 'methodological inquiries into methods and inquiry' (p. 570). It was only well over a decade later that a book with the ambition of bridging the gap

between theory and method, and thus giving methodological questions prominence in a meaningful way, emerged.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) was, as previously stated, much inspired by pragmatism's knowledge foundations, and by Blumer's naturalistic inquiry. The notion of theoretical sensitivity put forward in Grounded Theory was a close relative of Blumer's 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer 1954). Glaser and Strauss noted their indebtedness to Blumer in their book, but were also critical of his preference for verification rather than generating theory,

Blumer's solution to getting better theory, and in close relation to data, was – again – blunted because he was poised in too sharp a posture against verification and too ready to give up on the problem of how to generate better theory except by the general formula of sticking close to the data being studied. (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 14)

Their book did also engage in debate with the works of Robert Merton on middle range theories. They said of his attempts to overcome the theory-empirical research divide that this did not involve any generating of new theory, 'The closest he came was with "serendipity"; that is, an unanticipated, anomalous, and strategic finding gives rise to a new hypothesis. (...) Thus, he was concerned with grounded modifying of theory, not grounded generating of theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 2 footnote 1). Their approach was one of flexibility throughout the research process. Theoretical notions cannot be forced but must emerge as the analysis proceeds, hence the emphasis on theoretical sensitivity.

Glaser and Strauss' book became an important inspiration for the revival of the biographical method in that it provided methodological procedures for qualitative designs that made such approaches valuable in their own right and not only as 'preliminary procedures'. The fact that both authors were actively involved in methodology discussions at the time, made their influence particularly important.

On the continent a different approach to biographical material had developed, partly inspired by the classic American tradition but with important differences. Edmund Husserl's original phenomenology was an abstract brand of thought in the Cartesian tradition. Alfred Schütz

emigrated to America during WWII and inspired by Husserl's thought, developed a form of phenomenology—social phenomenology (Barber 2022)—which became highly influential in German biographical research. Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of an intersubjective life-world was for Schütz considered the basis of social life. The 'natural attitude' provided actors with 'taken-for-granted' life-worlds,

'All interpretations of this world is based upon a stock of previous experiences of it, our own experiences and those handed down to us by our parents and teachers, which in the form of "knowledge at hand" functions as a scheme of reference. (Schütz 1945, p. 534)

Schütz's ideas were, in contrast to American pragmatism, in a Cartesian tradition. He was very impressed with the writings of William James but distanced himself from Mead in a curious set of arguments that claimed Mead's thoughts rested on a simple stimulus-response model.<sup>6</sup> Several critiques have been raised against the Schützian line of thinking in its sociological application<sup>7</sup> but it has nevertheless gained prominence in the sociological literature, and particularly in some European biographical research.

Quite a few of the methodological advances in biographical designs took place within quantitative research strategies and in some instances became a bridge to the revival of the biographical methods and the life story tradition.

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<sup>6</sup>It is remarkable to note Schütz' (1945) somewhat condescending and misinterpreted view of Mead's work and his notion of time and of the self, 'It is doubtless Mead's merit to have seen the relations between act, self, memory, time and reality. The position of the present paper is of course not reconcilable with Mead's theory of the social origin of the self and with his (modified) behaviorism which induces him to interpret all the beforementioned phenomena in terms of stimulus-response' (Schütz 1945, footnote 10, p. 541).

<sup>7</sup>One such critique is related to problems of 'translating' these ideas to empirical descriptions of society or to turn them into useful empirical concepts. Another challenge was this brand of phenomenology's claim to universality and its basic individualistic approach represented a third problem (Kilminster 1993).

## Quantitative Methods Gaining Ground

The first wave of quantitative data in the US was driven by demands from the government to increase social research during and after the Great Depression (Platt 1996). This gave access to huge data sets and encouraged the development of statistical techniques of analysis. The Sociology Department in Chicago, where case-studies originated, saw a change in the methodological profile of its staff. During and after WWII the demand for statistical information increased manyfold as opinion research into attitudes gained ground. The technological advances in computer science were also important for the increase in quantitative studies. Case-studies disappeared in the sense the term was used in the early phase, and the methodological practices associated with these, fell out of favour among social scientists. The advanced statistical techniques that became popular gave rise to a new type of methodological literature. In the textbooks emphasis was now on how data was collected. The increase in the number of methods textbooks was driven both by the differentiation of disciplines that occurred in the post-war era, but also by the huge increase in the number of students as the systems of education were expanded across the western hemisphere (Platt 1996, pp. 50–52).

As briefly mentioned in Chap. 2, an important development within the quantitative tradition of biographical life course research was longitudinal studies. A particular form of longitudinal research is the cohort study. A cohort is defined as ‘an aggregate of individuals who experienced the same event within the same time interval’ (Ryder 1965, p. 845), the most common of which is the birth cohort. Participants in longitudinal cohort studies were often ‘deviants’, ‘delinquents’, and other groups of people who for some reason did not fit into the ‘normal’ fabric of society and were incarcerated for a limited period or for the longer term, which meant that they were easily accessible for social scientists. An early exemplar was carried out by Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck (1930). They did another study in 1940 that included delinquent and nondelinquent white boys aged 14 and followed them up at 25 and 32 (Glueck and Glueck 1943, 1950). Their archived data was later analysed by Laub and Sampson (1998). They viewed the material and rich and was particularly

impressed with the data's variety of dimensions of juvenile and adult development, including major life course events. Glueck and Glueck's material included interviews with the informants and their families, social workers, schoolteachers, employers, and neighbours as well as official records and criminal histories. The sheer volume of data together with the longitudinal design, set the study apart from criminological studies that preceded it. However, from a methodological and epistemological viewpoint, the study was firmly grounded in a quantitative logic with a 'scientific' objective. The purpose of these studies was to arrive at causal explanations and thereby achieve the ability to predict what specific types of young people who would be at risk of falling outside of normal trajectories for the age group. In other words, to examine causal 'mechanisms', independent of time and contextual features of societies, of characteristics that made young boys become juvenile delinquents.

Among the most well-known cohort research is the afore mentioned study by Glen Elder, *Children of the Great Depression* (1974/1999). As noted in an earlier chapter Elder was much inspired by C. Wright Mills' 'history-biography' connection. Thus the purpose of Elder's research was to study how historical contexts of economic deprivation shaped individuals' lives over time. The material he gained access to was similar to the Gluecks' studies, but with one main difference: the cases were 'ordinary' children. The sample consisted of fifth graders (born around 1920)—84 boys and 83 girls, all of them white, from working- and middle-class backgrounds living in Berkeley and Oakland, California. They were continuously studied over a seven-year period from 1932 to 1939 and contacted again at five different times ending in 1964. This is indeed an impressive study in terms of the depth and range of data. It stands out from other studies of its time because, as Elder explicitly stated, when he got access to this material he chose to study effects of economic deprivation on theoretical and historical grounds, and not because he sought some de-contextualized mechanisms and predictive explanations about how deprivation in childhood would affect individuals over the life course in general (Elder 1999, p. 6).

Elder's approach was grounded in a variable logic and in quantitative analysis. However, his stressing of the importance of social and historical context was important for the direction of the revival of the qualitative

biographical approach in the same decade in which his ground-breaking study was published (see Chap. 2). Rather than making generalisations about how particular experiences of deprivation in childhood would affect individuals over the life course, irrespective of time and place, Elder concluded that effects of childhood deprivation related not only to the historical circumstances, but also to the points in the life course (age and cohort) in which they experienced it. But: 'Social change can turn lives around by opening up new opportunities and careers; it may also close certain options' (Elder 1999, p. 321). He noted that three aspects of the historical context for young boys from Berkeley and Oakland were important for their relatively unexpected<sup>8</sup> success in life. The first of these was the greater access to college education for this cohort in the immediate post-war period in California. The second was opportunities to find a marriage partner. The age of marriage declined in the 1940s USA. The third important factor was military service, 'Full-scale mobilisation for war in the early 1940s pulled men and women out of their families and local communities and broadened their exposure to life opportunities' (Elder 1999, p. 322).

Elder's study did not in itself build bridges between the quantitative and the qualitative camps. He did not make much explicit use of the qualitative material in his data (Nilsen and Brannen 2010) but his applying an historical sensitive frame of reference breached the 'scientific' approach that had been the most prominent in post-war sociology up to that point in time, since he did not attempt to formulate laws that would be valid across time and space. As stated above and in an earlier chapter, his work became an important inspiration for the revival of the biographical tradition.

In Europe a number of quantitative and longitudinal studies have been done over the past decades, building on the life course design, if not adhering to the contextualist variety of Elder's approach. German research stands out in this regard. The advanced statistical methods of 'event history analysis' (Blossfeld et al. 1989) was important for the development

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<sup>8</sup> If a mechanistic approach had been the underpinning of the study deprivation at particular points in time would predict lack of success in later life because context would not be brought into discussions.

of statistical techniques for analysing large volumes of data in sequence. The debates within the quantitative field were mostly, but not exclusively, about the usefulness of particular statistical techniques for studying complex data related to the life course. Operationalisations of variables, what variables to include, what techniques for measuring complex relationships between variables when time series were involved, these were all questions in the debates (see e.g. Settersten and Mayer 1997). Andrew Abbott (1995) subsumed all the types of statistical analysis that involved sequences of events and/ or phases and transitions under the term 'sequence analysis'.<sup>9</sup> These could involve a number of variables in sequences that had varying degrees of contextual features associated with them.

Aisenbrey and Fasang (2010) in an article with a title inspired by Abbott's (1995) review, made the case for a 'second wave' of sequence analysis that held more promise for life course research. This was related to the further sophisticated techniques for fulfilling its aim of identifying temporal patterns of sequences in life course trajectories. Exploring the timing and temporal order within sequences are a main advantage of sequence analysis for life course studies.

In all it seems that when debates tend towards the sophisticated and advanced technical sides of data analysis, concerns such as contextualisation in historical time or relating to other forms of temporal levels, tend to become of lesser importance. The sheer complexity of advanced statistical techniques has a tendency to eclipse other issues. Thus researchers whose fields of study invite quantitative designs tend to be involved in debates with other researchers in their own particular methodological field, and discussions often concentrate on which techniques are the preferred ones to measure particular relationships between variables relating to a specific phenomenon. They more often than not discuss questions of *method as technique* rather than *methodological* issues of a broader kind, hence it is very rare that researchers from the quantitative field initiate or are engaged in debates with those in the qualitative traditions.

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<sup>9</sup> Aisenbrey and Fasang (2010) observed the differences between event history techniques and sequence analysis related to their origins in different statistical traditions; whereas the former is regression-based in a data modelling culture, the latter is in the tradition of algorithmic exploratory analysis (p. 424).

Thus actual methodological debates between qualitative biographical researchers and those in the purely quantitative camp of life course studies rarely happen. This is understandable but nevertheless regrettable as it would have a potential for being beneficial for both. One major obstacle for full integration of methods is that survey designs have many cases and few variables, whilst case-based designs have few cases but many ‘variables’ per case (Gomm et al. 2000). There is however an overall tendency for methodological debates to take place *within* methodological fields rather than *between* them. The quantitative and qualitative ‘camps’ tend to develop vocabularies that are internal and exclusive to those who use the respective methods. This does seem to be the case in biographical life course studies as well as in sociology in general. I will return to this issue in the final Chapter to explore more recent avenues followed in order to overcome the quant-qual divide.

## Debates About the ‘Cultural Turn’ in Biographical Research

This section discusses the meeting between the different approaches to biographical research based in the social sciences and the humanities. The heated methods discussions from the 1980s onwards, that were in reality discussions about themes in the philosophy of science, are presented in their contemporary contexts with ‘the cultural/narrative turn’ and the controversies over realism vs. constructionism as important ingredients.

In Europe hermeneutical approaches,<sup>10</sup> became prominent in discussions about important differences between the humanities and the natural sciences methods wise. Drawing on Dilthey’s notions of understanding meaning in context and Heidegger’s development of his ideas in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s student Hans-Georg Gadamer published *Truth and Method* in 1960 (Gadamer 1989), which became a standard

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<sup>10</sup>In Chap. 3, and in a section above in this chapter, the differences between this approach and that of pragmatism was discussed in relation to Cartesian ideals of knowledge versus the importance of context. Whereas hermeneutics are grounded in a Cartesian epistemology with de-contextualised knowledge ideals, biographical life course research as defined here, is associated with pragmatism and contextualism.

reference within hermeneutical approaches. Husserl's variety of phenomenology was important in Heideggerian hermeneutics but came into the social sciences in other ways too, notably through Garfinkel's ethnomethodology which was developed in the intersection between Parsonian thought and Schütz's expanding of Husserl's work (Heritage 1984).<sup>11</sup> Hermeneutics started out as a method to examine texts. As this perspective became part and parcel of social science methods debates, aspects of language and narrative structure in biographical accounts were highlighted. Another important influence for this shift came from linguistics. As the structural linguistics of Lévi-Strauss was criticised by Foucault and Derrida, the foundation was laid for post-structuralism in language theory and in time also in social theory. These works had their origin in the humanities but as poststructuralism and post-modernism gained more ground in the social sciences in the 1980s the hermeneutical traditions also become influential in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology.

In a critique of the 'cultural turn', Bonnell and Hunt (1999) maintained that both structuralism and post-structuralism had contributed to the foregrounding of the cultural as linguistic and representational, at the expense of the social.<sup>12</sup> 'Social categories were to be imagined not as preceding consciousness or culture or language, but as depending upon them. Social categories only came into being through their expressions or representations.' (Bonnell and Hunt, 1999, p. 9). The semiotics of Roland Barthes, Foucault's critique of power and Lyotard's critique of 'grand narratives' were all influential for the direction social science research took throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Methodological questions were replaced by epistemological debates about whether there was a reality beyond language (Nilsen 1994, 2008).

When influence from the humanities became more pronounced throughout the 1980s, a shift of focus also occurred in biographical research. From having been concerned with analyses of life stories and

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<sup>11</sup> See Chap. 3 and above for a detailed a critique of Schütz' writings.

<sup>12</sup> There have been early critiques of the use of culture to replace that of social structure: 'In contrast with social structure, the concept 'culture' is one of the spongier words in social science, although, perhaps for that reason, in the hands of an expert, enormously useful. In practice, the conception of 'culture' is more often a loose reference to social milieu plus 'tradition' than an adequate idea of social structure (Mills 1959/1980, p. 177, footnote 5).

biographical accounts as empirical evidence of *lived life*, gradually more attention was given to the narrative itself, to *the told life* and to the different phases of interpretation of a biography. Kohli (1981) presented an early argument for the advantages of literary and linguistic theory for biographical studies. He maintained that the structure of autobiographical narratives could be analysed by the use of linguistic theory. He observed that a narrative had two functions: the referential and the evaluative. The former, and most often used as a definition of 'narrative', had to do with the structure and temporal ordering of the events in the story. However, without the evaluative element which occurred in the present where the story was told, it would not be possible to clarify the meaning past events narrated had for the narrator. The past is in other words interpreted in the present. Some decades later Riessman (2008) observed that 'the narrative turn' was no longer a topic of literature studies alone but had seeped into all disciplines in the humanities and most of the social sciences.

Questions about the role of the researcher in the production of the biographical account, whether this had originated as a written autobiography or was the outcome of an interview between an interviewee and a researcher, became important. Demands that the researcher be self-reflective in the writing up of biographical research material were frequently heard, and in many instances the biographical experiences of the researcher and his or her reactions to the story told by the informants, became topics of interest (Stanley 1992). This shift also marked a change in epistemological focus towards a constructionist standpoint which implies a line of questioning that is premised on *knowledge about* reality *as* reality (Lewis and Smith 1980). A belief that reality is a human construction alone can lead to extreme relativism in the approach to research material. A blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, between truth and non-truth, between the factual and the non-factual, is not compatible with the pragmatist ideals of knowledge that guided biographical research in its origin.

Norman Denzin was one of the most prominent advocates of a shift in biographical research towards narrative approaches and a focus on language. A former student of Blumer's, he changed the term used for his

perspective from symbolic interactionism to *interpretive interactionism* (Denzin 1989a, b). The term

‘interpretive interactionism’ [...] signifies an attempt to join traditional symbolic interactionist thought with participant observation and ethnographic research, semiotics and fieldwork, postmodern ethnographic research, naturalistic studies, creative interviewing, the case study method, the interpretive, hermeneutic, phenomenological works of Heidegger and Gadamer, the cultural studies approach of Hall, and recent feminist critiques of positivism. (Denzin 1989a, pp. 7–8)

This quote demonstrates that biographical research epistemologically founded in contextualist pragmatist thought was no longer seen as the underpinning of such studies. A blending of many different—and in many instances incompatible—research approaches opened up a wider field for biographical research and invited collaboration across disciplinary boundaries in ways that had earlier not been common. This was especially true in feminist biographical research (Stanley 1992). Denzin’s changed approach is symptomatic of the debates that occurred in biographical research during this period. From discussions about whether individuals’ accounts could be regarded as reliable in the sense of people telling the truth about their lives, the interest was gradually shifted towards debates on ontological and epistemological issues and about if there was such a thing as Truth (Nilsen 2008). In many instances the underlying epistemological notions were not taken up explicitly but informed research designs and choices of methods for data collection and analysis in empirical studies. The history-biography dynamic was as such not the centre of attention. The analysis shifted gradually towards more linguistic, individualistic and psychological dimensions.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the origins of biographical research rested on Mead’s notion of the self as developing in social relationships that changed over time. From the 1980s onwards the concept of *identity* came to overshadow the ‘self’. Identity was a fairly novel concept in the social sciences (Gleason 1983) and had been discussed in relation to development and particularly with reference to the life course phase of youth (Erikson 1980 [1959]). The epistemological shift towards

constructionist approaches introduced terms such as ‘fragmented identities’ and ‘identities as matters of choice’ (Giddens 1991; Plummer 2001). Such notions were criticised from life course perspectives as being more spatial than temporal since identities in this sense bear no relation to development in time but could be regarded as *constructed* in discourse (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; McNay 2000). Where Erikson saw identity as part of a wider notion of self, in cultural studies identity in many instances replaced the notion of self as ‘selves’ were thought of in terms of being constructed in discursive fields rather than developed in social relationships (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, p. 22).

As the 1990s progressed biographical research came to include a wide array of approaches and perspectives. The blurring of boundaries between disciplines within the social sciences and between the social sciences and the humanities were called for and cross-disciplinary studies were encouraged. The suggestions for what to include in biographical and other methods of performing research became many and varied.<sup>13</sup> The influence from hermeneutics and methodological approaches originating in humanistic disciplines, together with the epistemological shift towards constructionist/interpretive perspectives, led some to subsume biographical material under the wide term *interpretive* approaches (Plummer 2001); the story as a *told* story was put at the forefront of attention. Biographical accounts are stories told, but for those who believed there was reality and some factual experiences and context behind the account, the focus on the narrative element only, became too simplistic,

Every life story contains a large proportion of factual data which can be verified (e.g. dates and places of biographical events). Life stories can be used - and in effect, have been used - as a documentary source to know about realities ‘out there’. (Bertaux 1996)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The drift towards interdisciplinarity has had its critics. As Bonnell and Hunt (1999, p. 14) observed: ‘Dialogue among the disciplines depends in part on a strong sense of their differences from each other: exchange is not needed if everything is the same; interdisciplinarity can only work if there are in fact disciplinary differences’.

<sup>14</sup>In the mid-1990s there was a fierce debate in the *Biography & Society Newsletter* over these issues. Daniel Bertaux was accused of oversimplified or naïve realism in his approach to biographical studies. His ‘opponents’ came largely from a hermeneutic research tradition and a constructionist epistemological standpoint.

In these debates the advantages of exploring the way people talk about their lives was considered important for many reasons. It was maintained that the understanding of narrative structure was essential for the overall understanding of a biographical account, not only in terms of language used, but also with reference to the social positioning of individuals in society (Riessman 1991; Nilsen 1996). It can also give insight into and draw attention to the *silences* in biographical accounts, and thus make visible the taken-for-granted aspects of people's lives that are more often than not structurally founded and thus important for understanding the interviewee in the context that the life unfolds within (Nilsen and Brannen 2002; Brannen and Nilsen 2005).

A side in the debates maintained that the ontological and epistemological foundations of the 'cultural turn' may make it difficult to envisage a social science that can produce convincing evidence of, for instance, social disparities between groups of people (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, Brannen and Nilsen 2005). A line in the debates stated that if the notion of culture replaces that of social structure, and individual narratives *about* lives become the most important objects of analysis rather than *lived* experiences as expressions of social and collective being in wider contexts, social science research that highlights power and inequalities between people may be challenged (Nilsen 2008).

The overarching topic of this book is the biography-history dynamic introduced by C. Wright Mills. In the classic variety of biographical studies points of reference for analysis of biographical material were historical circumstances, thus the contextualist approach. Themes that address questions in relation to the history side of this dynamic, are topics in the final section of this chapter.

## From History as Periods to History as Epochs

The period during which the methods debates originated and were at their fiercest, coincided with the historical period after the ending of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. The historical changes that took place around this time were discussed in Chap. 4. In the final section of this chapter the historical side of the history-biography dynamic

will be examined in relation to the wider methodological debates. In this period there was a shift in focus at the historical level from history as periods to history as epochs; modernity and postmodernity replaced the standard life course vocabulary in the social sciences with those more common in cultural studies approaches. Other notions associated with such perspectives include de-standardised life courses, choice biographies and increased individualisation. The writings of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, who were the main figures in the debates about these issues, gained prominence in general sociology as well as in biographical research.

One definition of individualisation referred to ‘...first, the disembedding and, second the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which the individual must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves’ (Beck 1994, p. 13). A further clarification of the term is given by Beck, when he said that,

...individualisation is not based on the free decision of individuals. To use Sartre’s term, people are condemned to individualisation. Individualisation is a compulsion, but a compulsion for the manufacture, self-design and self-staging of not just one’s own biography but also its commitments and networks as preferences and life phases change, but, of course, under the overall conditions and models of the welfare state, such as the educational system (acquiring certificates), the labour market, labour and social law, the housing market and so on. (Beck 1994, p. 15)

The sequences in life course development that hitherto were thought of as standard, could no longer be taken for granted. A reason for this was institutional changes in welfare states as well as in work and education that made people’s lives less and less predictable. Individual *choices* and *decisions* came to be central themes in their own right in discussions about individualisation. Beck suggested that the process of choices and decisions which constituted individualisation was lifelong and that there was more room for flexibility over the life course in contemporary society than ever before (Beck 1992, pp. 127–137). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 5) maintained that a ‘standard biography’ was being replaced by a ‘choice biography’, and that life course phases no longer followed the

same pattern they used to since structural characteristics such as age, gender and social class were not as significant for shaping individuals' lives.

Around this time the epochal terms that took over as historical periodisation markers included words such as modernity, postmodernity, late modernity, post-industrial societies, information society, and so forth. These were widely used in non-specific ways and they became part of a distinctive and wide sweeping vocabulary within a variety of disciplines, sociology included, for describing broader social change and trends. There are however problems of demarcation in relation to both time and place with these terms. Historian Perry Anderson (1998) pointed out in an examination of the term postmodernity that its origins lay in aesthetic categories of poetry in Latin America in the 1930s. He observed that in the currently influential writings of Lyotard and Habermas, postmodernity remains vague on these aspects; no precise periodization can be found in either author's writings (Anderson 1998, p. 45).

As stated elsewhere, the 'new' vocabulary for describing the history-biography dynamic that was suggested in the 1990s may be related to characteristics of the historical period itself. Individualisation and an emphasis on the agency side of the agency-structure divide, or the biographical side of the biography-history dynamic, became prominent from the late 1980s as wide sweeping historical changes at the end of the Cold War happened.<sup>15</sup> Although social inequalities increased steadily in most countries from the late 1970s onwards and structural changes impacted on people's lives for better, but mostly for worse, popular social theory concepts that were launched in the early 1990s lacked the specificity necessary for addressing such issues in sociology in general, and in biographical life course studies in particular. Non-specific and general notions of historical periods in terms of epochs, seemed to serve to obscure important features of specific contexts. Biographical research with this type of theoretical backcloth may have left analyses at a level of abstractions where discourse and narratives were more meaningful starting points than the intersection of history and biography.

The paradox is that both the positivist and interpretive sides of the divide question the validity of biographical research founded on a realist

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<sup>15</sup> See Chap. 5 for a more in-depth discussion of this.

pragmatic starting point. From an extreme interpretive side of the divide debates about representativeness are easily rejected as irrelevant since they are considered positivist. Extreme positivism on the other hand would question biographical material because it does not qualify as objective data. This chapter has thus argued that a third position needs focusing on. In order to map out this third position the case has been made for a closer look into the premises that underpin the methodological and methods debates within biographical research. The parameters for the discussion have been the starting point in debates about 'method as technique' that highlighted the initial quantitative-qualitative divide, to a methodological focus where epistemological questions and discussions across the boundaries of a realist-constructionist divide became prominent.

## Summary

This chapter has discussed methodological and other controversies in biographical life course research. Two strands of methodological debates over life course and biographical approaches have run parallel; the quantitative-qualitative divide that foregrounded methodological issues, and the other originating in the 'cultural/narrative turn' in the social sciences, that put epistemological questions centre stage (Nilsen 2008). The chapter has shown how these debates each in their ways have impacted on sociological research generally and biographical research in particular.

The quantitative-qualitative dispute has early origins. The discussions as they relate to life course and biographical research were prominent in Blumer's (1939) volume about the Appraisal of The Polish Peasant. Questions about the trustworthiness of 'human documents' were hotly debated there. This methodological divide has persisted over the years partly due to technological advances that has made statistical techniques more sophisticated and of interest in their own right.

The chapter has shown how epistemological debates that took over from methods discussions have created dividing lines within qualitative approaches. The methods discussions from the 1980s onwards, that were in reality discussions about themes in the philosophy of science, have

been presented in their contemporary contexts. Another line of debate was to do with naming of levels of temporalities, specifically with reference to historical time. The writings of Beck and Giddens with their emphasis on ‘the individualisation thesis’ and a de-standardisation of life courses in discussions of history in epochal terms such as ‘late modernity’, has been shown to be influential in general sociology as well as in biographical research. A discussion of this trend and the impact it has had over decades concluded this chapter.

In Chap. 7 these debates will be revisited but this time the topic is to show attempts that have been made to overcome dividing lines in sociological thinking in general, and biographical research in particular. As will be demonstrated, hotly debated issues are nothing new in academia as a whole, and suggestions for bridging the gaps that have been identified are as old as the debates themselves.

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# 7

## Reflections

The social world is a world of events, and the lives of both social groups and individual persons are navigated as complex trajectories across this heaving sea of happenings. (Abbott 2016, p. 247)

### Attempts at Bridging Gaps and Overcoming Divides

The topics discussed throughout the chapters in this book have been set into the historical contexts they originated in and related to the debates they were part of in their contemporary society. Thus I have made every effort to avoid the trap that Mills (1959/1980) called the ‘ritual (of) a dull little padding known as ‘sketching in the historical background’ (p. 171). In this final chapter I will start by tracing the general origins of the specific discussions that were addressed in Chap. 6. These debates go beyond biographical life course studies, beyond social science and well into the academic community as a whole. I will thus focus on the early suggestions for overcoming conflicts and controversies that can be identified in the literature. I will do this in order to open up a wider backcloth against which to discuss topics such as mixing methods and questions of

quality in biographical life course research. Examples of studies that use single or multiple methods, are addressed in relation to different types of analyses of biographical material in combination with other types of data. The section on mixed methods designs is followed by a discussion about quality in biographical life course studies and the chapter ends with some concluding reflections.

The differences between the quantitative and the qualitative approaches in general sociology can be considered in view of the wider topics Charles Percy Snow (1959) named ‘the two cultures’. In *The Rede Lecture* of 1959, Snow, who had a PhD in physics from Cambridge, discussed the antagonism between the two cultures in academia and the intellectual world.<sup>1</sup> He raised the question of whether the humanities and the natural sciences were irreconcilable since there were few lines of communication between researchers in each of these fields,

Literary intellectuals at one pole – at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension – sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding. They have a curious distorted image of each other. Their attitudes are so different that, even on the level of emotion, they can’t find much common ground. (Snow 1959, p. 2)

He believed that the ‘intellectual life of the whole of western society is increasingly being split into two polar groups’ (p. 2). An opportunity to bridge this gap was for him in industry and engineering, which were important for what he named the scientific revolution, which could only come about through a total shift in the whole of the system of education.<sup>2</sup>

The arguments put forward by Snow about the intellectual and academic community bear some resemblance to Blumer’s (1954) critique of the hegemony of the natural sciences and how they should never become

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<sup>1</sup> In 1961 this lecture was published in the book *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.

<sup>2</sup> In this lecture he made international comparisons between the situation in the UK, the USA and the USSR and found the UK wanting in teaching practices that tried to combine knowledge from different disciplines. He also addressed the results of the scientific revolution, industrialisation, and how this contributed to widening the gap between rich and poor nations in the world.

a model for the social sciences. His launching of the differences between sensitising and definitive concepts originated in the same type of argument as those later introduced by Snow. Mills (1954), clearly inspired by the same body of thought but taking the situation in sociology as a point of reference, came up with suggestions for, if not bridging the gap between the ‘Scientists’ and the ‘Theorists’, then at least of finding a way around this divide. He proposed a new form a sociology, one that contextualised the lives of people studied and maintained that the place for sociology was somewhere beyond the two dominant fields of ‘Theory’ and ‘Method’ of his day. Whilst the ‘Scientists’ sought to ‘break down truth and falsity into such fine particles that we cannot tell the difference between them’, the Theoreticians had withdrawn themselves from efforts to describe, understand and explain human society (p. 569). What he named the ‘third camp’ would include sociologists who should start from three questions about the way societies are formed:

- (1) What is meaning of this – whatever we are examining – for our society as a whole, and what is this social world like?
- (2) What is the meaning of this for the type of men and women that prevail in this society? And
- (3) how does this fit into the historical trend of our times, and in what direction does this main drift seem to be carrying us? (p. 572)

These questions, and his visions for a third space for sociology, bore no methods prescriptions; his ambitions were wider than mere methodological. In that sense his thoughts and those of Blumer (1954) and Snow (1959) covered some of the same ground; they found the dichotomic division between academic approaches confining and called for a third space. This particular period, the 1950s, is often portrayed as characterised by consensus in the mainstream academic community. The examples shown above demonstrate that there existed alternative voices in both the social sciences and the natural sciences at this time.<sup>3</sup>

As Chap. 6 demonstrated, in the social sciences the potential, and sometimes actual, conflicts between methodological approaches have

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<sup>3</sup>There are a number of other examples, as indicated in earlier chapters. However, for the current argument these are illustrative of the period and Snow’s thoughts are well known in academic and public debate beyond the social sciences.

been many and varied. Attempts to overcome the different lines of disagreement between not only the quantitative and qualitative approaches but also those within the qualitative camp, have varied in intensity and scope over the years. During the past three to four decades practices of mixing or combining methods and data, have been explicitly addressed.

## Combining Research Designs, Methods, and Data

Mixing various types of methods and data has been one way of trying to combine practices and knowledge from various fields within and between disciplines in order to bridge the gaps between them. Over the years a number of mixed-methods ideas have been launched, for instance in the writings of Julia Brannen (1992) and Alan Bryman (2006). However, the fact that different types of data have occurred in the same study has not always been acknowledged as a mixed-methods strategy (Brannen and Nilsen 2011). For example, in the *Polish Peasant* study a number of different sources of data and modes of analysis were evident. The authors did however not present the study as one of a mixed-methods design, nor did the appraisal proceedings (Blumer 1939) mention this or similar characteristics, in spite of the study combining diverse types of qualitative data as well as statistical information.

The very notion of mixing methods is thus new, even if the practices involved are not. Empirical research show that when quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the same biographical life course studies, aspects of methods and data from across the divide are most often being used within the main methodological framework, and from the viewpoint, where the lead researchers have their methodological ‘home’ (Bryman 2006; Nilsen and Brannen 2010).

In the past decades the literature on mixing methods in general social science has ballooned.<sup>4</sup> In actual empirical practice it is quite common to

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<sup>4</sup>As an example may be mentioned the four-volume series on mixed methods that was published by Sage in 2006. The series editor was one of the pioneers in the mixed methods literature, the late professor Alan Bryman. There are journals that are specifically assigned to mixed methods, as well as many edited volumes and monographs.

make use of different types of data and to combine aspects from the qualitative and quantitative fields in the same study. To fully integrate them within a design that does justice to the origin of both, is however more difficult. As Bryman (2006) pointed out, ‘(...) the formalization of approaches to multi-strategy research through typologies has moved too far ahead of a systematic appreciation of how quantitative and qualitative research are combined in practice’ (Bryman 2006, p. 99). However, this said there are instances where different types of qualitative and quantitative data and techniques of analyses are combined and reflected upon with reference to methodological considerations involved. Such studies do however rarely cross the challenging qual-quant *design* divide. As the section above demonstrated, attempts to overcome gaps between approaches often lead to suggestions of finding a ‘third way’.

The studies of Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1997) are early empirical examples of how combining qualitative and quantitative data in the same study may lead to wishes of transcending established research designs and create strategies that could make the strength of each type of method be used more advantageously together. They advocated a third space beyond the natural sciences and the literature and the arts and arrived at this suggestion through studies in a field which has been dominated by quantitative approaches: social mobility. Their analysis of biographical case studies of five generation families brought results they saw as consistent with a third space,

But perhaps the time has come for us to acknowledge the existence of a third space, outside of those spaces occupied by the natural sciences and by literature and the arts: one that possesses its own regimen of truth. It is precisely because that space contains criteria for comparing the relative value of various interpretations of the same phenomenon that the interpretive imagination may be given free rein. (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997, p. 96)

This call for a break with traditional practices echoes the much earlier writings of Blumer (1954), Mills (1954) and Snow (1959) cited above, who all suggested similar ‘third space’ ideas for the future of the research practices in the social sciences.

Other scholars have tried to overcome divides by using all available methods from whichever toolbox they originated. Tamara Hareven was one of the first in the tradition of biographical life course studies to make truly mixed data and methods research in her aforementioned historical research of the relationship between work and family in an industrial community in the United States. The material she integrated in her study were 'company files and employees' files from Amoskeag, vital records, parish records, insurance records, and linkage with the 1900 census' (Hareven 1982, pp. 385–386). This huge material was combined with biographical interviews. On the differences between surveys and interviews, Hareven observed,

Like surveys, it [a life history] recalls attitudes and perceptions, but, unlike surveys, it places these perceptions in the context of an individual's life history. These perceptions are exceptionally valuable not as individual case histories but as historical, cultural testimonies'. (Hareven 1982, p. 382)

Although she did not name her research practice 'doing a mixed methods design' she nevertheless integrated both quantitative and qualitative material in the study, and also discussed their methodological implications,

Whereas the quantitative analysis provides structural evidence concerning the organisation and behaviour of kin, the oral-history interviews offer insight into the nature of relationships and their significance to the participants. The empirical analysis reported here—although attempting to weld both types of evidence—at times presents two different levels of historical reality, each derived from a distinct type of data. (Hareven 1982, p. 371)

In her research, all types of data were combined and discussed together in order to explore and explain different layers of contexts of the research questions. Hareven's studies are thus some of the first biographical ones where data and methods of analysis were fully integrated and the merits of each type of data, together and separately, were explicitly addressed. Moreover, as she was sensitive to the temporal aspects involved in the type of research she carried out, her reflections on the usefulness of the

different methods included how they could separately and together illuminate issues on the different temporal levels addressed.

The more conventional attempts to mix methods have been in combining various forms of surveys, administrative data or questionnaires, with interviews. Recent examples of this include Østergaard and Thomson (2020) who combined longitudinal questionnaires with interviews to address questions of drug use and early school leaving in a Danish sample of young people. Descriptive statistical analyses of the quantitative data were presented in tables and overviews to serve as a backcloth of the narrative analysis of interviews sampled from the overall material. An earlier example with a similar design is from my PhD-research in the late 1980s. I used a deliberate mixed-methods design combining questionnaires with biographical interviews to explore questions relating to women's occupational careers compared to men's with the same type of education in three cohorts. The biographical interviews, that included 44 women from the quantitative sample, were combined with 'lifelines' in the analysis (Nilsen 1992, 1994).<sup>5</sup> These are helpful portrayals of the sequence of events and phases in a life course in relation to age and chronological time and are especially useful in cross-national studies (Brannen and Nilsen 2011). Analyses of the questionnaires in my PhD study, as in most others of the same type of design were done using descriptive statistics.<sup>6</sup> Combining quantitative analysis of the descriptive kind with interviews is more often than not the main way of mixing methods in biographical life course studies. When the focus is on sophisticated predictions are prominent in order to uncover 'causal mechanisms', the strategies and research

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<sup>5</sup>In my research I have drawn up lifelines with the interviewees after the interview was over. This because the chronological form of the lines could affect the narrative style of the interviewee were these introduced at the start of the interview (See Nilsen 1994 for further reflections on this point).

<sup>6</sup>I did not do the advanced statistical techniques which are frequently used in analysis of life course data because I had no intention of predicting or identifying causal variable relationships. In types of techniques available at the time such as event history analysis and survival analysis, prediction of outcomes over time is the main purpose of studies (see e.g. Blossfeld et al. 2003). It is difficult to combine ambitions of causal modelling and prediction with research questions originating in a contextualist life course approach.

questions are rarely compatible with designs where biographical interviews are main sources of data.<sup>7</sup>

Other examples of mixing methods are from cross-national studies where focus groups and individual interviews were used as primary data, in combination with a variety of descriptive statistical information and overviews (Brannen et al. 2002; Lewis et al. 2009). In the latter study we also made use of lifelines in combination with individual interviews (Brannen and Nilsen 2011; Nilsen et al. 2012). Lifelines demonstrate how the social structure in a particular historical period frames specific life courses of men and women in defined contexts. As such they are excellent tools to heighten the awareness of the importance of focus on the biography-history dynamic. The following examples show how lifelines may be drawn up to illustrate the individual trajectories in relation to structural conditions (Fig. 7.1).

The lines<sup>8</sup> of the four interviewees are from the Norwegian part of a cross-national research project (Lewis et al. 2009; Nilsen et al. 2012). The interviewees in the project were selected because of their workplace in either a public sector social service or in a private sector company. These lifelines illustrate how structural conditions frames opportunities and impact on aspects of the lives of a man and a woman from each of the workplace types. They belong to the same birth cohort, late 1960s to early 1970s.

Lifelines are useful in the phase of analysis of individual interviews when they are seen in view of the interpretations interviewees themselves have of the phases and events in their lives as rendered in their own narrative style. Taken together a group of lines can give snapshots of individuals' trajectories in relation to birth cohort and structural aspects of a specific historical period. They can also indicate gender and class specific aspects of types of trajectories. Gendered dimensions in the four lines presented here are suggested by the parental leave period in particular. Gunilla had a phase of being a fulltime mother for a long period of time

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<sup>7</sup> See Bryman (2006) for a more detailed discussion of challenges to combining qualitative and quantitative data and designs.

<sup>8</sup> The depiction of the lifelines differs somewhat between the four in this illustration which is due to difficulties in finding a common format for four variation of lines that were drawn up in different interview contexts.

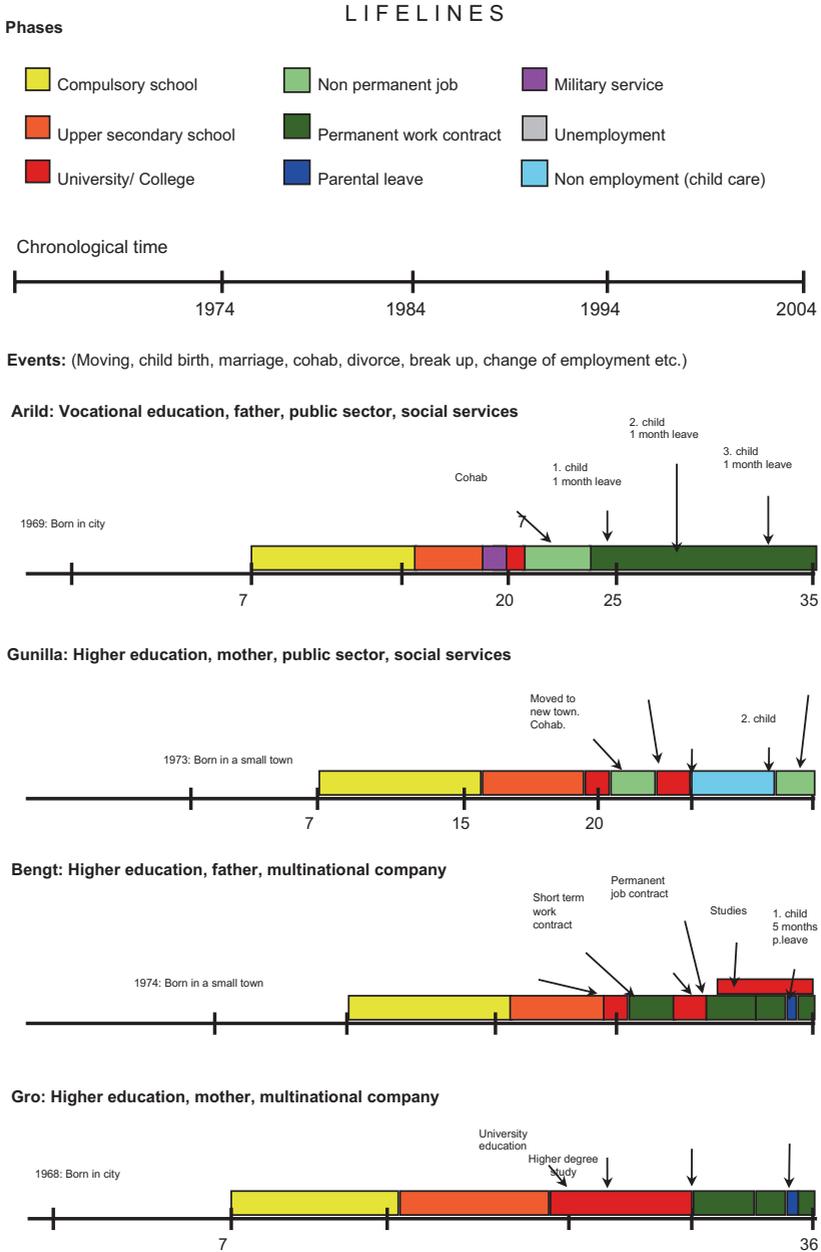


Fig. 7.1 Lifelines: illustrations of life courses with phases and events

which exceeded the maternity leave period she was entitled to. Whilst Arild had three children and a months' leave for each even if he was eligible for longer leave for his third child, Bengt who had a career in a multinational company had five months' which was longer than the paternity leave period. As a contrast is presented his colleague Gro who only took out eight of the 12 months she was entitled to. She was also the one with the most 'streamlined' lifeline; she had undergone every phase according to normative expectations of 'timing' and 'timeliness' (see Chap. 4). Her colleague Bengt had a patchier education trajectory and had during the last five years before the interview done part-time studies whilst being in full time employment. The two social service employees both had shorter educational trajectories. Gunilla had done some academic subjects, but not a whole degree, whilst Arild came from a vocational background. The jobs they had did not require higher education at the time. This has now changed so that social workers are required to have a bachelor's degree as a minimum.<sup>9</sup> Only analysis of the interviews can give some understanding of the variations in trajectories as these are related to decisions and relationships in the interviewees' lives, and that has been done elsewhere (Nilsen et al. 2012).

Other more recent examples from the biographical field may shed further light on how quantitative and qualitative approaches in biographical life course studies may find common ground in similar designs. Le Roux et al. (2023) made a case for mixed methods combining sequence analysis of survey data on residential trajectories in the Paris region of France with selected interviews from a larger sample. The sequence analysis was applied to select interview cases without making use of any specific case selection method associated with practices from the qualitative tradition. This form of analysis was the most prominent in the paper and the interview material was used as illustrations of points brought forward by the statistical analysis. This practice is widespread in mixed methods designs starting from a quantitative design and is useful for giving a fuller picture of the research questions investigated. The article in question here was written by a team of researchers that included members who had

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<sup>9</sup>Lifelines of younger cohorts born 20 years after these four, would look very different as the structural features of Norwegian society has changed considerably (Nilsen 2023).

published qualitative material. The form of sequence analysis that was the main method in the analysis, is based on an exploratory design and although the technical methods of analysis are complex and sophisticated they render some room for other types of data because of the method's processual quality—its main aim is not prediction or causal modelling. Adding the qualitative element gives depth to understanding how patterns uncovered in sequence analysis are related to biographical interpretations and actions in view of structural circumstances.

The second example is not multi-method but based on a study using a sample from Norwegian administrative data to study gendered transitions from school to work in Norway in two cohorts (Lorentzen and Vogt 2022). The theoretical foundation of the article is a contextualist life course approach and the authors made use of a specific variety of sequence analysis.<sup>10</sup> The results are presented as descriptive tables of aggregated outcomes over time for the two cohorts.<sup>11</sup> The authors of this article come from different methodological approaches in sociology. Whereas Lorentzen is well versed in sophisticated statistical analyses, sequence analysis in particular, Vogt is trained in the contextualist life course perspective and biographical interviewing. Although the empirical material in this particular article is quantitative, the logic of research questions and discussions are based in a life course approach.

Using data from both qualitative and quantitative designs in a single study and publications may help towards bridging the gap between them. But many quantitative strategies are modelled on the natural sciences and require huge amounts of data and advanced statistical analyses based on causal models and 'mechanistic' designs which are not compatible with qualitative approaches—neither their data nor the types of analysis. Processual statistical approaches such as sequence analysis may open up a road towards mixed-methods designs that are helpful in studies that seek to investigate the history-biography dynamic using both biographical and quantitative life course data. The purpose of sequence analysis, however sophisticated and advanced the technique is, stems from a processual

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<sup>10</sup> Multifactor discrepancy analysis of status sequences.

<sup>11</sup> The tables (Lorentzen and Vogt 2022, p. 71) resemble the results of aggregated life lines presented in a Nordic comparative life course study of women's lives where the life line approach was introduced (Bjeren and Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994; Nilsen 1992).

logic suggested by one of the most important proponents of a processual and contextual approach as it originated in the Chicago tradition, Andrew Abbott (Abbott 1995, 1997; Aisenbrey and Fasang 2010). Future collaborations between qualitative and quantitative based researchers in the life course field may benefit from combining biographical interviews with quantitative material analysed by sequence analyses to further contextualise biographical accounts and ground them in wider patterns of life courses in their specific historical period. Lifelines could serve as an intermediary element to illustrate individual cases in comparison with the patterns described in tables from sequence analyses.

## A Note on Quality in Biographical Life Course Research

During the Appraisal proceedings for *The Polish Peasant* (Blumer 1939) questions about what biographical data could be used for, and whether biographical accounts could be trusted, were high on the agenda. These issues pertain to the validity and reliability of a study; notions that are more associated with quantitative than qualitative designs. Questions of representativeness and generalisability must therefore be approached differently from those in studies that rest on statistical, random sampling.<sup>12</sup>

In the vast literature on generalisations in qualitative studies there are many different suggestions of how to address the issue in this research tradition. Many varieties of generalisations in case studies are discussed by Gomm et al. (2000). They made a distinction between theoretical inference and empirical generalisations. The first refers to 'reaching conclusions about what always happens, or what happens with a given degree of probability, in a certain type of theoretically defined situation' whilst the latter 'involves drawing inferences about features of a larger but finite population of cases from the study of a sample drawn from that population' (p. 103). Whilst neither of these are particularly associated with case

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<sup>12</sup> Sometimes requirements to use the same research logic as that applied in statistical studies are used as a critique against qualitative studies (see e.g. Anderson et al. 2005; Brannen and Nilsen 2007).

study research as the former is often used in experimental strategies, the latter is associated with surveys. The authors show examples of their use in qualitative case studies as well. They observe that case studies may overcome the problems involved in empirical generalisations in their sampling strategy. In most biographical studies the sampling follows a purposive logic (Silverman 2020), i.e., the sample of interviews are selected because they share characteristics that are relevant for the types of question the researcher seeks to explore. This is related to Glaser and Strauss (1967)<sup>13</sup> arguments that the quality of qualitative data is closely related to the sampling procedures which again have to do with what kinds of research questions a study seeks to examine and to what extent the findings of studies are sociologically and theoretically relevant.

Procedures associated with a quantitative logic involve representativeness of findings based on random sampling and of rigorous testing of replicability and reliability. These procedures may however not secure that findings have enhanced generalisability. Notions of representativeness are associated with sampling procedures whilst generalisability has to do with the findings from analysis. A lot happens between sampling and final analysis that may affect the quality and hence generalisability of the research (Gobo 2008).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) were also wary of the social sciences adopting procedures of rigorousness from the natural sciences because,

(...) a great deal of sociological work, unlike research in physical science, never gets to the stage of rigorous demonstration because the social structures being studied are undergoing continuous change. Older structures frequently take on new dimensions before highly rigorous research can be accomplished. (...) Undue emphasis on being “scientific” is simply not reasonable in light of our need for discovery and exploration amid very considerable structural changes. (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 235)

This is not to say that qualitative research in general, and biographical studies in particular should not be subject to careful inquiry of its

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<sup>13</sup>Whilst Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommended theoretical sampling for generating grounded theory, this procedure is resource demanding and complex so is rarely followed in biographical life course studies. Hence purposive sampling is the more common strategy in this research tradition.

procedures. However, particular types of scrutiny and criteria for truthfulness and trustfulness, must be regarded in view of the specificities of these data within the wider context.

Whilst the early debates were centred on whether biographical accounts could be trusted, whether people tell lies and therefore render life stories invalid as sociological data, the questions shifted to matters of 'Truth' in itself, in the sense that reality became the object of question. The debates came to centre around ontological and epistemological issues instead of methodological ones (Nilsen 2008).<sup>14</sup>

In other instances matters of truth have become important because of experiences from past historical periods. As addressed in Chap. 3 in Germany the methodological discussions that became prominent during the revival of biographical research were related to experiences during the Nazi period. This time was still present in the minds and lives of researchers who were part of the revival phase of these studies. There were overall suspicions about people's truthfulness about experiences during this painful period in German history, and in order to ensure that biographical accounts were trustworthy, sophisticated forms of biographical analyses were developed (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000).

If temporal dimensions, and layers of time, are brought into the discussions, a different set of issues become relevant for assessing the quality of biographical research. In Hareven's studies biographical time, family time and historical time were brought together in a framework for understanding how social processes in a society during a particular historical period were synchronised and woven together. The context of temporal elements together makes the scrutiny of biographical accounts a matter of analysing them in relation to the layers of temporality they are situated in. As Bertaux (1990) observed,

Whenever [life stories] are used for probing subjectivities, life story interviews prove able to probe deep; perhaps because it is much easier to lie about one's opinions, values and even behaviour than about one's own life. [...] it takes a sociological eye – some lay persons do possess it – to look

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<sup>14</sup>In extreme constructionist approaches matters of truth would not be on the agenda at all since the divide between truth and fiction is not an important issue (Denzin 1989).

through a particular experience and understand what is universal in it; to perceive, beyond described actions and interactions, the implicit sets of rules and norms, the underlying situations, processes and contradictions that have both made actions and interactions possible and that have shaped them in specific ways. It takes some training to hear, behind the solo of a human voice, the music of society and culture in the background. (Bertaux 1990, pp. 167–168)

This beautifully poetic way of stating the purpose for doing biographical life course studies shows how the biography-history dynamic unfolds and how sociological research may capture the processes involved in life lived in particular contexts. It goes to the heart of what this research tradition in its time set out to be and demonstrates how it has evolved under changing historical circumstances.

## Some Concluding Reflections

The topic of this book has touched upon one of the core issues in sociology: the relationship between the individual and society. Throughout the chapters I have tried to demonstrate how an approach that sees this relationship as a dynamic where events and processes at different temporal levels are the driving force in the ‘heaving sea of happenings’ (Abbott 2016, p. 247) is still one of the most vigorous frameworks imaginable for empirical research in sociology. The writings of C. Wright Mills have been a great inspiration throughout my academic life. The simplest way of saying what sociology is to be about is his: ‘Social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within social structure’ (Mills (1959/1980, p. 159).

In order to show the relevance of this approach it was necessary to go back in history and try to trace its origins. Numerous books and articles have been written about the Chicago tradition from its beginning at the newly established university in the late nineteenth century. Only a few of these have made the connection between the female dominated, and indeed female funded, Hull House, Jane Addams, and the other women’s contributions to the innovative methodological foundations Chicago

sociology at this time has become famous for. Gender has been absent from many discussions in mainstream sociology. As this book has touched upon topics that are at the heart of the mainstream, I have made it a point to include gendered aspects of all the issues discussed, some of these with examples from my own empirical research and that of others who have addressed these themes.

Time and temporality, at all levels, are central to biographical life course research. This is a topic that in itself has engendered a revival of interest in the past decades. Focus on the temporalities involved in biographical research have sometimes competed with the attention to narrativity of interviews in the latest decades. In this approach the temporal structure of narratives has been a point of interest, also in my own research as discussed in Chap. 4. However, this temporal element is somewhat limited compared to an approach to time as a processual context for the lived life, so in and of its own a narrative focus gives only partial insight into the biography-history dynamic. In quantitative life course studies the temporal dimension is often eclipsed when highly sophisticated statistical techniques are involved in strategies to predict and uncover 'causal mechanisms' in social life.

Most life course studies address the historical period as a level of temporality that forms the backdrop to comparisons, specifically in cohort studies which have been a main empirical focus in much of life course analyses. In cases where historical periods are clearly defined by specific events such as the division and unification of Germany, studies of birth cohorts and their life courses under varying historical circumstances have been prominent.

The timing of phases and events in the life course has been addressed in a number of studies that have been referenced in the chapters of this book. The age boundaries for life course phases shift and become flexible across societies and historical time. Terminologies may change and discussions about life course transitions be clad in vocabularies that are grounded in any present of a particular historical context. This has always been so. For instance only in the postwar era did the phase we think of as 'youth' become accessible to the many, and for young women access to contraceptives and education changed their lives in comparison to their foremothers' generations. The normative and actual timing of life course

events vary between societies and over historical time as do the transitions between life course phases. Notions of time thus invite reflections on age and contents of life course phases. As ideals of the phase of youth stretch into both younger and older age groups other phases of life are seemingly crowded out from view in the public domain. Slogans such as ‘60 is the new 40!’ advertise ideals of youth for older age groups. Cosmetic procedures, especially for women, promise eternal youth as wrinkles and other ‘imperfections’ that occur with age, can be smoothed out at a price. At the other end of the age spectrum social media affect ever younger age groups with ideas and practices that have traditionally belonged to youth rather than to childhood.<sup>15</sup> However, chronological age is still important in society for legal access to a number of rights, for instance getting a driving license; a passport of one’s own; the right to vote etc. Examples from the older end of the life course include OAP discounts on public transport.<sup>16</sup>

In empirical studies, and theoretical ideas ‘people’ in general were until the latest decades referred to with the term ‘man’ and ‘men’ (e.g. Mills 1959/1980). As Mills said elsewhere (1940), differences between terminologies and vocabularies are that the latter are located in historical contexts and specific situations, whilst the former is non-specific (p. 913). When gendered nouns became part of the vocabulary that replaced the men-only one, this happened in a period when the women’s movement became influential in academia and beyond and wider overall changes in social institutions started. Other aspects of reality could thereby come to the fore. For instance, in studies about the future different dimensions became important when there was a shift in the vocabulary. The early studies of women and time and gendered thoughts about the future, for instance, originated in a period when changes in gender relations on the labour market, in politics and in the domestic sphere was a novelty and happened at a rapid pace in the Scandinavian countries in particular.

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<sup>15</sup> Research indicates that family resources are important for what content young children can be exposed to on social media. This is a hugely important topic but it does fall beyond the scope of this book to give it the attention it merits.

<sup>16</sup> There are variations in age dependent rights across societies that may also include gender specific patterns.

The future is an aspect of time unknown but the seeds of the future is found in the past-present continuum, as observed in Mead's writings. The Enlightenment period's ideas of time were that of a linear course and an underlying Progress as an unstoppable force of history akin to processes in nature. During this period there was a shift from beliefs in the future as in the hands of deities to one where we humans are in full control of our personal lives and that of our surroundings. At the time of writing (July 2023) scorching temperatures across southern Europe break every known heat record. This is just one, but perhaps the most spectacular of the catastrophic consequences of twentieth century policies involving our exploitation of nature. For the past decades the scientific community has warned about future consequences of these policies. The increasing social and economic inequalities is another issue that causes much suffering. Warnings have been directed at the economic policies that drive more and more people into poverty. Descriptions of the 'cost-of-living-crisis' that affects millions of people in the Western world and beyond, go hand in hand with reports of extreme affluence among the few. If we do not believe in the future as destiny decided by deities, it is up to humankind to create the kind of societies we wish to live in. Sometimes though, the results of human ingenuity and imagination become unpredictable and beyond our control, or as the Marx quote in Chap. 1 said, 'we find ourselves at the mercy of forces that we ourselves have created' (Sayer 2008).

Sociological research about the future at the biographical level, indicate that developments at the level of society sometimes are too overwhelming for people to engage with in their everyday lives. As stated in Chap. 5, when the temporal interval between cause and effect is too long for people to observe the connection between them, outcomes of policies and/or aggregated actions can become a field for contested opinions. When actors at the political level in societies are in disagreement amongst themselves and with science about causes of specific outcomes, for instance in relation to global warming, it becomes even more difficult to legitimise policies that interfere with people's everyday lives to try and create change in the conditions that cause this catastrophic situation.

The opening paragraphs of Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*, written with a completely different historical situation in mind, the Cold War period, still seem relevant and fresh in light of the current situation in society,

Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. (Mills 1959/1980, p. 10)

The task of sociology is thus to make this interplay a subject of research and to communicate the results of such studies to the wider public beyond academia. In this book I have tried to trace the ideas of this type of sociology and to show its relevance for understanding contemporary society.

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